

A Virgin Queen, But Not by Choice

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“A Virgin Queen, But Not By Choice” explores the the question of why Queen Elizabeth I never married. The essay argues that Elizabeth’s gender required her to have the full support of both her privy council and parliament to tie the knot on a marriage, which proved an impossible feat. In addition, the essay argues the debates surrounding each potential match - including fears of a Catholic suitors influence in Protestant England - were political repercussions of her womanhood. The failed courtships of Robert Dudley, Charles Archduke of Austria, and Francis, Duke of Anjou, serve as case studies that illustrate Elizabeth’s inability to proceed with any match due to divides among her councilors. Ultimately, the essay demonstrates how Elizabeth’s very virginity was a decision made by for her by her male councilors.

TODAY, QUEEN ELIZABETH I IS IMMORTALIZED AS “THE VIRGIN QUEEN,” but for much of her reign cultural works depicted her not as a virgin, but as England’s Deborah, the only female judge in the Bible and the wife of Lapidoth. It was not until 1578, twenty years into her reign, as Elizabeth contemplated marriage with Francis, Duke of Anjou, that opponents of the marriage glorified the iconography of chastity for which she is known. Before 1578, when Sir Robert Dudley appeared a potential match, theatrical performances privileged marriage and producing children as the higher and more natural state than celibacy.¹ Susan Doran argues Elizabeth would have wed on two occasions had her privy council reached a consensus on either suitor.² This essay will further the argument that while Elizabeth expressed preference for the celibate life, she pursued marriage with the hopes that the right husband would not only solve the issue of the succession but also strengthen England’s position on the continent. However, her marriage negotiations were hindered by councilors who could not reach a consensus over any of her potential suitors. While Doran argues the queen’s marriage negotiations failed not because of Elizabeth’s gender but because of the political debates surrounding each courtship, the privy council’s debates and the power of such disagreements to derail Elizabeth’s marriage negotiations were direct political consequences of her womanhood.

Queen Elizabeth I expressed an (albeit grudging) willingness to wed in response to a request from Parliament in 1559. Speaker of the Lower House Thomas Gargrave delivered his request couched in flattery for his majesty: “[t]here is nothing which with more ardent affection we beg of God in our daily prayers, than that our happiness hitherto received by

your most gracious government may be perpetuated to the English Nation unto all eternity.”³ According to Gargrave, such a prayer could only be granted if Elizabeth ruled forever, an impossibility, or if she provided England with an heir.⁴ In the 1560s, an heir appeared crucial for the subjects of Protestant England when Elizabeth refused to exclude the Roman Catholic Mary Stuart from the succession. For Parliament and the Privy Council, an heir was the only way to preserve Protestantism in England and provide an unchallenged succession.

Elizabeth’s response to Gargrave has perhaps contributed to popular images of the Virgin Queen determined never to wed, but is in fact evidence of the contrary. “I have already joined myself in marriage to a husband, namely, the Kingdom of England,” Elizabeth replied. “And do not upbraid me with miserable lack of children: for every one of you, and as many as are Englishmen, are children and kinsmen to me.”⁵ Such a declaration depicts a queen content to rule alone, but Elizabeth did not end her response on this decisive note. Instead, she added an additional sentiment: “Nevertheless, if it please God that I enter into another course of life, I promise you I will do nothing which may be prejudicial to the Commonwealth, but will take such a husband, as near as may be, as will have as great a care of the Commonwealth as myself.”⁶ Elizabeth’s initial response reads like a reprimand to a member of parliament for raising a subject as touchy as the succession, while her concluding concession reveals her willingness to both consider a match with a man whose kingship would benefit her country and produce an heir to ensure a peaceful transition of power upon her death.

Elizabeth’s courtships in the following decade offer evidence that the queen listened to the entreaties of Parliament and her Privy Council. Yet, her failure to tie the knot is a result of division within these two bodies. An analysis of her courtships reveals Elizabeth refused to conclude marriage negotiations without the full support of her advisors, particularly those in her trusted Privy Council, and thus, each courtship ended when her councilors failed to reach a consensus. Susan Doran argues that “to appreciate why these negotiations failed, we have to turn our eyes away from the character and gender of the queen and focus instead on the debates surrounding the courtships.”⁷ According to Doran, Elizabeth did not reject any marriages due to “political reasons associated with her gender,” and yet, Elizabeth’s reliance on full support from her privy council is, in fact, a political reason associated with her gender.

The political repercussions of Elizabeth’s gender are exemplified in the works of John Knox and John Aylmer, two religious leaders divided over the danger of female rule. Knox’s *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* is a scathing objection to female rule, arguing that a woman in power is a sick corruption of nature.⁸ In *True Haborrowe for Faithfull and Trewe Subjects, against the late blowne Blaste concerninge the Government of Women*, Aylmer refutes Knox’s claims and defends female rule. One pillar of Aylmer’s argument is that England is especially suited for female rule given its governmental structure: “The regiment of England is not a mere monarchy, as some for lack of consideration think, nor a mere oligarchy, nor democracy, but a rule mixed of all there, wherein each one of these have or should have like authority,” Aylmer wrote.⁹ For Aylmer, a “rule mixed” where bodies of men including Parliament and the Privy Council could provide a check on their

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female ruler's power, protected England from the harmful effects of female rule. Stephen Alford argues that under the influence of Privy Council member William Cecil Lord Burghley, both the Privy Council and Parliament were elevated to active participants in running the realm.¹⁰ Thus, the queen's demonstrated need for full support of her Privy Council arose from the knowledge that even those amenable to female rule would only view her choice of husband as legitimate if she had the backing of the men in England's "rule mixed."

In his defense of female rule, Aylmer also drew upon the image of Deborah, the biblical married judge, revealing his belief that marriage was in Elizabeth's future.¹¹ Aylmer's choice of allusion is significant because it shows even he, who refuted claims that a female ruler was unnatural, assumed marriage was the natural course for a female ruler. In fact, in his argument that a representative, "rule mixed" government would keep a female ruler in check, Aylmer employed imagery of marriage. "The rule and kind of government betwixt the man and the wife ...is like the government ...of a Senate," Aylmer wrote. "For the man according to his worthiness, ruleth in such things as becommeth him, and the wife in such is meete for her."¹² Thus, in ensuring the queen exercised sound judgement, the Privy Council and Parliament acted as her husband. Aylmer believed not only that Elizabeth would marry – as evidenced by his allusion to Deborah – but also that a true husband could serve as the ultimate protection against any actions stemming from her lesser qualities resulting from her gender. For Aylmer, marriage was not only the natural course dictated by the Bible, it was the best course for England. Aylmer could not have foreseen that members of Elizabeth's Privy Council, lavishing in their role as Elizabeth's proxy husbands, would not want a true husband to usurp their political influence.



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Sir Robert Dudley, known as "The Queen's favorite," appeared to be Elizabeth's clear choice for a husband in the early 1560's. The case of Dudley reveals not only Elizabeth's openness to marriage, but her belief that she could garner support from her counselors. However, support for a Dudley match proved difficult. First, there was the mysterious death of his wife Amy Dudley, followed by rumors of illegitimate children between Dudley and the queen. In addition, Dudley's rise above his fellow council members at court sparked fears of factionalism amongst Elizabeth's advisors. To allay concerns regarding the queen marrying one of her subjects, Dudley commissioned plays such as the Play of Patient Grisell, written by John Phillip in 1560, in which Prince Gautier gives up a life of celibacy to marry for the good of his kingdom and takes a peasant girl as his wife. Phillip aimed to assuage fears of factionalism and paint Dudley as a humble and worthy choice by describing the peasant as a peacemaker.¹³ Another play, which Dudley intended to present Elizabeth while she visited his

castle in 1575, portrayed the nymph Zabeta who had to choose between Diana, the goddess of chastity, or Juno, the goddess of marriage. The play's conclusion, with goddess Iris praising marriage, was meant to serve as Dudley's allegorical proposal to the queen and provides evidence that images of marriage trumped those of celibacy.¹⁴ Therefore, images of marriage, not celibacy, dominated the period of the Dudley courtship.

Unfortunately for Dudley, Privy Council members such as William Cecil undermined his courtship efforts. Cecil's opposition to Dudley stemmed from his own political ambitions to be Elizabeth's chief advisor, which he accomplished when Elizabeth appointed him to the coveted Master of the Court of Wards in 1561. To thwart Dudley, Cecil played upon the very fears he would try to allay with later suitors Archduke Charles of Austria and Francis, Duke of Anjou; those of a Catholic suitor threatening the prosperity of Protestant England. Dudley had turned to Spain to seek international backing for his suit and decided to pursue the position of papal nuncio to England to gain support for his potential union with the Queen. When a Catholic priest was arrested and a letter found in his home expressing hopes the papal nuncio would bring toleration for English Catholics, Cecil defeated the papal nuncio and Dudley's efforts to gain support abroad.¹⁵

The debate surrounding the Dudley match was a product of the political repercussions of Elizabeth's gender. In opposing the marriage on the grounds that Elizabeth should not wed one beneath her in her own court, members of the Privy Council acted upon fears that Dudley would rise above them. As Aylmer wrote, the Privy Council members played the role of proxy husbands, but a true husband would become the ultimate check on the queen's power. Thus, advisors such as Cecil, who saw their favor with the queen threatened, sparked unresolvable debates over the match. Elizabeth's need for full Privy Council approval in order to move forward with the match – yet another repercussion of her womanhood – forced her to look elsewhere for her husband due to opposition within her court. After Dudley, Elizabeth broadened her search from within her court to outside of her country.

With a broader search came broader fears than court factionalism. The Archduke Charles of Austria's courtship of Elizabeth, commenced in 1563, caused councilors to divide over the danger of his Catholicism. Cecil supported the match, believing the Archduke's commitment to the Catholic faith to be only moderate. But when the Archduke insisted on holding mass within the royal household, support for the match dwindled, with Dudley playing upon fears of Catholic influence to subvert negotiations.¹⁶ While Charles offered potential benefits – the opportunity for Elizabeth to gain an international ally and produce an heir with Hapsburg blood – religious incompatibilities proved insurmountable in Elizabeth's courting of the archduke. Evidence that English male royalty could marry a Catholic is provided by the case of Charles I, who became king of England in 1625 and wed the Catholic Henrietta Maria of France. But for Elizabeth, her womanhood caused her Privy Council to fear she would be unable to wield greater religious influence than her Catholic husband. For a queen reliant upon a body of men to approve her marriage, such fears destroyed her chance to wed.

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The foreigner the queen came closest to marrying was Francis, Duke of Anjou, a Catholic who was twenty-two years her junior. Anjou sparked similar fears of Catholic influence when Elizabeth, attracted by the benefits of an alliance with France, opened marriage negotiations with him in 1579. Like Archduke Charles of Austria, Anjou refused to give up holding mass. However, he conceded to forgoing public exercise of his religion, banning the queen's subjects from his mass chamber, and attending English church services.¹⁷ Despite these concessions, Elizabeth's council remained divided over Anjou's Catholicism. The council also remained divided by debates over Anjou's effect on England's foreign relations. In 1579, Spain sought to conquer the Netherlands, and an Anglo-French alliance appeared strategic to stop a Spanish victory. Thomas Radcliffe promoted the match with Anjou to counter French intervention in the Netherlands while Cecil argued the marriage would break up the international Catholic coalition of France and Spain.¹⁸ However, Francis Walsingham pointed to Anjou's failed campaign in the Netherlands as evidence England could stand alone against its enemies. Instead of benefiting England, Walsingham claimed the marriage could exacerbate relations with Scotland by ending James VI's hopes of claiming the crown upon Elizabeth's death.¹⁹ Anjou's failed ventures in the Netherlands did little to sway the queen's councilors who argued a French alliance would only entangle England in unnecessary wars. Thus, the queen's marriage was again halted by dissent amongst her advisors. Once again, the dissent was gendered, stemming from fears that a female ruler could not control her foreign husband's influence, both in regard to his religion and his military operations.

The debate over Anjou's Catholicism is evidenced in letters by Elizabeth's councilors including William Cecil, who wrote for the match, and Phillip Sidney, who wrote against it. Cecil's letter to the queen, sent in 1579, argued life is not as full without a companion as even God made the angels to keep himself company. Next, Cecil argued Anjou's marriage to Elizabeth would not give him the power to overthrow Protestantism. Finally, Cecil wrote that Protestants could not help but support the match out of love for Elizabeth, and Catholics would support the match, not to see their religion reign supreme but to have protection from persecution.²⁰ Philip Sidney countered Cecil in his own letter in 1579, arguing the match would have two devastating effects: alienating Protestants and providing papists with a platform to voice their discontent. "If, then, the affectionate have their affections weakened and the discontented have a gap to utter their discontentation, I think it will seem an evil preparative for the patient (I mean your estate) to a greater sickness," Sidney wrote.²¹ Sidney's letter demonstrates a failure by Elizabeth to gather the necessary full support for her marriage. While Cecil believed the match could succeed, his argument was unrealistic, relying on the full support of England's men, both Protestant and Catholic, just as Elizabeth relied upon the full support of her Privy Council to affirm her actions. Sidney voiced the prevailing opinion: Elizabeth was not powerful enough to mitigate the influence of a Catholic husband.

Unlike with Archduke Charles, the response by opponents to the Anjou match extended to the public sphere. John Stubbes authored the most famous publication in opposition to the match: *Discoverie of a Gaping Gulf*. Stubbes argued Elizabeth's marriage to a papist would breach God's law and harm both the state and Elizabeth. Furthermore, Stubbes played upon



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Elizabeth's gender in his attack. He portrayed Elizabeth as Eve, the weak woman tricked by Anjou, the serpent. "Because she is also our Adam and sovereign Lord, or lordly Lady of this land, it is so much the more dangerous," Stubbes wrote.²² While Stubbes' attack centered on religion, he also sought to stir up fear of a foreign influence and extol English independence. He wrote, "it is natural to all men to abhor foreign rule as a burden of Egypt," and argued France posed a far greater threat than Spain.²³ The spread of Stubbes' publication to churches in England suggests a public sphere existed in opposition to the Anjou match. Natalie Mears argues Elizabeth saw a divide between the public sphere and her advisors, and only subjects she appointed to her council had the right to weigh in on policy-making issues.²⁴ Unlike Elizabeth's advisors who voiced opposition to the match, a lawyer such as Stubbes could not invoke such an inflammatory opinion without also invoking the wrath of the queen.

In his pamphlet, Stubbes echoed the sentiments of John Knox, writing that because of Elizabeth's gender, she must accept advice from her male councilors. "It is a faithless careless part, to leave her helpless in her choice of the person and personal conditions of her husband to her own consideration," Stubbes wrote.²⁵ Knox, knowing the seditious nature of his publication, had penned it anonymously, while Stubbes took public ownership of his work and suffered for it at the scaffold. On September 27, 1579, Elizabeth issued a proclamation ordering the Lord Mayor of London to collect and burn every copy of Stubbes' pamphlet. Aylmer himself gathered forty ministers and urged them to speak out against the work. Elizabeth's fury did not abate until both Stubbes and one of his printers, Hugh Singleton, had their right hands chopped off and were locked for months in the tower.²⁶ Elizabeth's public fury at Stubbes and his printers is evidence of her belief that a common man had no right to dissent to her marriage negotiations or comment on her womanly need for counsel. While Elizabeth could not punish her male councilors or risk confirming Knox's notions of women as weak, foolish, and lacking judgement, she could exact her revenge on a member of the public sphere. Elizabeth's punishment of Stubbes sent a message to her kingdom that, far from being a Virgin Queen, she was determined to wed, and she would not allow men outside of her council to stand in her way.

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A letter to Anjou, likely penned by Elizabeth in February 1580, described how Parliament's Anti-Catholic sentiment and opposition to the match was exacerbated by recent arrivals of Jesuit missionaries in England. "I pray you tell me your will honestly, and what you think about these misfortunes," Elizabeth wrote.²⁷ By distancing herself from Parliament

in this letter, Elizabeth reveals she did not share in “the fear and murmuring.” However, her letter also reveals the importance of Parliament’s opinion of her marriage negotiations. In another unsent letter written for Anjou in 1579, Elizabeth discussed how their potential marriage threatened Spain by writing, “the King of Spain, his eldest son, are planning day by day ... to hinder this marriage, thinking it of ill omen for the advancement of evil in this Kingdom.”²⁸ Elizabeth’s words are evidence that, despite dissent from her councilors, she saw the Anjou match as beneficial to England’s foreign policy. However, in the same letter she acknowledged the effort was likely to fail. “If the marriage does not happen, I don’t see a better path to set my steps on, than by the way of close friendship, such as human understanding can compose between us two: in which the fortune of the one takes the same form as that of the other,” she wrote.²⁹ Recognizing her inability to gather full support, Elizabeth set her sights on an alliance with France outside of a marital one. While the marriage negotiations ultimately failed, Elizabeth’s persistence despite popular anti-Catholic sentiments and fear of international entanglements offers compelling evidence that she was open to marriage.

The divisiveness of the Anjou marriage negotiations is evidenced by the multitude of cultural works on both sides of the debate. Councilors such as Thomas Radcliffe, Earl of Sussex commissioned plays extolling the virtues of marriage. In 1579, Sussex entertained the queen at New Hall with a performance involving Jupiter, which according to a letter by Sir Edward Clere, encouraged the queen to marry. The next day at New Hall, Sussex again provided the queen with an entertainment urging her to marry. This time, the play involved a knight who needed to be rescued by a virgin queen. Neil Younger explains the knight was Anjou and he could only obtain release from his captivity by marrying the queen, an even more appealing bride due to her virginity.³⁰ However, Elizabeth ultimately remained celibate and, as a result, the cultural works in opposition to the Anjou match are the ones that prevailed. Such opposition works included plays by Thomas Churchyard performed during Elizabeth’s stay at Norwich in 1578. Churchyard’s entertainments, which criticized the Anjou match, also stressed virginity as a virtue, particularly through the goddess Diana who praised the Virgin Queen as pure and perfect.³¹ Other opposition works included the sieve portraits of the queen painted from 1579 to 1583. In these portraits, Elizabeth holds a sieve associated with Tuccia, the Roman Vestal Virgin who proved her virginity by carrying a sieve of water from the Tiber to the Temple of Vesta. Painter George Gower inscribed parts of Petrarch’s *Triumph of Chastity* glorifying Tuccia on his 1579 sieve portrait.³² In discussing such works, Doran demonstrates how Elizabeth did not create the cult of virginity, but instead reclaimed the image created by writers and painters as her own when she saw the Anjou marriage negotiations would fail.³³ One way Elizabeth achieved this goal was by appointing Gower to serve as her Serjeant Painter in 1581.³⁴ Thus, she created the illusion that chastity was an image she had commissioned for herself.

Ultimately, Queen Elizabeth’s inability to tie the knot on any marriage suit while her Privy Council remained divided was a political consequence of her womanhood. Her openness to wed is evidenced both by her response to Parliament’s entreaty of marriage and by her persistence in pursuing potential husbands. She was particularly persistent with her

favorite, Robert Dudley, and with the French Francis, Duke of Anjou. However, as evidenced by the writings of both John Aylmer and John Stubbes, her subjects could only rest assured in their female ruler as long as she was kept in check by England's "rule mixed," and thus any match would only be legitimate with the approval of both Parliament and the Privy Council. The Privy Council's unresolvable political debates, which caused them to remain divided over every potential match, were repercussion of Elizabeth's gender. In the case of Dudley, councilors feared a king usurping the Privy Council and with Anjou, they believed their queen could not hold her own against the influences of a foreign king. Thus, Elizabeth's celibacy was a choice made for her by her male counselors, and the image of her virginity that emerged was created by men who opposed her marriage. While some historians laud Elizabeth as an early feminist heroine who chose to forgo men to keep her autonomy, the truth is far less appealing. Her very virginity was a choice made for her by men.

NOTES

1. Susan Doran, "Juno versus Diana: The treatment of Elizabeth I's marriage in plays and entertainments, 1561-1581," *Historical Journal*, 38:2 (1995), Cambridge Journals Online. 259-262.
2. Susan Doran, *Monarchy and matrimony: The courtships of Elizabeth I* (London: Routledge, 1996), 5-12.
3. Elizabeth I, Queen of England and Simonds D'Ewes, *The Marriage Speech* (extemporaneous version), 1559 (Boston: Northeastern University Women Writers Project, 2001).
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Doran, *Monarchy and matrimony*, 11.
8. John Knox, *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the monstrous regiment of women* (Geneva: J. Poullaine and A. Rebul, 1558).
9. John Aylmer, *True Haborrowe for Faithfull and Trewe Subjects, against the late blowne Blaste, concerninge the Government of Wemen, wherin be confuted all such reasons as a stranger of late made in that behalfe, with a breife exhortation to obedience* (Strasburg, 1559).
10. Stephen Alford, *The early Elizabethan polity: William Cecil and the British succession crisis, 1558-1569*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 212.
11. Aylmer, *True Haborrowe for Faithfull and Trewe Subjects*.
12. Ibid.
13. Doran, "Juno versus Diana," 259-260.
14. Doran, *Monarchy and matrimony*, 68.
15. Ibid., 50.
16. Ibid., 73-98.
17. Ibid., 134.
18. Ibid., 159.
19. Ibid., 160.
20. William Cecil, "Letter to the Queen Regarding Her Proposed Marriage" (1579) in *Elizabeth I and her age: Authoritative texts commentary and criticism*, ed. Donald Stump and Susan Felch (New York, London: W. W. Norton, 2009), 274-276.
21. Philip Sidney, "From A Discourse of Sir Philip Sidney to the Queen's Majesty Touching Her Marriage with Monsieur" (1579) in *Elizabeth I and her age: Authoritative texts commentary and criticism*, ed. Donald Stump and Susan Felch (New York, London: W. W. Norton, 2009), 274-276.
22. John Stubbes, *The discoverie of a gaping gulf vvherto England is like to be swallowed by another French marriage, if the Lord forbid not the banes, by letting her Maiestie see the sin and punishment thereof* (London: H. Singleton for W. Page, 1579) on EEBO.
23. Ibid., 165.
24. Natalie Mears, "Counsel, Public Debate, and Queenship: John Stubbs's 'The Discoverie of a Gaping Gulf', 1579," *The Historical Journal*, 44:3 (2001), 649. JSTOR.
25. John Stubbes, *The discoverie of a gaping gulf vvherto England is like to be swallowed by another French marriage, if the Lord forbid not the banes, by letting her Maiestie see the sin and punishment thereof* (London: H. Singleton for W. Page, 1579) in "Counsel, Public Debate, and Queenship: John Stubbs's 'The Discoverie of a Gaping Gulf', 1579," Natalie Mears, 642.
26. Doran, *Monarchy and matrimony*, 164-168.
27. Elizabeth I, "Letter 4 - Translation," in *Elizabeth I's Foreign Correspondence: Letters, Rhetoric, and Politics*, eds. Carlo Bajetta, Guillaume Coatalen, and Jonathan Gibson, (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 47-48.
28. Elizabeth I, "Letter 2 - Translation," in *Elizabeth I's Foreign Correspondence: Letters, Rhetoric, and Politics*, eds. Carlo Bajetta, Guillaume Coatalen, and Jonathan Gibson, (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 38.
29. Ibid., 38.
30. Neil Younger, "Drama, politics, and news in the earl of Sussex's entertainment of Elizabeth I at New Hall, 1579," *Historical Journal*, 58:2 (2015), 353.

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31. Doran, "Juno versus Diana," 270-273.
32. "The Plimpton "Seive" portrait of Queen Elizabeth I," *Folgerpedia*, accessed December 13, 2017, https://folgerpedia.folger.edu/The_Plimpton_%22Sieve%22_portrait_of_Queen_Elizabeth_I.
33. Doran, "Juno versus Diana," 274.
34. "The Plimpton "Seive" portrait of Queen Elizabeth I."

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