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Book Review: The Heart and Stomach of a King: Elizabeth I and the Politics of Sex and Power

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The Heart and Stomach of a King: Elizabeth I and the Politics of Sex and Power

Second edition, by Carole Levin. 2014.

University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia. Pp xx + 264. Includes 12 illustrations and index. \$27.50 paperback. ISBN 978-0-2240-1

Reviewed by Michael McClintock¹

In the twenty years separating the initial publication of Carole Levin's *The Heart and Stomach of a King* in 1994 from the second edition under review here, Queen Elizabeth I has been, according to Wikipedia, the subject of two Hollywood films (*Elizabeth* (1998) and *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (2007), both starring Cate Blanchett), two BBC miniseries (*The Virgin Queen* (2005) with Anne-Marie Duff and *Elizabeth I* (2005) with Helen Mirren), and has appeared in smaller roles in several films, television shows, works of fiction, and video games; she even has a Twitter hashtag (#queenelizabethI). For an English monarch who has been dead for more than 400 years, Elizabeth I (1533-1603; reigned 1558-1603) continues to hold a powerful sway over both the popular and the academic imagination in the 21st century. For Levin, the key to Elizabeth's fascination lies in the two terms she highlights in her subtitle: sex and power. Elizabeth I successfully ruled England for 45 years as an unmarried woman, something unparalleled by any other female ruler of the period but also a source of cultural anxiety: Elizabeth along with her sister Queen Mary I (reigned 1553-1558) were the first women to be crowned Queen of England since the Norman Conquest in 1066. Elizabeth I remains a significant figure for us today not only as a resource for popular culture but also because, as Levin notes, despite our many differences from sixteenth-century England, women in positions of power still face difficulties that do not trouble their male counterparts. Levin points to Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin in the United States, Michelle Bachelet in Chile, Angela Merkel in Germany, and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia as examples of contemporary women in power behind whom "we perhaps can see the shadow of a long-dead queen" (xvi).

Levin's work is not a biography in the traditional sense. In her Preface to the Second Edition, Levin prefers the term "cultural biography" for her project. Inspired by the "poetics of culture" model offered by Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, Levin's *Heart and Stomach of a King* goes beyond the facts of Elizabeth's life to consider "how Elizabeth represented herself and how people in turn responded to her as an unmarried woman in power" (xiii), looking not only at conventional historical sources but also at how Elizabeth was constructed socially in gossip, in rumors, in slander, and even in dreams. Levin begins with a brief Introduction outlining Elizabeth's life prior to assuming the throne in 1558 as well as some of the basic challenges Elizabeth faced as a woman in a position of power. Some of Levin's central questions include "how did [Elizabeth] transcend her gender and her unmarried, childless state, and in what ways was she trapped by it? What strategies did she use that were successful and which ones failed? What were the different ways in which her people responded to her? How did the image of the queen change in the reign of her successor, James I?" (4). The remaining chapters proceed in approximate chronological order and skilfully weave together the biographical and cultural elements of this cultural biography.

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Chapter 2, “Elizabeth as Sacred Monarch” focuses on Elizabeth’s engagement with religion. As monarch, Elizabeth gained authority over the English church, but Parliament in 1559 was reluctant to grant her the title “Supreme Head” of the Church, the title held by her brother, Edward VI, and her father, Henry VIII. As the Archbishop of York explained, “Her highness, beyng a woman by birthe and nature, is not qualyfyed by God’s worde to feed the flock of Chryst, it appeareth most playnley. . . . Therefor she cannot be supreme head of Christ’s militant churche” (14). Instead, Elizabeth was given the title Supreme Governor of the Church. As Levin demonstrates, Elizabeth wisely avoided getting caught up in squabbles over semantics and doctrine, which she delegated to the Church hierarchy. Instead, she demonstrated skill in harnessing the spiritual power of religion to bolster her identity as a sacred monarch. Elizabeth, like her sister Mary, continued medieval rituals of applying the royal touch to cure those afflicted with the “king’s evil” or scrofula, and ritually washing the feet of the poor on Maundy Thursday. Unlike her sister Mary, however, Elizabeth demonstrated far greater awareness of how to use the spectacle of these ceremonies to reinforce her political authority. Elizabeth’s popular identity as the Virgin Queen is perhaps the strongest example of this blend of piety and politics: while the cult of the Virgin Mary was suppressed with the restoration of Protestantism under Elizabeth, the queen and her councilors consciously worked to adopt much of the symbolism associated with the Virgin Mary to the public persona of the Virgin Queen, cleverly coloring the Queen’s popularity with a sacred aura of religious devotion.

Chapter 3, “The Official Courtships of the Queen” examines the intense pressure Elizabeth faced throughout her reign to marry and produce an heir to the throne. Elizabeth’s identity as Virgin Queen was powerful, but at the same time she also recognized the political and diplomatic value of entering into marriage negotiations with important European allies; she also, as Levin emphasizes, seemed to enjoy the game of courtship and proposals that went with these marriage negotiations, and was at least initially sincere in her desire to find a husband acceptable to both herself and her subjects. Levin focuses on the three major foreign marriage negotiations during Elizabeth’s reign: Archduke Charles in the mid-1560s; the Duke of Anjou in 1571-72; and Anjou’s brother the Duke of Alençon in the late 1570s and early 1580s. The chapter also explores the chief domestic contender for Elizabeth’s hand during the early years of her reign, Robert Dudley, the Earl of Leicester. Elizabeth’s relationships with Dudley and Alençon both revealed strong affection on her part, yet in the end the Virgin Queen rejected the roles of wife and mother. Levin suggests that Elizabeth’s personal history may have provided a powerful argument against marrying: “Unmarried, Elizabeth avoided the role of wife and the risk of being perceived as the inferior partner in the marriage relationship. Also, she need worry neither about lack of fertility and subsequent embarrassment, such as dogged her sister Mary, nor about the risks of dying of disease related to childbirth, as were the fates of two of her stepmothers, Jane Seymour and Katherine Parr. Certainly there were costs as well to this choice, both personal and political, but it was a choice that was also in keeping with Elizabeth’s own wishes” (65).

The fourth chapter, “Wanton and Whore”, develops naturally from the previous chapter’s discussion of Elizabeth’s marriage negotiations. Here Levin considers Elizabeth’s sexuality and the ongoing questions, comments, and gossip that she faced on this matter throughout her reign. Early in the reign, Levin writes, interest in the Queen’s sexual behavior “was a means for the people to express their concern over a female monarch, and also a way of expressing the hope she would fulfill her womanly function, and have a child”, while later in the reign, when Elizabeth was too old to have a child, rumors of her sexual misconduct “served as a focus for

discontent and fear for the succession” (67). Levin assembles an impressive amount of rumor and gossip concerning the Queen’s supposed pregnancies, illegitimate children, and secret affairs with Dudley and others. Far from being idle speculation, Levin argues that many of these accusations spring from the discontent and anxiety produced by the figure of Elizabeth as a powerful, single, and childless female ruler. Levin goes on to note that paradoxically the very adoration that her subjects felt for Elizabeth made her also the focus for their distress as her reign wore on and the question of the succession remained unresolved: “comments about her sexuality were one way for her people to come to express their ambivalent feelings about her position as ruler, and also to come to terms with it” (90).

Chapter 5, “The Return of the King”, emerges from the concerns of the fourth chapter: if the ongoing discussion of Elizabeth’s sexuality sprang in part from the anxieties produced by the absence of a husband and an heir, this chapter looks at persistent rumors that Elizabeth’s brother, Edward VI, who died in 1553, was in fact alive and ready to return to England and claim his throne. Levin acknowledges that while historically both kings and queens have been troubled by impostors and false claimants to their thrones, for a king these figures tend to appear only when his legitimacy is in question, while for both Mary and Elizabeth, succeeding to the English throne after centuries of kings, their very presence on the throne immediately raised questions of legitimacy and a desire to return to the “normal” masculine order of things. In addition to spectral brothers, Levin tells the story of Anne Burnell, who claimed to be the daughter of Philip of Spain, Queen Mary’s husband and thus potentially a rival claimant to the English throne, and William Hacket, who claimed to be both Jesus Christ and the King of Europe and thus spiritually and politically superior to the Queen. As with the rumors of the Queen’s sexual indiscretions, these impostors for Levin are further evidence of the unsettling cultural effect of being ruled by a female monarch, but unlike the rumors, some of these impostors were moved by their anxieties to take action.

The sixth chapter, “Elizabeth as King and Queen,” broadens in focus to look at some of the ways Queen Elizabeth presented herself verbally as both male and female, and how this phenomenon was mirrored culturally in the practices of female cross-dressing and the dramatic convention of the female heroine in male disguise on the Elizabethan stage. Tying all of this evidence together is the notion of gender and identity as performance, an analogy that allows Levin to deftly move between literal performance in the theatre and figurative performance on the world stage. A key example in this chapter provides Levin’s book with its title. In 1588, as England prepared to face the Spanish Armada, Queen Elizabeth appeared in armor and on horseback before her troops at Tilbury. In her speech, she presents herself to the troops as both woman and king, saying “I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too” (144); in a different version of this speech published in the early seventeenth century, Elizabeth again mixes genders but this time without offering herself as weak and feeble: “come and let us fight the battell of the Lord, the enemie perhaps may challenge my sexe for that I am a woman, so may I likewise charge their mould for that they are but men” (144). For Levin, Elizabeth’s performance of gender was a complex “multi-layered self-presentation. . . . [that] blurred the definitions of gender and role expectation in her particular position as rule of Renaissance England” (148).

The final chapter, “Dreaming the Queen,” covers several recorded instances of Elizabeth appearing to her subjects in dreams, as well as some other forms of dream that appear at the end of Elizabeth’s reign and beyond: the dream of rebellion (and its transformation into action) held by the Earl of Essex and its impact on the idealized or dreamed image of Elizabeth as the eternal

Virgin Queen, as well as some of the ways in which Elizabeth was remembered after her death. Levin blends her account of the rise and fall of Essex with a discussion of the dreams of Joan Notte, whose premonitory dreams about animals threatening the Queen and Sir Robert Cecil seem to reflect popular fears over the danger posed by Essex as well as, more broadly, “a sense that for Elizabethans in some sense their dream of Elizabeth as Gloriana is also ending” (162). Elizabeth died in 1603, and initially there were many who welcomed the arrival of King James I as a return to the traditional alignment of gender and power. Yet discontent with James’ rule soon led to nostalgia for the days of Gloriana, but often this imaginary Gloriana was at odds with the values of the actual Elizabeth herself. Levin notes sardonically “Perhaps the best queen of all is a dead one; one who can be made to stand for whatever one wishes, one who can look down from heaven and advise on how things on earth ought to be different” (169). Perhaps this is what we too are doing when we represent Elizabeth in popular culture, yet for Levin, quoting Sir Francis Bacon, none of these dreams fully gets to heart of a woman who was “ever her own mistress” (172).

Levin’s work is an engaging and highly readable account of a powerful woman who continues to reign over the modern imagination. Levin masterfully synthesizes a wide range of sources to provide an account of Queen Elizabeth that highlights the peculiar challenges of being both the most powerful person in the kingdom and being a woman in the sixteenth century. *The Heart and Stomach of a King* will be of interest not only to scholars studying early modern England but to anyone who is interested in the paradoxes of gender and power; we should be thankful for its appearance in a second edition.