When you're a strong self-actualized woman just living your life to the fullest and nobody can stop you

Revisioning the Virgin Queen:

Changing Images of a Woman in Power, 1955-2006

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Cover Picture: Text and Portrait are an Internet meme. Source unknown.
This thesis, like all things I do, is for my mother.
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Statement of Authentication

The work presented in this thesis, to the best of my knowledge and belief, is original except as acknowledged in the text.

I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution

E. Jones

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Abstract

This thesis examines and analyses a number of depictions of Queen Elizabeth I in film and television between 1955 and 2006. As it is becoming increasingly apparent that historical films and television series are among the dominant media through which the general public is gaining a sense of historical knowledge, a means through which to study and assess these forms of history is necessary. This thesis argues that this must involve a serious study of the media itself. In using representations of Elizabeth I as a case study, I apply both historical and film analysis to investigate how they, as films and television series, communicate a specific interpretation of the Virgin Queen through their form as well as their content, and how they function as works of history. I examine four examples, The Virgin Queen (1955), Elizabeth R (1971), Elizabeth (1998), and The Virgin Queen (2006). Particular attention is paid to how these films and series interpret Elizabeth I’s virgin status and how they reflect their contemporary contexts, especially in regard to how their representation of Elizabeth I engages with the gender contexts at the time of production. Each of these examples independently and together, demonstrates how these audio-visual media are used by filmmakers to re-examine both the past and their contemporary situations, how they are able to interpret and communicate history through the particular techniques of their media, and how these relate to academic history. In an increasingly postliterate time, it is crucial that we can understand and learn from the different ways that history is being communicated and interpreted outside of the academic history book.
1. Introduction: Revisioning the Virgin Queen

In 2005, Tessa Morris-Suzuki noted a ‘crisis’ for traditional, academic history. She described this situation as “a curious dichotomy between, on the one hand, the lack of interest in history in the formal curriculum and, on the other, mass public enthusiasm for these popular representations of historical consciousness.”¹ This idea that the relationship with the past is being mediated through means that the academy has no control over and little to no involvement in has led to increased interest in the relationship between film and television, and history. Beginning in the 1970s and steadily becoming a field in its own right, the study of historical films and television has occupied the attention of many scholars from the disciplines of both film studies and history, though rarely, it must be said, have their efforts been combined. Early studies in the 1970s and 1980s focused largely on questions of whether film and television were capable of depicting history appropriately, arguing to and fro about film’s capacity to be accurate and whether or not this was important.² However, as scholars have largely come to terms with the idea that all history is inherently narrative based, these questions have fallen largely to the wayside. The emerging consensus among most writers is that film and television are, in their own way, also capable of exploring and engaging with history and historical discourse and attempting to make meaning of and understand the past. More recent work on the topic has centered far more on the nature of the relationship between written history and history on screen than on whether film and television are capable of historical accuracy.

The relationship between film and history is the concern of this study. The question of whether or not film is capable of depicting history in a meaningful way is no longer necessary. What is more interesting now is to examine exactly how film and television interact with history. This is the aim of the present study. In particular, I am attempting to examine how films and television series interpret and reinterpret history for their contemporary audiences. By taking the particular example of how filmmakers have interpreted and depicted Queen Elizabeth I (r. 1558-1603) in their particular historical, social, and gendered contexts, I will be investigating how history is represented and revised in different contexts and in different ways for the screen.

rather than for the page. In doing this, I do not wish to focus solely on how the film and series being studied simply reflect their contemporary contexts. By analysing a selected set of representations of Elizabeth I’s history, I will be examining how the filmmakers are contributing to historical discourse and contemporary public understandings of history through the particular techniques and methods available to them, using audio-visual media rather than the more traditional methods of academic history. The influence of the contemporary context of production however, cannot be ignored. Film and television, after all, are artefacts of the particular time and society from which they emerge. Thus, I will also explore how the past can be an important vehicle for examining, interrogating, and understanding the present.

**History in popular culture**

Film and television are far from being the first media to use and depict history. Poems and stories have been used to communicate history as it was understood for far longer than academic history has. In Elizabethan England of course, Shakespeare was interpreting history through his plays, often with a strong contemporary resonance. For example, Shakespeare’s *Richard II* (c.1595), a play about the deposal of King Richard II by Henry Bolingbroke (later Henry IV), was considered contentious when it was first performed as it was believed to have reinforced the comparisons that had been made between the ageing Queen Elizabeth and Richard II late in her reign.³ The scene in which Richard II abdicates to Henry IV was banned for this reason for fear that it would incite rebellion.⁴ The fact that the play was performed by commission of supporters of the Earl of Essex the day before he staged his rebellion in 1601 in an attempt garner support for the Earl’s rebellion, ultimately did not help his case.⁵ It is unsurprising then, that with the advent of moving picture technologies, history has provided a wealth of narratives for the screen. Four years after the invention of the cinematograph by the Lumière brothers in 1895, George Melies, a pioneering filmmaker, began staging scenes recreating recent history.⁶ Many of cinema’s most influential innovators have turned to history for their films, including D.W. Griffith with his highly controversial *Birth of a Nation* (1915), one of the first major historical films, and notably, Sergei Eisenstein, grappling with creating a mythology for the new Soviet Union in his revolutionary (both in style and subject matter) films *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and *October* (1928).

Despite this, it was not until the late 1970s and 1980s that the study of film and history really began to take off. This new interest was possibly due in part to the rise of poststructuralism and postmodernism in the 1960s and 1970s which challenged traditional ideas about history. This was not the first time that questions about academic history’s capacity to represent historical truth were raised, however. As Morris-Suzuki points out:

> [E]ver since the nineteenth century, after all, historians and philosophers have engaged in intense historical debate about the contentious connection between the infinitely complex lived experience of history itself and the stories we tell about that experience.\(^7\)

At this time, realist historical novels were the dominant form of historical representation outside of the academy. In 1973, Hayden White, in his influential postmodernist work *Metahistory*, argued that history actually had more in common with nineteenth century literature than it did with science. He argued that history is primarily “a narrative prose discourse” that shares many of the structures and tropes from fictional literature.\(^8\) Of course, academic history, while it may borrow the tropes of literature to present its interpretation, relies on stringent methods of verifiability that don’t apply to historical novels. In the 1970s and 1980s, the idea that academic history could have things in common with more narrative based forms began to be applied to film and television as historians began to “recognize the power of the medium and understand that students and the public get many of their ideas about the past from movie and television screens.”\(^9\)

In 1970 both the Historians Film Committee and *Film and History: An Interdisciplinary Journal* were established. These institutions “attempted to promote the thoughtful use of film and television in historical research and training.”\(^10\) Historians involved in these worked steadily in this area and it became increasingly popular, with reputable journals such as the *Journal of American History* (JAH) and the *American Historical Review* (AHR) beginning to include film review sections by the late 1980s.\(^11\) In 1988 the AHR held a forum on historical films which was introduced by Robert A. Rosenstone’s article, “History in Images/History in Words,” which would go on to become a key text in the field. Rosenstone had become interested in the relationship of film and history after two of his own works had been adapted into films, *Reds*

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\(^7\) Morris-Suzuki, *The Past Within Us*, 20.


\(^10\) Ibid.

\(^11\) Toplin and Eudy, “The Historian Encounters Film,” 8.
(1981) and The Good Fight (1984), a Hollywood feature film and a documentary respectively. In “History in Images/History in Words” Rosenstone argued that film and television could be seen as valuable contributors to a historical discourse once historians had stopped expecting them to be a work of written academic history.\footnote{12} This is a point he has continued to argue for nearly thirty years: if a film is judged within the constraints of its medium, its specific “rules of engagement,” only then can we properly assess its historical value.\footnote{13} This article was met with largely positive responses, including from John O’Connor, one of the founders of the Historians Film Committee who went on to propose a methodology for studying historical films and series\footnote{14}, and Hayden White, who coined the term ‘historiophoty’ in order to describe the specific ways in which film represents and interacts with history.\footnote{15}

While these were important steps forward in taking film and television seriously as forms of history, writers such as these were, at this time, still largely of the opinion that written history was ultimately the best means of recording and representing history. This meant that, while Rosenstone and others claimed that history on screen need not be held to the same standards as written history, they could not quite escape this mindset themselves. More recent scholars however, have approached historical films and series with more of a focus on the role of the media themselves. Tessa Morris-Suzuki, in her 2005 work The Past Within Us: Media, Memory, History, approached various, non-academic, sources of history through the lens of her idea of ‘historical truthfulness.’\footnote{16} Morris-Suzuki views any form of historical communication, regardless of the media it is presented in, as “a series of relationships between historical events, the people involved in recording and representing the events, and the people who subsequently consume an account of the past through various media.”\footnote{17} Historical truthfulness, for her, is the tracing and understanding of these relationships.\footnote{18} This, she argues, requires us to consider:

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
    \item \footnote{12} "History in Images/History in Words: Reflections on the Possibility of Really Putting History onto Film." The American Historical Review 93, no. 5 (1988).
    \item \footnote{13} Rosenstone, History on Film/ Film on History, xxi.
    \item \footnote{14} John E. O’Connor, “History in Images/Images in History: Reflections on the Importance of Film and Television Study for an Understanding of the Past,” The American Historical Review 93, no. 5 (1988).
    \item \footnote{15} Hayden White, “Historiography and Historiophoty,” The American Historical Review 93, no. 5 (1988).
    \item \footnote{16} Morris-Suzuki, The Past Within Us.
    \item \footnote{17} Ibid., 27-28.
    \item \footnote{18} Ibid., 28.
\end{itemize}
That the stories and images we receive about the past are shaped by the ideas and interests of the people who communicate them, by the nature of the media through which they are communicated, and by our own position in the present.\(^{19}\)

This emphasis on the influence of the particular contexts of the production of the representation of the past, as well as the medium is crucial to my own study.

**What is a historical film?**

How to define a historical film or television series has been one of the most contentious areas of the field of history and film. The answer is not as simple as it may perhaps seem. James Chapman, in the introduction to his book, *Past and Present: National Identity and the British Historical Film*, states that "there is a broad consensus among most, though not all, scholars that a historical film is one based, however loosely, on actual historical events or real historical persons."\(^{20}\) This is a fair but simplistic summary. Most scholars do agree that historical films — that is, films that set out to communicate history — must, at least in part, draw their main story or plot from documented historical people and events. However, for many scholars simply being based on history is not enough. For some, the film must interact somehow with the historiography. For Leger Grindon, historical films are those that “make claims to a persuasive representation of the past, that arise out of historical scholarship but do not partake in the discipline of history.”\(^{21}\) This is similar to Rosenstone, whose definition includes only films that engage historiography in similar ways to professional historians, most commonly by engaging questions that already exist in the historical discourse.\(^{22}\) For instance, Clint Eastwood’s complementary films *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006) and *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006) both deal with issues of public history, from the perspectives of both national myth and silence.

According to Rosenstone, the films that engage the questions that historians ask tend not to be mainstream or ‘Hollywood’ films. In 1995 he detailed the six most problematic features of mainstream historical films. He argued that: (1) mainstream films paint history as either a romance or comedy, often with a triumphant ending; (2) history is presented as individualistic; (3) they focus on the emotional experience; (4) they fall into ‘false historicity,’ in which a focus on the historical verisimilitude of the costumes, props, sets etc., overshadows any focus on the

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22 Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History*, xix.
ideas and actions of historical agents; (5) they offer a closed story or a finished past; and (6) they cannot provide new information about the past.  

Marnie Hughes-Warrington, in her book *History Goes to the Movies*, systematically questions each of these problems, essentially suggesting that they depend on two assumptions: that written academic history is assumed to be the ideal form of history and that written history is considered to be immune from all of these same problems. While Rosenstone also pointed out that these problems assume the written form as paramount, his point with these six problematic elements is that avant-garde or ‘experimental’ films are the better alternative. For him, experimental films are those “[m]ade in conscious opposition to Hollywood codes, conventions, and practices” and which “contest the seamless stories of heroes and victims that make up the mainstream feature.” He argues that these are better historical films because they challenge some if not all of his six problems with mainstream cinema. For example, he sees Sergei Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and *October* (1928) as privileging collectivist instead of individualistic histories and Jill Godmilow’s *Far From Poland* (1984) as an example of a film that refuses to present a resolved past.

Essentially, for Rosenstone, experimental films are more worthy of scholarly attention because:

> Rather than opening a window directly onto the past, [they open] a window onto a different way thinking about the past. The aim is not to tell everything, but to point to past events, or to converse about history, or to show why history should be meaningful to people in the present.

For example, Rosenstone acknowledges that while films like Oliver Stone’s *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) and *JFK* (1991) may not be the most accurate of historical films, they opened conversations and prompted challenges and questions in the public sphere, the first about President Kennedy’s assassination and the fallout of it for American society; the other, the experiences of Vietnam veterans.

My intention is not to argue that Rosenstone is incorrect in this assessment of experimental films and their potential to disrupt mainstream narratives. Rather, I would argue that when scholars limit their definition of a historical film in this manner they are excluding a vast number of the films that a general audience may be viewing and a rich source of

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25 Rosenstone, *History on Film/ Film on History*, 57.
27 Ibid., 63.
information about how history on screen is being presented and interpreted. Experimental films can tend to be films that are open in limited release and may not reach the same audiences that mainstream films might. Therefore, I would argue, mainstream films are just as important, if not more, if we want to consider historical films as reinforcing, challenging, or even creating, particular myths about history in the public consciousness.

Perhaps the most common way that scholars have attempted to define historical films is by describing what they are not. The most obvious example of this is the costume drama. In his book *History on Film/Film on History*, Rosenstone writes that one of his primary goals was to outline “a method by which we can distinguish the costume drama, the feature set in the past which is no more than a kind of exotic realm for love and adventure … from the film which engages the kind of questions which professional historians pose…” Rosenstone himself suggests there is nothing inherently wrong with costume dramas. However, his argument is that the history in them is simply window dressing for an imagined story that has no basis in documentable history. As Hughes-Warrington puts it, “the personal narratives they advance could just as well be set in the present or in another time.” A number of historians coming out of the initial waves of scholarly work on history and film in the late 1970s and 1980s continue this line of argument.

More recently, scholars have looked to costume dramas more seriously. Andrew Higson, in his book *English Heritage, English Cinema*, is critical of the distinction between historical films and costume dramas. Often films don’t fit neatly into either category, with films potentially having historical characters and settings but having an imagined plot, therefore any distinction can be difficult to maintain. Higson’s argument is that “the problem with the conventional distinction between the historical film and the costume drama is precisely that it depends on a rather rigid and unwavering set of rules.” He thus decided to shelve the term historical film and “assume that the term costume drama label covers all period films, whether they depict actual historical figures or clearly fictional figures.” Similarly, Rowland Weston, a historian teaching a film and history course at the University of Waikato in New Zealand, actively uses costume dramas, such as *A Knight’s Tale* (2001), in his course, as he argues that there is still a wealth of historical information that can be gathered from them, in this case about

28 Rosenstone, *History on Film/ Film on History*, xix.
29 Hughes-Warrington, *History Goes to the Movies*, 27.
31 Ibid.
the hierarchical nature of Medieval English society.\textsuperscript{32} I would argue that costume dramas are equally important to study, regardless of whether they depict actual historical figures or not, as they contribute to popular understandings of the past among the general public. If we want to understand how audiences are gathering ideas about history from film and television, then focusing only on ‘better’ types of history films, regardless of what is being most commonly consumed by audiences, seems counterintuitive. As it is for this study, I am looking at depictions of a particular historical figure, Elizabeth I and therefore am dealing in what would typically be defined as historical films.

**Elizabeth I as a cinematic icon**

The proliferation of depictions of Elizabeth I naturally began during her own time, with many poems and portraits produced in her honour. Famously, Edmund Spenser wrote the poem *The Faerie Queen* (the first three books published in 1589, the last three in 1596\textsuperscript{33}) about his Queen Elizabeth and many of Shakespeare’s plays are believed to have references to Elizabeth, if implicit. Dobson and Watson discuss the development of a “nostalgic cult of Elizabeth during the seventeenth century in stage plays about her accession and about the Armada” and that later in the seventeenth century and into the eighteenth century there emerged an “image of a Protestant epic heroine” through “sentimental memoirs, plays and novels.”\textsuperscript{34} She has been interpreted and represented by many authors since this time, for example Sir Walter Scott and Virginia Woolf wrote of her. Perhaps it is natural that this legacy would transfer to film. One of the first multiple-reel films ever made was a French film called *Les Amours d’Elisabeth, Reine d’Angleterre* (or *The Loves of Queen Elizabeth*) directed by Henri Desfontaines and Louis Mercanton in 1912.\textsuperscript{35} The 1930s saw a spate of films involving Elizabeth I. Flora Robson starred as Elizabeth in both *Fire Over England* (1937) and *The Sea Hawk* (1940). In each of these films, Elizabeth I is a triumphant leader of a dominant naval force. In 1939, Bette Davis first played Elizabeth in *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* which focused on an ill-fated romance between Elizabeth I and the Earl of Essex.

In the 1950s, films about Elizabeth I were also dealing with the coronation of the new Queen of England, Elizabeth II. *Young Bess* (1953) for instance, romanticises Elizabeth I’s

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 11.
relationship with her former guardian Thomas Seymour, turning Elizabeth’s youth into a fanciful romance, ultimately suggesting she would much rather be a wife and mother than queen but she must settle for this after it is thrust upon her. This, according to Dobson and Watson, is “a sentiment of the sort regularly attributed to Elizabeth II.”

This decade also saw The Virgin Queen (1955), Bette Davis’ second film in the role of Elizabeth I. In this film, Elizabeth, interestingly is the antagonist of the story, a jealous woman who feels betrayed by Sir Walter Raleigh. This image of Elizabeth as a woman invested in romance shifted in the 1970s to an “independent, self-willed career woman.”

This was largely through the BBC produced television series Elizabeth R (1971), starring Glenda Jackson in the title role. According to Dobson and Watson, this series “instantly constituted Glenda Jackson as the canonical face of Elizabeth for the last quarter of the twentieth century.” This series attempted to tell Elizabeth’s history authoritatively through its focus on historical fidelity and its depiction of the most well-known episodes of Elizabeth’s life, lending it a sense of nationalistic pride. While it still perpetuates many of the same ideas about Elizabeth, mainly “heterosexual normality, self-control, love of the people, religious tolerance, political moderation,” this series also appeared to add an element of Elizabeth I as a career driven, independent woman. This was largely attributed to Glenda Jackson’s dominant performance.

In 1978, the now cult film Jubilee directed by Derek Jarman was released. This film sees Elizabeth I transported into the 1970s punk scene making the Virgin Queen into a punk idol, in direct comparison and contrast to Elizabeth II. Where Elizabeth I is interested in an uncertain but bright future, Elizabeth II is a symbol of continued complacency.

In the 1980s, a time where England was being led by its first female Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, Elizabeth I was most famously depicted in a satirical way. In the 1985 series Blackadder II a version of Elizabeth I, known only as ‘Queenie,’ is played by Miranda Richardson as an outrageously childish woman flitting between murderous and flirtatious at whim. This was a great departure from the more serious and nationalistic post war interpretations of the Virgin Queen. 1992 saw the adaptation of Virginia Woolf’s novel Orlando (1928), featuring an elderly Elizabeth I. In keeping with the story’s gender crossing protagonist, and the film’s inherent androgyny, Elizabeth was portrayed by a man, Quentin Crisp, for the
short amount of screen time given to the Queen. This decade also saw the release of Shekhar Kapur’s first film about the Virgin Queen, *Elizabeth* (1998) starring a young Cate Blanchett. In the same year, Judi Dench portrayed Elizabeth I in John Madden’s *Shakespeare in Love*, as an endearing but commanding theatre enthusiast, earning Dench an Academy Award for just eight minutes of screens time.

In 2006 two mini-series debuted about Elizabeth I. The BBC’s *The Virgin Queen* starring Anne-Marie Duff was a more comprehensive take, covering from Elizabeth’s coronation to her death over the course of four episodes. HBO’s *Elizabeth I*, starred Helen Mirren as an ageing Queen and covered the last thirty or so years of her life. Interesting, in the last decade, there has been an increased interest in Mary Queen of Scots’s history. In 2011 the CW network first aired series *Reign*, a largely romantic drama series about Mary Stuart’s life in France, and, in the last two seasons, Elizabeth I’s life and the conflict between the two queens. At the time of writing, a new film, *Mary Queen of Scots* is in production, starring Margot Robbie as Elizabeth I. It is due for release in 2018.

For this thesis I have chosen four case studies, two films and two television series. These are *The Virgin Queen* (1955), *Elizabeth R* (1971), *Elizabeth* (1998), and *The Virgin Queen* (2006). These examples are chosen because they provide a variety of interpretations of Elizabeth from over the course of the latter half of the twentieth century and the early twenty-first century. This was a period of immense change in attitudes toward gender and therefore each representation of Elizabeth I from this period is inevitably effected by this. Three examples are from Britain, meaning that they are representing their own national history. This is excluding the American film *The Virgin Queen* (1955), though this deals with Sir Walter Raleigh who travelled to the Americas and therefore is, however loosely, relatable to American history. They are all mainstream, meaning that none are particularly experimental, and are all financed and produced through established companies. Each, to my mind, examines and interprets Elizabeth I dynamically, through their engagement both with the history and with their contexts of production, particularly their gender contexts. All four examples represent an Elizabeth I that is both a historical figure and a figure for their own times. Each I argue brings a new perspective to the narrative of Elizabeth I’s life and reign.
Film and history: an approach

My own approach to the study of the films and series under consideration was largely inspired by the approaches of Tessa Morris-Suzuki and John O’Connor. Morris-Suzuki’s idea of historical truthfulness was essential to the development of this project, with the consideration of how the history and the medium it is presented in interact, forming one of the bases of my approach. In *The Past Within Us*, Morris-Suzuki dedicates a chapter each to various media that can and have been used for historical representation. In each, she pays attention to how the particular medium functions in the communication and understanding of historical knowledge and interpretation. In her chapter on film and television, she describes the way that these, as audio-visual media, are more capable than most of evoking emotional connections with the past. She notes that while this engagement with the empathy of the audience is something that is common to historical novels and photographs, it is often stronger with the moving image. As she states:

[I]t is the moving film, and its combination of sound with changing human moods and expression, that is more likely to move us to tears. This emotional charge means that the images which moving pictures – both documentaries and feature films – present of past events are likely to have a deep impact in shaping shared feelings of identification with those events.

Morris-Suzuki also points to how this leads into debates about historical films that centre on the “the relationship between history as identification and history as interpretation.” While some scholars see the potential in film as a vehicle for identification with the past and therefore a level of understanding about the historical period, other scholars are concerned with film interpreting the past by presenting it as a whole, answered question with the impossibility of reference to sources. Through an examination of Steven Spielberg’s *Amistad* (1997) Morris-Suzuki looks at how film functions on both accounts, as identification and interpretation. This is my interest as well, with a more specific focus on how film and television construct and communicate their interpretations of history and facilitate identification through both the form of the film, its techniques, and the content, its narrative. In my particular case, I am interested in how, in the

43 Ibid., 125.
44 Ibid., 145.
case studies I have chosen, Elizabeth I is interpreted as a woman in power, how the related issues of her gender and virgin status function, and how these ideas are communicated to the audience, especially in light of the historical and social contexts of production.

Because of this desire to focus not solely on the historical content but also on the films and series themselves and how they function, John O’Connor’s proposed methodology for studying historical films also informed my approach. While Rosenstone certainly opened up the field of history and film with his 1988 article, “History in Images/History in Words,” by arguing that historical films should be judged on the basis of the conventions of the medium, he did not articulate a method by which to do so. Perhaps because of this, there and in all of his later works, he does not analyse in a great level of detail any of the films he discusses beyond an excessive focus on visual metaphor, ignoring other means through which the film may convey meaning. John O’Connor, a founder of the Historians Film Committee, did however articulate a method, first in “History in Images/Images in History,” his response to Rosenstone, and expanded on it later in his 1990 book, Image as Artifact. O’Connor advocates a two-stage method that incorporates both film analysis and historical analysis in order to “bring a coherent and comprehensive methodology”⁴⁶ to the analysis of historical films and television series. His method has certain drawbacks, including that the film analysis aspects are underdeveloped compared to the historical. This is likely in part because O’Connor himself is a historian attempting to train other historians on how to view historical films. However the general approach was useful in informing how I chose to go about analysing the film and series depicting Elizabeth I.

The two stages of O’Connor’s method are designed to focus on both the film itself and what historical information it can provide. The first part of O’Connor’s methodology is “Stage One: Gathering Information on the Content, Production, and Reception of a Moving Image Document,”⁴⁷ By content, he is not referring simply to the plot or the characters but to everything that appears on screen. He argues for the application of the techniques of film analysis, seeking to understand how all elements of the mise-en-scène combine to create and convey meaning.⁴⁸ For O’Connor, mise-en-scène “includes aspects of staging, creative design, and dramatic direction that would be present whether a production was being prepared for the

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⁴⁷ Ibid.
⁴⁸ Ibid.
stage or for the movie screen.” For the historical drama film, he argues that these elements would include setting, props and costumes, characters, and performance and how these signify and embody the historical period. He argues that mise-en-scène in a historical film is often considered accurate “as long as there are no glaring incongruities or anachronisms.”

O’Connor then distinguishes the “photographic elements of a shot” from the mise-en-scène. These, for him, include “duration, lighting, color, field size, composition, camera angle, camera movement, focus, lens characteristics, film stock, and projection speed.” In order for the historian to analyse these properly, he argues, “[i]f not a frame-by-frame or shot-by-shot analysis surely a scene-by-scene or sequence-by-sequence breakdown is necessary.” O’Connor urges historians looking to analyse film and television to acquaint themselves with these techniques.

This is an important point but O’Connor’s ideas should be taken further. O’Connor’s definition of mise-en-scène is limited to those elements that appear on both the stage and the screen. Many film scholars argue instead that while there is overlap between elements on stage and screen, a film’s mise-en-scène goes beyond this to include those photographic elements that O’Connor himself distinguished as separate from mise-en-scène. The Oxford Dictionary of Film Studies for example, includes in mise-en-scène, “the relationship between onscreen and offscreen space created by the framing of the image and by camera movement.” Bruce Kawin, in How Movies Work, distinguishes cinematic mise-en-scène from theatrical, arguing that:

[C]inematic mise-en-scène also includes such elements as the choice of filmstock (black and white or color, fine-grain or grainy), of aspect ratio (the proportions of the screen), of framing (how much of the set or cast will be shown at a time) of camera placement and movement and of sound environment.

For others, like the critics of the Cahiers du cinéma, mise-en-scène is a dynamic process that engages the spectator affectively. This is not to say that the method O’Connor is putting forward is necessarily flawed but rather that a more comprehensive understanding and approach to the film analysis is necessary.

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49 O’Connor, Image as Artifact, 305.
50 Ibid., 306.
51 Ibid., 307.
Alongside the content analysis of the film or series, O’Connor argues for looking at the production of the moving image document and the reception of it. He argues that we must consider “the social, cultural, political, economic, and institutional background of the production and the conditions under which it was made; and the ways in which the film or television program was understood by its original audiences.” For O’Connor, these aspects can be done via the same techniques historians are already familiar with, and significant effort is dedicated in *Image as Artifact* to describing how useful archival research is in uncovering production histories. Naturally, the social, political, and in my case gendered, contexts are important considerations for why a film or series might have depicted history in a certain way. Films are inevitably products, and reflections, of their own particular moments in time. The contemporary contexts of the film and television industries at the time of the production of texts are also important. Understanding the dominant trends in filmmaking at the time, for example in narrative, genre, character, style, technical possibilities or constraints and so on, will naturally inform any analysis of how a filmmaker chooses to depict history and if and how they engage or challenge dominant ideas. Research into reception is certainly important, and scholars like Hughes-Warrington and Morris-Suzuki have noted the importance of gauging audience responses in order to understand how the history on screen is interpreted and engaged with. Morris-Suzuki argues that “reflecting on our own response to particular films, and on the images, techniques and narrative structures that evoke that response, can be a way of enlarging our understanding of the past and its hold on the present.” For this study, I have chosen not to focus on reception due to the time constraints, and thus audience responses are only speculated on. However, future research would be enriched through the inclusion of the investigation into the reception of the films and series under examination.

The second part of O’Connor’s methodology is “Stage Two: Four Frameworks for Historical Inquiry” and involves the investigation of what historical information can be gathered from the content, production, and reception analysis done in stage one. He sorts the kind of historical information that can be gathered from film and television into four frameworks. The first of these frameworks is The Moving Image as Representation of History. This is fairly self-explanatory in that it is referring to how the film or series is depicting is depicting the historical period or persons that is its subject. O’Connor advises that the best way to approach the

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representation of history on film and television is first to dispel with the “unrealistic expectations” some historians hold that the history should be presented accurately. O’Connor, however, argues that “[f]ixing their attention on matters of verisimilitude, they resist the idea that the film is an interpretation or representation and look instead for a ‘recreation.’” Thus, the questions asked of the content analysis in this framework involve how the analysis of the film can show us “a thoughtful and coherent interpretation of the historical issues and events being portrayed” and whether that interpretation can be reflected or supported by scholarly work. The emphasis here is less on whether or not the history is literally accurate and more on how the film communicates its idea of history through its own means, not solely narrative and plot but also mise-en-scène, character, editing, interpretation and so on, including the fictionalised elements. By analysing how the film or series is making meaning of the past through its own techniques, we can come to understand the point of view of the filmmaker and how they understand and are representing the history they are depicting. The questions asked of the production at this point involve investigating what circumstances may have led to this particular interpretation, including the potential ideological positions of the studio or group funding the film, the filmmaker themselves, and their intended audiences.

The second of O’Connor’s frameworks is The Moving Image as Evidence for Social and Cultural History. This framework refers to the ways in which films and television can reflect the social and cultural values of the time of their production. Here, the historical information about the past being depicted is not the point, but rather the focus is with “decoding the socially and culturally driven judgements involved in the production and reception process.” In this framework, the questions asked of the content should focus far less on questions of accuracy and far more on “the values represented and the style assumed in establishing the composition and mise-en-scène…”. Importantly, there must be an examination of whether there are concepts and values represented in the film or series that reflect or challenge social and cultural values and concepts of the context of production, whether these be explicit or implicit. In terms of production, O’Connor argues that “special attention should be given to the purpose of the

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61 Ibid.
62 Ibid., 38.
63 Ibid., 108.
64 Ibid., 115.
65 Ibid.
production.” For instance, what social and cultural situations existed that made the depiction of a certain history, in this case the representation of Elizabeth I, necessary.

O’Connor’s third framework is Actuality Footage as Evidence for Historical Fact. This refers to the use of the moving image in forms like documentary and newsreel footage for what they can reveal about a particular historical event or person. Naturally, the point is made that any study of actuality footage for its historical information must be tempered with the fact that no piece of footage is without a specific perspective, even when the aim is objectivity. O’Connor argues that more important than objectivity or accuracy is the explicit and implicit information the footage or the film provides. The explicit information might be the facts that we can see in the footage and implicit information might include what the perspective and the context can tell us. For instance, Triumph of the Will (1936) shows us what the 1934 Nuremberg Rally was like but it also shows us how Leni Riefenstahl and the Nazi Party wished it to be viewed. Thus, O’Connor argues that actuality footage should always be accompanied by “more complete and more reliable sources,” by which he means archival and written histories (though naturally, these will also inherently include the perspective of the author). While documentaries and actuality footage are an important and intriguing part of the study of film and history, because I am dealing with a historical period and person from the sixteenth century, actuality footage is obviously not part of my thesis. However, the questions around explicit and implicit information are still relevant. For a historical drama film, the explicit information might be the representation of history and the implicit information might be the external contextual factors that led to this particular interpretation.

The fourth framework, The History of the Moving Image as Industry and Art Form, focuses not on the film or series itself but rather where it fits into the history of the film and television industries. In this framework, when looking at the content, questions are asked of how the film’s style or story might be indicative of its time and where it fits in the history of the medium. This requires an understanding of what styles and ideas about filmmaking and narrative were popular at certain times, as well as what technologies were available. O’Connor argues that the analysis of production in this framework is both technological history and economic history, as “both of these factors and other dominant industrial practices invariably

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66 O’Connor, Image as Artifact, 116.
67 Ibid., 173.
68 Ibid., 170.
69 Ibid., 222.
influenced the ways in which films looked and the messages they delivered.”

Like the other frameworks, these analyses can help us understand how the film was made, and why.

In analysing the films and series that I had chosen I did not directly apply O’Connor’s methodology in a strict manner, but rather took inspiration from his and Morris-Suzuki’s approaches. In doing this, I focused on analysing my examples on the basis of how they functioned as films and television series before doing a historical analysis. Applying techniques of film analysis that I had learned through my background in film studies, I tried to understand how Elizabeth I was being constructed and conveyed through cinematic techniques and conventions. After this point I addressed how these interpretations were engaging with historical discourse on Elizabeth I herself and how they might be influenced by the historical, social, and gender contexts of their production.

**Virginity as power**

Was the Virgin Queen actually a virgin? This is a question that continues to garner a lot of focus but is, frankly, a tiresome one given the inherent limitations on the possibility of the discovering an answer and the fact that regardless of the physical reality, she was considered to be a virgin at the time. More interesting questions arise when we begin to think about the ways in which, for Elizabeth I herself, virginity might have served her purposes and how, in representing her, filmmakers have approached the depiction of her virginity.

Many scholars, particularly feminist critics, have long discussed and debated what Elizabeth’s status as ‘The Virgin Queen’ meant both during her reign and in their contemporary societies. For Shelley Cobb, Elizabeth’s virginity represents both a conformation and a rejection of the patriarchy: “Queen Elizabeth’s virginity, which fulfils both male ideals of femininity and asserts her individual and political will, simultaneously affirms and subverts patriarchal order.”

Kathryn Schwarz also picks up on this seeming paradox by examining the complexity of the notion of virginity itself, both in the early modern conceptions and in the late twentieth century western culture. Virginity, she argues, “is not an absolute condition, in our cultural vocabulary” but rather is an abstract concept, but one that is generally understood bodily.” She states that “both its presence and its lack are understood as imprinted on the body, and that understanding

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70 O’Connor, *Image as Artifact*, 222.
enables evaluation and disposition by men.”\textsuperscript{73} She argues then that Elizabeth I by, at the very least, actively presenting herself as ‘The Virgin Queen,’ may have been thwarting this process: “[t]here is something unsettling about an ideological product that construes and manipulates its own conditions of value.”\textsuperscript{74} The notion that Elizabeth I’s image as a virgin brought her power is the theme that I will be examining over the course of the four case studies, \textit{The Virgin Queen} (1955), \textit{Elizabeth R} (1971), \textit{Elizabeth} (1998), and \textit{The Virgin Queen} (2006).

Much has been written of the ways in which the iconography of the Virgin Queen borrowed from and appropriated that of the cult of the Virgin Mary and even older mythical virginal figures including the Roman goddess Diana.\textsuperscript{75} These women are sacred icons and are worshipped both as virgins and as motherly figures, similar to how Elizabeth I was viewed, although in a far more secular context. Helen Hackett, in her book, \textit{Virgin Mother, Maiden Queen}, argues that the goddess-cults of Greek and Roman mythology, the cult of the Virgin Mary and the iconography of the Virgin Queen are all part of a long continuity of a worship of virginal, mother figures.\textsuperscript{76} She argues that the three main terms associated with Marian iconography are ‘mother,’ ‘virgin,’ and ‘queen,’ all of which are traditionally figures held in high esteem.\textsuperscript{77} Hackett details how the association with the iconography particularly of the Virgin Mary, was a large part of the way that Elizabeth I was able to establish and maintain authority as a ruler.

When Elizabeth ascended to the throne in November 1558, female rule was a topic under heavy debate. It is important to note that Mary and Elizabeth Tudor were only the first and second women to ever officially rule England as queens in their own right and not as wives of kings.\textsuperscript{78} Before Mary Tudor’s death in 1558, John Knox, a Scottish Protestant, published \textit{The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women}. This was an attack on the legitimacy of female rulers. His polemic was based in religion, essentially arguing that if woman’s subordination to man was ordained by God, as he believed the scripture to mean, and man was meant to rule in marriage and in the household, how could it be anything less than

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\textsuperscript{73} Schwarz, “The Wrong Question,” 11.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 8.
\textsuperscript{76} Hackett, \textit{Virgin Mother, Maiden Queen}, 13-15.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 27.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 19.
\end{flushleft}
sacrilegious for a woman to rule the public and political spheres as queen? His attack was directed toward three Catholic Queens, Mary of Guise, regent of Scotland in her daughter Mary Stuart’s place, Catherine de Medici of France, and Mary Tudor. However, after Mary I died and Elizabeth I ascended, he suddenly attacking a Protestant queen. In 1559 Knox wrote to Elizabeth and her chief advisor William Cecil in an attempt to reconcile with her. There would be no reconciliation though as he continued to insist that she make clear that she was raised to her position by God and not by the laws of man. Knox’s Blast was met with a response by John Aylmer who defended Elizabeth’s right to rule on the grounds that it was the law and custom of England that she succeeded the throne.

This debate about female leadership raging in the early months of Elizabeth’s reign contributed to the urgent need to establish her authority. Hackett argues that Elizabeth did this is a number of ways that evoked the iconography of the Virgin Mary, or Marian iconography. One of these ways was by emphasising the imagery of the king’s two bodies, and thus reinforcing the sacredness of the monarchy. Her legitimacy as monarch was in part justified by her possession of the two bodies and the androgyny this bestowed on her,

If an ordinary man had only daughters, the inheritance should be shared between them, whereas if a king had only daughters the inheritance passed to the eldest as if she were a man. Thus, despite the femaleness of her body natural, Elizabeth could lay claim to the ‘masculine’ public virtues of rule through her possession of the body politic. The concept of her two bodies, one private and feminine, the other public and implicitly ‘masculine’ in its virtues, is one element in well-known proliferation of androgynous iconography around her.

In her accession speech, Elizabeth herself specifically employed this kind of rhetoric. Hackett argues that this line of argument, whilst not explicitly Marian, mirrors the sense of the Virgin Mary being an exceptional woman. Elizabeth was aligning herself with the idea that, like Mary, her greatness came from being able to overcome the frailties of her sex. As Hackett argues, Mary’s virginity and Elizabeth’s regality are not meant to be representative of all women, “rather, they emphasise the impurity and unfitness for rule of women in general by stressing

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80 Ibid., 243.
81 Hackett, Virgin Mother, Maiden Queen, 39.
82 Ibid., 40.
83 Ibid.
how miraculous and unique is the exceptional woman in rising above it,” despite her sex.⁸⁵ In the context of the arguments made by Knox, Elizabeth was thus defending her rule by creating the image that, whilst she did embody the feminine in her natural body, she also embodied the masculine in the body politic.

Being linked to the Virgin Mary through virginity also gave Elizabeth I a powerful association with divinity. Being a Protestant ruler, she was already seen as the representative of the divine as the head of the church. However, when viewed in the context of Elizabeth being seen to restore the Protestantism of her father and brother’s reigns after her sister Mary I’s violent Catholic rule, Elizabeth’s association with the divine takes on even more significance. Elizabeth’s refusal to marry was distressing to her council, the parliament, and the people, because on the one hand it put the succession in doubt, and on the other, it went against Protestant theology. With the belief that man was inherently corruptible after The Fall, Protestants believed that “celibacy was impossible to fallen human beings.”⁸⁶ Thus, “virtuous matrimony” was a more practical goal.⁸⁷ Hackett argues that this idea stemmed not from a complete rejection of virginity but of the elevation of virginity to an almost divine status, “virginity is so special that it can only be attained by a tiny number of the exceptionally sinless, aided by God, and therefore remains the highest goal to which to aspire.”⁸⁸ Not only was virginity seen as purity and perfection but the resistance to temptation was viewed as “a spiritual transcendence and a triumph over the Fall.”⁸⁹ In this context, Elizabeth’s status as a virgin brought her symbolically closer to the divine.

Elizabeth’s place as an almost divine figure also came to be used in the religious conflicts between Catholics and Protestants. Whilst not as violent as her sister Mary I had been in her quest to drive out Protestantism, Elizabeth was ruthless in her attempts to remove Catholic idols, including that of the Virgin Mary, from places of worship.⁹⁰ Hackett points out the irony in the fact that whilst she sought the destruction of idols, she became one herself.⁹¹ Symbolism and ritual for Protestants was not completely removed but rather moved from the sacred realm, to the secular. As Hackett states, “there was not a complete rejection of imagery, but rather the replacement of old, ‘false,’ Catholic images with new, ‘true,’ Protestant ones: in this case, the

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⁸⁵ Hackett, *Virgin Mother, Maiden Queen*, 41.
⁸⁶ Ibid., 54.
⁸⁷ Ibid.
⁸⁸ Ibid.
⁸⁹ Ibid., 55.
⁹⁰ Ibid., 3.
⁹¹ Ibid.
Virgin Mary opposed to and destroyed by the Virgin Queen.”\textsuperscript{92} Where the Virgin Mary was figuratively destroyed, she was replaced in the consciousness of the people by the ‘true’ virgin, Elizabeth I. It is these ideas that I will be examining in each case study, looking at how each example engages with this historical discourse whilst also adapting to their contemporary contexts.

Outline

This thesis is in six chapters. Following this introduction, I will begin my case studies with \textit{The Virgin Queen} (1955) and examine how it depicts Elizabeth as an antagonist. As part of this, we see the way that she manipulates international relations through the promise of marriage. Ultimately though, this version of Elizabeth is revealed to be infertile and it is this that fuels her bitterness and anger. I argue that, in light of the context of the 1950s views on gender roles, this was a necessarily choice in order to make Elizabeth relatable to a 1950s audience and to perpetuate these gender norms. In chapter three I look at \textit{Elizabeth R}, a 1971 BBC series that reinterprets Elizabeth I in the context of the emerging Women’s Liberation Movement. She is a woman more focused on politics and her reign than she is on marriage, proving successful whilst not conforming to the roles of wife and mother. Despite this, her virginity largely functions as protection in the series, as she is depicted as having personal trauma from her childhood that leads her to have a deep seated fear of intimacy. I argue that, given that the series strives far more for historical accuracy than other depictions, this is an attempt to explore the Virgin Queen as an individual woman. Chapter four is an analysis of the 1998 film \textit{Elizabeth}. This film presents a version of Elizabeth that is young, inexperienced and must learn and grow into her role as queen. This growth is expressed in her unconventional transformation from sexually experienced to virginal. Here, her virginity is almost a marketing strategy that she employs in order to help bring stability to her nation. I argue that this is in part a reflection of late twentieth century women in power, Margaret Thatcher and Princess Diana. The final case study is the 2006 series \textit{The Virgin Queen}. Again, this series takes the position that Elizabeth had a fear of intimacy from her childhood. Her virginity is thus also protection but it is largely articulated through the rhetoric of the monarch’s two bodies. This series depicts her as politically minded but sexually frustrated and her motherly relationship to the Earl of Essex suggests a lost desire for children. This, I suggest, is a reflection of the postfeminist context from which it emerged, with the reversion and rejection of feminist ideals.

\textsuperscript{92} Hackett, \textit{Virgin Mother, Maiden Queen}, 3.
2. The Virgin Queen (1955): Justifying Childlessness

*The Virgin Queen*, directed by Henry Koster and released in 1955 is the closest to what might typically be defined as a costume drama of the films collected here. It is also the only example from outside of Britain, produced not long after the collapse of Hollywood’s studio system. The film was Bette Davis’ second portrayal of Elizabeth I. She had played the Queen previously in the 1939 film *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex*. *The Virgin Queen* is set late in Elizabeth’s reign, in 1581, and centres on a tumultuous relationship between Elizabeth and Sir Walter Raleigh (Richard Todd). When Raleigh comes to court after serving in Ireland to ask to sail to the New World, Elizabeth becomes infatuated with him. Unbeknownst to Elizabeth, Raleigh marries one of her ladies, Beth Throgmorton (Joan Collins) with whom he fathers a child. Elizabeth finally lets Raleigh have a ship but plans to keep him back in England. Raleigh tries to organise to sail without royal permission When this, as well as his secret marriage to Beth, is discovered by the Queen she arrests them both and plans their executions in a fit of betrayal and jealousy. However, she eventually relents and allows them both to sail to the New World. This film puts Elizabeth in a position that she is not often seen in, that is, she is the main antagonist. She is the villain whilst Raleigh is the hero that must overcome her tyrannical actions. In this film, her virginity, in the form of her eligibility to marry, functions as policy as she manipulates international marriage suits in order to maintain foreign relations. The film’s narrative however, invents a medical reason for Elizabeth’s childlessness by making her infertile and this is ultimately the reason that she is bitter and jealous throughout the film.

*The Virgin Queen* was produced by 20th Century Fox, one of the Big Five studios that had dominated film production in America during the studio system. The director, Henry Koster, was a German filmmaker who had fled Germany not long after the Nazi Party came to power, working in Europe for a time before signing a contract with Universal Pictures in 1936.¹ In 1948 Koster moved to 20th Century Fox and in 1953 he directed the first CinemaScope film *The Robe*. CinemaScope was a new way of shooting and showing a wide-screen film that was pioneered by 20th Century Fox. It involved the use of “cylindrical lenses

that take in an angle of view twice that of normal lenses.” ² This meant that wide-screen films became more of an experience. Belton argues that they “began to engage their audiences more actively, creating for them a compelling illusion of participation in the action depicted on the screen, an illusion that proved far greater than that achieved by previous, narrower exhibition formats.” ³ These films whilst using new formats relied on theatre conventions and “drew heavily on other traditional genres that rely upon spectacle, such as the period costumer and the musical.” ⁴ By the time The Virgin Queen (1955) was being produced, CinemaScope was the standard way of making films for 20th Century Fox and it is an example of the way period costume dramas were exploited by this style of filmmaking.

The Virgin Queen represents an American take on Elizabeth I’s history. This was not the first Hollywood film to approach the subject. Several earlier films drew on the history of the Virgin Queen, including Davis’ first film in the role of Elizabeth I, The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex (1939), John Ford’s Mary of Scotland (1936), and MGM’s Young Bess (1953). None of these films are particularly interested in historical veracity, a trait not emphasised in studio films. Instead, historical epics were seen as vehicles for lavish productions and melodrama. In this sense The Virgin Queen has more in common with the ‘outsider’s’ perspective that Shekhar Kapur brought to Elizabeth (1998) than either of the BBC productions discusses in later chapters, in that neither treats Elizabeth I’s history particularly reverentially. As in The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex (1939), The Virgin Queen focuses on Elizabeth’s romantic life, in this case, the relationship between Elizabeth I and Sir Walter Raleigh. Given that he was responsible for the first British colony in the Americas, Virginia, which he named after the Virgin Queen, ⁵ Raleigh’s inclusion bridges both British and American history. However, the film does not directly deal with the discovery of New World. It is implied that this is the voyage he will undertake at the end of the film. It is possible though, that the film’s depiction of Raleigh as willing to defy royal orders to sail to the New World could be seen as an attempt to align the establishment of American colonies with bravery and passion for discovery.

³ Ibid., 355.
⁴ Ibid., 357.
The relationship between Elizabeth I and Sir Walter Raleigh has garnered about as much filmic and literary attention as Elizabeth’s relationship with Robert Dudley. Raleigh did first come to court in the December of 1581, and Elizabeth was quickly taken with him. As Tudor historian Alison Weir describes, “Elizabeth was impressed by his intellectual skills, his forthright manner and candid views.” There is a popular myth, as seen in the film, that Raleigh laid his cloak on the ground so Elizabeth would not step in a puddle. However this story appeared first in Thomas Fuller’s *Worthies of England* (1662), with no earlier record of it, making it unlikely to have actually happened. Weir argues however that, “the gesture is in keeping with Raleigh’s character and what we know of his relationship with Elizabeth.”

Raleigh often wrote poetry about or to the Queen, referring to her as both Cynthia and Diana, the virgin huntress. Kapur’s sequel to *Elizabeth* (1998), *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (2007), also focuses on the relationship between the queen and Raleigh, following a similar narrative in which Elizabeth is taken with Raleigh and betrayed by his secret marriage.

Whilst Elizabeth and Raleigh were by all accounts close and perhaps had a flirtation, *The Virgin Queen* (1955) takes many liberties with the history. The film stresses his longing for adventure and exploration, a longing that Elizabeth consistently thwarts. In reality, Raleigh’s first “voyage of discovery” was in 1578 with his half-brother Sir Humphrey Gilbert, before he had even been stationed in Ireland several years before he met Elizabeth. Similarly, Raleigh’s relationship with Bess Throckmorton, portrayed by Joan Collins in the film, did not begin until 1591, after Raleigh had sailed with royal permission in both 1584 and 1587. It was also not until June 1592, months after Bess had given birth to a boy that Elizabeth was to learn of their relationship. Raleigh was at sea when they were discovered and was swiftly summoned back, as he had committed two punishable offences, “seducing a noble virgin committed to [the Queen’s] care, and marrying without royal consent.” Both Raleigh and Bess were sent to the Tower in July. Elizabeth’s personal anger in the film is

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8 Ibid.
9 Ibid., 223.
10 Ibid., 342.
perhaps not a stretch as whilst Raleigh had technically committed crimes, Weir describes Elizabeth’s personal anguish at the situation:

Worse still was Elizabeth’s bitter sense of betrayal, for Raleigh had for a decade been one of her chief favourites, and this marriage seemed to mock all his protestations of devotion to her.\(^\text{13}\)

Raleigh was eventually released early in August 1592 when his services were needed after a riot amongst English sailors at Dartmouth, though Elizabeth continued to bar him from court. In December, Bess was also released.\(^\text{14}\) In 1597, Raleigh was restored to favour and, when Elizabeth died in 1603, he marched in her funeral procession.\(^\text{15}\)

**Elizabeth as antagonist**

Despite its lack of regard for historical accuracy, the film remains an interesting interpretation of Elizabeth I, mainly due to her largely being the antagonist of the story. Even before she is seen, her character is described by Robert Dudley (Herbert Marshall), as “a woman of winds and wisdom, but only the winds of the moment.” She is established as being indecisive and impulsive, and as the film progresses, she is further characterised as possessive, jealous, and tyrannical. When she is first introduced, we see her feet first as the camera pans up to reveal her, dressed akin to the iconic look of Elizabeth I, with an elaborate white dress, bright red wig, and stark white face, her body and hair adorned lavishly with pearls (Fig. 1). She takes an immediate liking to Raleigh as he piques her interest in accounts of the fighting in Ireland. She largely waves off the flattery of flirtations of the men of the court and maintains an air of authority, as she appears to be able to see through their attempts to please her.\(^\text{16}\)

\(^\text{13}\) Weir, *The Life of Elizabeth I*, 412.
\(^\text{14}\) Ibid., 413.
\(^\text{15}\) Ibid., 486.
\(^\text{16}\) *The Virgin Queen*, Directed by Henry Koster (Los Angeles: 20\(^\text{th}\) Century Fox, 1955).
It is important to also consider the actor when dealing with representations of historical figures, and Bette Davis, playing the role of Elizabeth I for the second time, brings a sense of authority to the character. Morris-Suzuki argues that, “the familiar face of the famous actor in the feature film brings history into the midst of our own lives.” Davis was one of the most prominent stars of the studio era, playing largely strong-willed characters. This reputation was only increased when in 1936 when she walked out of her Warner Bros. contract demanding better roles. Although she lost the legal case the studio brought against her, she reportedly returned to a greater deal of respect. Davis playing Elizabeth I becomes almost shorthand for the audience. Elizabeth becomes endowed to an extent with Davis’ own reputation; she was Hollywood royalty herself and was evidently no push over. This connection between the actor and the historical person they are portraying is important because, as Morris-Suzuki states:

> It assures us that the people of the past had recognizable emotions and motives that may be played out by the people in the present, and that the events of the past are

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considered sufficiently relevant to be addressed to us through the voices of the heroes of contemporary popular culture.  

Davis was thirty-one when she first portrayed the Virgin Queen in *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* (1939) which tells the story of an ill-fated love affair between Elizabeth I and the Earl of Essex. When she returned to the role in 1955, she was forty-one and is more comfortable and commanding in the role. Though her career was waning, despite delivering what is critically believed to be her best performance in the 1950’s *All About Eve*, she still carried with her the weight and the authority of being one of the most well established, well regarded, and highly acclaimed film stars (she had been nominated for ten Academy Awards and won two by this time).

Immediately following the introduction to Davis’ Elizabeth I in *The Virgin Queen*, the Queen’s own flirtatiousness and her tempestuousness becomes apparent. This comes in the first private scene between Elizabeth and Raleigh. This room is furnished with red furniture and later we see that her chambers are shrouded in red curtains, wall hangings, and a red bedspread (Fig. 2 & Fig. 3). The colour red forms a character motif for her. It is an outward reflection of her character, both as a representation of the association of the Tudor dynasty with red and as a symbol of her passion, thwarted desire and occasionally wretched temper. She holds a flirtatious conversation with Raleigh, discussing women as citadels Raleigh might like to storm. The conversation becomes aggressive however, when she realises that he would rather sail to the New World than entertain her at court. She throws her wine at him and all but demands his subservience. He walks out on her and complains later to Dudley about the way that she treats men, expecting them to fall at her feet — literally, as she has a pillow at her feet on which her current favourite is to sit — and how he will not give in to this. He plans to leave court but Elizabeth has made him the Captain of her Guard (something that, in reality, she did not do until 1587, after the previous captain Sir Christopher Hatton had been promoted to), all but forcing him to stay. Dudley claims that if he appeases her he may eventually get what he wants but warns him, “in return for her favour, the Virgin Queen demands a devotion that is single hearted, unwavering, long suffering.” She is, within three scenes, seen to be manipulative and demanding of men’s affection and devotion in a way that is selfish and separate from politics.

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21 *The Virgin Queen*.  

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Figure 2: Elizabeth and Raleigh (Richard Todd) in *The Virgin Queen* (1955). The red furnishings form part of a colour motif for the character of Elizabeth in this film.

Figure 3: Elizabeth’s bedchamber in *The Virgin Queen* (1955). The red dressing on and around the bed continue this motif.
Her characterisation as the antagonist of the film is explicitly established however, through a public argument that she has with Raleigh. This occurs during a scene involving a Privy Council meeting. Toward the end of this scene, Raleigh is accused of bringing a murderous Irishman into the Queen’s guard. While he has brought his Irish friend into the guard, he vouches for the man’s loyalty. When Elizabeth wants the man arrested anyway, Raleigh expresses his outrage and storms out, forcing their altercation into the more public corridor. This results in an exchange in which Koster explicitly codes Elizabeth as the antagonist to the heroic Raleigh. As she follows him out into the corridor, we see the exchange from a long shot (Fig. 4). As she speaks, suggesting that he should be grateful for the pity she has taken on him, the non-diegetic (meaning sound that comes from outside the diegesis, that is, the story world) score is slightly ominous. As Raleigh begins to speak however, the camera cuts to a mid-close up of him and the music begins to swell into something triumphant. He speaks passionately about wanting to serve England, not just Elizabeth and desiring to be free of her oppression of exploration, as though she were not just possessive of men but of the nation as a whole. In this, she is a tyrant, whom he gallantly opposes, a threat to his masculinity, which he overcomes.\textsuperscript{22} This is unlike the other depictions of her gathered in this thesis. For the most part in other depictions, she is largely fair and adored; only by Catholics is she deemed anything other than this. It is interesting that this story, of masculine freedom from oppression and cruel feminine wiles (which appear here to be one and the same), poses Elizabeth as a villain, not because of religious difference or any political circumstance but because of a vain, possessive, and encompassing desire for adoration.

\textsuperscript{22} \textit{The Virgin Queen}. 

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“There is policy for you!”

While Elizabeth’s virginity in this film is not invoked in a Marian way, she does demonstrate an agency over her virginity in how she uses it to manipulate international policy. In fact, this Elizabeth is established as masterfully cunning in the way that she handles political matters, particularly in the way that she manipulates her own image and status as a virgin. Unlike the images of first council meetings we will see later in *Elizabeth R* (1971), *Elizabeth* (1998), and *The Virgin Queen* (2006), the Privy Council scene in this film sees Elizabeth completely at ease and in control, having been ruling for twenty-three years. She sits at the head of the table, in a raised chair with her royal seal emblazoned on it, placing her above the councillors (Fig. 5). She wears another portrait-inspired costume, this time of the Armada Portrait (Fig. 6). The ambassador of France enters, insisting that she provide France with an answer to their Duke’s suit (this is presumably the Duke of Anjou given the time frame of the film). She is still upset that when, in the previous hunting scene the ambassador had laughed when she had missed a deer with her arrow, and is clearly tired of dealing with French marriage proposals. Elizabeth loses her temper with the ambassador, telling him to go back to his Queen, Catherine de Medici, and tell her that she is tired of the French. When the council questions her behaviour, Koster cuts to a wide shot of the entire council table, reminding us of her position of authority over them as she says, “it is I who make the policy of this realm, I, and I alone.” We then cut to a mid-close shot of her as she explains how she
has been sending love letters to the French Duke (whom she appears to despise) for five years to “keep France on tenterhooks, to keep France from turning to Spain. That is policy. My policy.”

Clearly, this Elizabeth is one who understands that her virginity and therefore her eligibility to marry are means through which she can maintain and influence international relations, and exploits this to great effect.

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23 *The Virgin Queen.*
Later in the film, we see the way that Elizabeth, again using her virginity as a political tool, fixes the situation with France. After falling ill, Elizabeth is in her own bed, adorned with red bed curtains and red sheets, against which she is contrasted in her white nightgown and nightcap. In this scene, Davis’ performance is key to understanding the way that this version of Elizabeth is depicted as a master manipulator. When the French ambassador knocks on her bedroom door, her favourite councillor, Christopher Hatton, suggests he should be sent away. However, Elizabeth decides instead to invite him in, and immediately her demeanour changes. She slumps further down into her bed and increases the pained expression on her face. She talks slower with the ambassador and clearly exaggerates her illness. She carries on about being close to death and questions whether the ambassador should really think to marry his Duke to a woman on her deathbed. During this scene, she is largely shot from the opposite side of the bed to the ambassador, allowing the audience to see the slight smirk on her face whenever she turns away from him (Fig. 7). She eventually tells the ambassador to inform his Queen that she is ill and that she will reconsider the marriage proposal when she is better. She also offers to exchange court personnel with Catherine de Medici, suggesting that she swap her ladies for some of Catherine’s gentlemen, ridding herself of the problem of Beth Throgmorton. As soon as the door closes behind the ambassador on his way out, Elizabeth sits straight up in bed and cackles maniacally. “There is policy for you!” she cries joyously. Her blatant act of manipulation appears both clever and cruel, but reinforces that she is aware of the value that her virginity has. It has enough value to maintain international relations on the mere possibility that she may agree to a match (though it is clear to the audience that she has no intention of honouring this, especially as the film later reveals that she is infertile).

24 *The Virgin Queen.*
Elizabeth’s act to encourage the idea that she would eventually be willing to marry, I would argue, is akin to the way that Cate Blanchett’s 1998 *Elizabeth* adopts virginity as a tool of power. Davis’ Elizabeth uses her virginity to hold power over men, to manipulate them as she does the French. For the majority of the film, the prospect of her love and marriage, and thus her virginity, is part of a performance that acts as a political tool. Knowing that she is expected to marry and be pure when she does so, she toys with the idea of marriage in order maintain relationships with countries like France to keep them from turning to other potential alliances. Historically, Elizabeth I was largely understood as desiring, or at least willing, to marry for quite some time before it became clear that the chances of her marrying and producing an heir were slim to none. Hackett points out, for at least the first twenty years of her reign:

Elizabeth was viewed by her subjects as a Virgin Queen not in the sense of perpetual virginity on the model of the Virgin Mary, but in the sense of being nubile, in a state preparatory to and ripe for matrimony.\(^\text{25}\)

This could be said to also have been the thinking at times of Jackson’s Elizabeth in *Elizabeth R* (1971). Whilst it is made clear that she has no intention of marrying, she also knows it

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would be unwise to ward off all prospect of it, “no one should be entirely discouraged.”

Ultimately though, the fact that *The Virgin Queen* (1955) reveals in the final scenes that it is not Elizabeth’s choice to be a virgin, seems to undermine her agency in the rest of the film. It turns what appears to be a clever ploy on Elizabeth’s part into what is effectively just making the best of a bad situation.

It could be argued that Elizabeth’s tyrannical authority in the film is a direct result of this lack of choice over her virginity. When it is revealed in the film that Elizabeth cannot bear children, it is meant as an explanation for why Elizabeth became the Virgin Queen. Being barren immediately makes her, in a sixteenth century context at least, a poor marriage prospect, especially as a monarch whose children would be expected to carry on her lineage and that of whomever she happened to marry. Thus, we can assume that she continues to put off her marriage for this reason and, as would be expected in both the context of the sixteenth century and the 1950s, remains pure and chaste. Given that the film suggests that her cruelty is born out of her desire to be adored and her jealousy of Beth who can marry and have children, in a sense, we could say that her actions that force the subordination of her courtiers is born out of her sexual and romantic frustrations. This is not a new idea, the woman who is cruel due to being frustrated and sexually repressed is a well-worn trope in cinema.

When looked at in the context of Hackett’s argument that Elizabeth I gained authority through the possession of the monarch’s two bodies, Davis’s Elizabeth’s lack of choice over her virginity is significant. Whilst the historical Elizabeth, and the Elizabeth of the other three examples collected here, clearly prioritise the body politic over the body natural, in *The Virgin Queen* (1955) she would seemingly not have the option. Given that she is unable to bear children and therefore marry, the political would appear automatically prioritised. This is not to say that the natural desires of a woman comprise only marriage and motherhood, but in each case, the dichotomy between the two bodies is expressed as the choice between these roles and that of being a good queen. I would argue however that this is not simply the case with *The Virgin Queen*, but rather her political actions appear to be driven by the frustration of her natural desires. Although she is in essence doing the same as the other representations in that she is furthering the idea that she is available for marriage for the sake of foreign policy (though with the far more explicit intention of not following this through), the rest of her actions in the film are born out of jealousy. Her actions against Raleigh and Beth come

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out of a feeling of betrayal, even her exchange of courtiers with Catherine de Medici is a means to remove the object of her envy, Beth, from her way and replace her with adoring male courtiers. Also, by the end of the film it is apparent that she is saddened by the fact that she must carry on with state business whilst Beth and Raleigh are free to live happily as a family. There is the sense in this film that if there was a choice available to her, this Elizabeth would certainly choose the natural body over the politic, or at least she would entertain both equally.

**Better to be infertile**

Despite appearing to be the antagonist of the film, Elizabeth is redeemed to an extent in the end when her infertility is revealed and she demonstrates compassion. After Raleigh has been arrested and sentenced to death, Beth, his now pregnant wife, sneaks into the Queen’s bedchamber to try to plead for his life. Elizabeth pulls back her red bed curtains to face Beth. The scene, in keeping with the rest of the film, has minimal editing, consisting of only five shots, the majority of which are a mid-shot with both women in the frame. When Beth accuses Elizabeth of demanding both hers and Raleigh’s deaths purely out of jealously the Queen demands she brings the candle, the only source of light in the room, closer and removes her nightcap. Elizabeth is symbolically and literally revealing herself, showing her near bald head, with only wisps of white hair (Fig. 8). Acknowledging that she could not compete in looks with other women, she claims the love men hold for her is a deeper, more intellectual love, “I am Elizabeth Tudor. Men have loved me. Not with a dandling love you toss a white kitten but men have loved me because I struck sparks from their minds, I matched spirit with spirit.” She goes on to explain that she is also barren, declared unable to bear children at eighteen. “I am glad” she claims, “England was child enough for me.”

Although she appears to be content with her infertility and the ‘deeper’ love she inspires in men, the music in the scene is of a melancholy tone, seemingly contradicting her. She also, despite these revelations, insists still on arresting and executing Beth.

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27 *The Virgin Queen.*
She does not follow through with the executions of both Beth and Raleigh in the end as she realises that she would be orphaning a child, something that she knew well. When she goes to visit Raleigh in the Tower, she wears a red dress, similar to the one that Elizabeth wears when addressing the parliament in Elizabeth (1998). She argues with him and he turns her out, demonstrating his consistent, and, in this film, heroic refusal to submit to her authority. She leaves, only to return a moment later with a changed mind, appearing to empathise with the child that will be orphaned as a result of her actions, “I was once a brat crying because of the headman’s axe,” a rare acknowledgement, in any film depicting Elizabeth I, of the trauma her mother’s beheading would have undoubtedly caused. She also admits to him that while she is loved as a Queen, the kind of love she describes to Beth in the preceding scene, she wishes also to be loved as a woman. The film ultimately ends with Raleigh and Beth sailing off to the New World flying Elizabeth’s royal colours. Elizabeth’s final line, as she sits at her large desk, is “I must go on with the business of state” but as she is left alone and the camera pans out, we see her hang her in sadness (Fig. 9).

We get the sense from the final few scenes that Elizabeth longs for these things that she cannot have, a loving marriage and a child of her own. This longing is left to explain her behaviour throughout the film. Without having the opportunity to be a woman and mother, Elizabeth becomes bitter and jealous. She cannot have children of her own, and therefore

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28 The Virgin Queen.
would never have been a suitable match for marriage. The only option left to her is to play at being eligible, creating schemes and excuses to put off marriage but maintain good international relations. She is also thwarted, according to the film, from meaningful relationships and therefore must demand love and affection from the men around her.

When considered in the complicated context of gender politics of the 1950s, this representation of Elizabeth I is particularly interesting. The 1950s is a period that sits between the pre-war, first wave feminist movement, that was focused largely on suffrage and legal rights for women, and the second-wave feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s that was focused more on sexual and reproductive rights.\(^29\) This moment between these two major movements was characterised by a feeling of a need to re-evaluate the woman’s place and importance in society and in relation to men; a feeling that, at least in part, arose from the fallout of the Second World War. However, these concerns were addressed with the assumption that homemaking, that is, marrying and raising children, were still the most central and important aspects of a woman’s life.\(^30\) Rosie Germain, when examining how Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* was received in America when it was published in

English in 1953, describes the particular situation at this time as a desire for revolution, but one that differs from the type of revolution that second wave feminism might have in mind:

The desired revolution was understood by the majority debating this topic to reside not in women’s total rejection of past roles and traditions, but rather in a re-evaluation of motherhood and femininity that – whether in the world of work or in the home – raised their prestige as high as, if not higher than, that given to traditionally male roles and attributes.  

This meant that ideas like what had been perceived in The Second Sex of separating women from maternity, or suggesting that a woman was not inherently inclined to want or need children, were largely criticised, if not altogether rejected, in 1950s America.

Given this context, the invention of a medical reason for Elizabeth I never marrying or ever having children in The Virgin Queen would seem to make sense. If all writing on women in the 1950s really worked within “a framework, which accepts the primacy of the woman’s role as wife and mother and which assumes that other aspects of woman’s lives must be fitted into that,” naturally then, Elizabeth’s rejection of these roles would need to be explained for a 1950s audience. The film removes any agency from Elizabeth I in this regard, she would be a wife and a mother if only she were able to bear children. Because she is infertile, in the context of Elizabeth’s time, she is also unfit to marry. Her natural (as the 1950s discourse would have it) desire for a husband and children being thwarted leads her to a bitterness and jealousy that she takes out on Raleigh. Reviewers of the time were quick to pick up on this theme. David Robinson, in his review for the BFI’s Monthly Film Bulletin, described Davis’ Elizabeth as “in a sketchy way interesting, in its glimpses of Elizabeth’s muddled sexual frustrations, unsatisfied by her intellectual successes and the assertion of her unquestionable superiority to the men who surround her.” Similarly, Bosley Crowther of the New York Times, wrote of the depiction of Elizabeth, “[h]er stubborn and endless passion is to find a true and loyal man among all her sycophantic followers, and of course, to make England strong,” as though one were clearly more important than the other. Elizabeth, in

32 Ibid.
33 Birmingham Feminist History Group, “Feminism as Femininity,” 8.
the film, is demonstrating the ill effects of her desires to be a wife and a mother remaining unsatisfied.

**Conclusion**

*The Virgin Queen*, unlike most other representations of Elizabeth I, depicts the Virgin Queen not as a heroine or a benevolent ruler, but rather as an antagonistic tyrant. She is coded as such through the use of red as a character motif, through her opposition to Raleigh, and through a strong performance from Davis. Ultimately the film suggests that this villainy is born out of the jealousy and frustration she harbours due to her infertility and her inability to engage in romantic and sexual relationships. This infertility is an invention for the film but one that reflects the anxiety in the 1950s around women’s roles as wives and mothers. Giving Elizabeth a medical reason to not have children rather than depicting it as a choice, reinforces discourses in 1950s America that maintained that maternity is the woman’s main purpose. Despite this, Davis’ Elizabeth demonstrates the way that Elizabeth I’s virginity was a means of maintaining an upper hand in international relations by keeping the prospect of marriage alive. Virginity in this instance, functions as a viable political option. In this film, we can see the way that history is being interpreted through film, in a way that reflects and engages with the contemporary context. In this case, the history is being added to or changed in order to make it more appealing or more relatable to the 1950s audience.

*Elizabeth R* is a six part series, produced by the BBC and broadcast originally in 1971. It was one of the series to come out of the trend of ‘historical plays’ that emerged after the introduction of colour television in Britain.\(^1\) Each episode is an hour and a half long, essentially using a typical film’s worth of time to explore each of six major moments in Elizabeth I’s life and reign. Due to the nine hour time span, the level of historical detail is far above what is usually possible. Contexts and perspectives that other films and series may not have been able to explore are given time here. For example, this series, unlike any other version of Elizabeth’s history, opens late in the reign of Edward VI, Elizabeth’s step-brother, and the successor to her father Henry VIII. The first episode is entirely devoted to the complicated series of events leading to Elizabeth’s ascension to the throne, focusing on the accusations of treason she faced down, not just from her sister Mary I, but also earlier when Elizabeth’s former guardian Thomas Seymour was accused of treason against Edward VI.\(^2\)

The rest of the series goes on to explore, in each episode respectively, her dodging demands to marry and her ill-fated courtship with the French Duke of Anjou, the conspiracy and death of Mary Queen of Scots, the Spanish Armada, and the Essex rebellion prior to her death. The series strives for a level of historical accuracy that is not common to most representations and appears to take a balanced approach, not necessarily without reverence, as we shall see with the approach of *Elizabeth* (1998), but without a fear of showing her more problematic characteristics. The series depicts her both as a confident and strong woman who must deal with personal trauma, meaning that her virginity, whilst not ever taking centre stage, does not solely function as a means of political protection but as personal protection too. This Elizabeth can also be read in the light of the growing Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM), depicting her as independent and not as concerned with her marriage prospects however, she does express a longing for a family, especially as she grows older. Thus, *Elizabeth R* presents a version of Elizabeth that is both in the vein of the WLM whilst also fitting with traditional heterosexual and feminine roles.

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The late 1960s and early 1970s saw a major shift in British television. Lez Cooke argues that two particular events occurred in 1967 that would pave the way for British television in the following decades. The first of these is the adaptation of John Galsworthy’s *Forsyte Saga*, a period drama that attracted “an average audience of 6 million” when it first aired and eighteen million when it was rerun in 1968.\(^3\) This demonstrated that there was a viable audience for a long running series, especially a period drama. The second event identified by Cooke occurred in December 1967 when the BBC2 began transmitting in colour.\(^4\) Although the full transition to colour television was not complete until the 1970s, Cooke argues that “the introduction of colour on BBC2 marked the beginning of the end for black and white television and had a significant impact on television aesthetics.”\(^5\) One of the particular trends to emerge after these two events, the success of *The Forsyte Saga* and the introduction of colour television, was the increase in historical dramas also identified by Chapman. Cooke explains why this was the case:

> [T]he television companies, during a decade of increasing economic restraint, began to see the virtue of series and serial drama, which could build and retain audiences over a period of time, re-using sets rather than having to mount production from scratch for only one screening, as with the more expensive single play. Furthermore, the transition to colour television was particularly beneficial for historical dramas as it enhanced the display of lavish costumes and period décor.\(^6\)

Thus, there was a flurry of historical dramas, especially on the BBC, depicting various aspects of British history, among them *The Six Wives of Henry VIII* (1970), *The First Churchills* (1969), and of course, *Elizabeth R* (1971).

This series is as lavish in its production as Cooke suggests, with elaborate, period-appropriate costumes and sets. A number of the costumes appear, like most other representations of Elizabeth I, to have been inspired by portraits. In particular, a dress that appears to be an attempt at a recreation of Elizabeth’s Armada Portrait (c. 1588) is worn throughout the fifth episode in which the narrative focuses on the conflict with Spain and the

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\(^4\) Ibid.

\(^5\) Ibid.

\(^6\) Ibid.
English defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 (see Fig. 6). The series generally has a kind of tableau staging, with a moving camera but very little editing. Conversations are typically shot with all characters in frame, moving in on particular faces more often than cutting to closer shots, and there are very few close ups at all. Glenda Jackson, playing Elizabeth I, however, is such a dominating force that she commands the frame regardless. The series was largely well received critically, earning five Primetime Emmy awards in 1972, including Outstanding Drama Series and Outstanding Achievement in Costume Design.

The Lion’s Cub

Elizabeth R presents an interpretation of Elizabeth I as a strong and determined woman of authority. Of the examples gathered in this thesis, it is the one that gives the most equal time to Elizabeth as a queen and as a woman. It explores her personal life in terms of how her private experiences and decisions affected her rule and how her role as queen affected them. It makes clear that her political life was the priority whilst still giving the sense that she was an individual. The title of the series keys us into this idea. Koster’s 1955 film is entitled The Virgin Queen and clearly centres on the apparent consequences of Elizabeth’s unfulfilled personal longings. In contrast, Elizabeth R focuses the attention on her as a ruler but also an individual. The R of course stands for Regina, the Latin term for queen, a term that continues to be used today; the present queen’s royal cypher reads EIIR standing for Elizabeth II Regina. Elizabeth R then means Elizabeth the Queen. It is the way that Elizabeth I signed her name, signally that the series is interested not necessarily in the myth of the Virgin Queen but in the person that she actually was. This is similar to Kapur’s Elizabeth (1998) which approaches Elizabeth I as a young woman who must grow into her position as queen, thus referring to her only by her first name in the title. The 2006 series The Virgin Queen returns to the idea of Elizabeth being sexually frustrated and thus, again, her status as a virgin is emphasised, though, as we will see, with a different significance.

The first episode of Elizabeth R is entitled “The Lion’s Cub,” immediately associating Elizabeth with her father, Henry VIII. The episode centres on the accusations she faced before she became queen. It begins with her interrogation in 1549 over the accusation that Thomas Seymour (John Ronane), who was accused of treason himself, and Elizabeth I had

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arranged to secretly marry without royal permission. She denies and manoeuvres her way out of these accusations and is ultimately deemed innocent. She is then imprisoned after her sister Mary I (Daphne Slater) comes to the throne and becomes convinced that Elizabeth is involved in a Protestant conspiracy against her. Although the series appears to suggest that the accusations against Elizabeth were a conspiracy engineered by the Spanish to remove her as a Protestant threat, Elizabeth outwits her jailors time and again until Mary frees her. This episode ends with Elizabeth finally becoming queen and the last lines are from her, “I may not be a lion, but I am a lion’s cub and I have a lion’s heart.” This sets the tone for the next five episodes which track her reign until her death in 1603. Referring to herself as her father’s daughter and claiming to have the heart of a lion provides the sense that she has the confidence to rule with the authority that her father had, as well as foreshadowing her famous remarks at Tilbury before the English faced the Spanish Armada in 1588, “I have the heart of a king.”

In the second episode, “The Marriage Game,” the queen continues this confidence in the kind of ruler she wishes to be: “I mean to be a monarch for use, not for show.” This statement is backed up by her first Privy Council scene. The council gathers without her, with Elizabeth’s chief advisor, William Cecil (Ronald Hines), taking the head. They begin to discuss their agenda when a door to the right of frame suddenly opens revealing Elizabeth in a green and yellow dress, brighter colours than the first episode, with her hair pulled up for the first time. She is visually distinguished from the young princess of the first episode with her flowing red hair. She is now the Queen, already polished. It is clear that the council members are surprised by her arrival, not expecting her to want to be actively involved in matters of state. They must rearrange themselves so Elizabeth can sit at the head of the table, replacing Cecil in the centre of the frame, where she stays for the rest of the scene (Fig. 10).

In doing this, Elizabeth becomes the dominant force, the person that controls the council and

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11 Elizabeth I was 25 when she ascended to the throne and reigned until her death in 1603 aged 70.
to whom they must answer. This immediately sets the tone for the kind of Queen we are watching in this series. The camera begins to move in on her as she details her plans, particularly the prioritising of the people, her subjects.

Glenda Jackson’s own powerful screen presence is integral to the representation of Elizabeth I as a woman of authority. Jackson’s performance maintains an air of power and control, dominating scenes both physically and emotionally. Right from the first episode we see her as demanding but intelligent and throughout the series she conveys both incredible wit and playfulness, and thinly veiled ferocity. She also captures the vulnerability of Elizabeth in times of personal trauma or insecurity, whilst conveying a sense that Elizabeth was uncomfortable with showing emotional weakness. Jackson had been earning critical and audience praise for her performances in the late 1960s and earned an Academy Award for her performance in *Women in Love* (1969), in which she plays a free spirited young woman who both desires and derides the affections of a man. She brings with her to the role of Elizabeth I this sense of respect and confidence that she had been gathering over the early years of her career.

In one scene in particular from the fourth episode of *Elizabeth R*, “Horrible Conspiracies,” Jackson delivers a monologue to Walsingham (Stephen Murray) about death,
scolding him for the orchestration of the execution of Mary Queen of Scots without her explicit consent. She describes in gruesome detail the rotting of a dead body, putting him in his place after he offers a consolation of peace in death. (Fig. 11). The camera focuses on her as she stands on a step above him, making her appear superior, as she spits out this unsettling monologue. In this moment Jackson manages to walk a line between fiercely intimidating and empathetic. “I have known death since I was a child” she tells him, “I have looked long into his white unseeing eyes. I know his dread cruelty.”

We get the sense that she is meaning to scare Walsingham but it also reveals her own fears of death. It is one of the most powerful moments of her performance, a performance that garnered rave reviews and earned her two Emmy awards in 1972. She went on to reprise the role of Elizabeth I later in 1971 in Mary, Queen of Scots another performance which earned her a Golden Globe nomination.

Interestingly, in 1992 Jackson retired to run in the UK general election where she was elected as a Labour MP, remaining in office until 2015. It is unclear the extent to which her role as Elizabeth I influenced her turn to politics but it is not too far of a stretch to imagine that her career as a highly acclaimed actress, including this powerful portrayal of one of the most famous female rulers, may have had some level on impact on her election.

Figure 11: Glenda Jackson in Elizabeth R (1971). Jackson's performance made her synonymous with Elizabeth I for the later quarter of the twentieth century.

The nine hour scope of this series allows for exploration of events and characters often glossed over in other depictions. For example, this series gives almost a whole episode to Mary I, Elizabeth’s half-sister and predecessor. Mary is regularly included in representations of Elizabeth, but more often than not she appears relatively briefly to imprison Elizabeth for treason and beg her to convert to Catholicism before swiftly dying, giving Elizabeth the throne. In *Elizabeth* (1998) the film opens with Mary’s violence against Protestants, establishing her reign as cruel and brutal, and characterising Mary as villainous. *Elizabeth R* however, is more sympathetic toward Mary, having the time to explore the period in which Elizabeth lived under her sister’s reign. Mary is developed as a character that the audience can empathise with rather than the largely two-dimensional villain of most other adaptations of Elizabeth’s history. In this series, there seems to be a genuine attempt on both Elizabeth and Mary’s parts to have a civil relationship. There is more frustration than anger when they come toe to toe about religion. In a scene following Mary’s coronation, the two sisters discuss religious loyalty. Mary is dressed in a darker dress, in her crown and coronation robe, whilst Elizabeth is dressed in a white dress, establishing the dichotomy between the sisters as well as between Catholicism and Protestantism (Fig. 12). Mary attempts to convince Elizabeth that Catholicism is the true religion and gets frustrated by Elizabeth’s requests to have the use of her conscience to herself.\textsuperscript{15} The tone of this scene is not one of foe against foe as is the case when Elizabeth and Mary come face to face in both *Elizabeth* (1998) and *The Virgin Queen* (2006) but more one of familial angst. Mary is also seen as more ignorant than vengeful, so devout that she is unable to grant Elizabeth the freedom of conscience that their brother Edward had denied her when she refused to acknowledge Protestantism under his reign. The scene evokes the sentiment that historian David Starkey uses to describe Mary I’s frustration with Elizabeth’s refusal to convert in the early part of her reign: “Edward, Mary would have said, had been wrong then and Elizabeth wrong now, while she, Mary, had been right all along.”\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{15} “The Lion’s Cub”  
If anything, Mary is depicted not as a caricatured, jealous antagonist but as a naïve, almost pitiful woman. She is blindly devoted to Catholicism and appears genuine in her wish that Elizabeth would embrace it for the betterment of her soul. She is not confined solely to black dresses as in other depictions but often wears soft colours, not at all living up to her reputation as ‘Bloody Mary’. The responsibility for Elizabeth’s imprisonment is shifted from Mary in this series to the Spanish who wish to use Mary to keep a Catholic hold on England. The Spanish ambassador manipulates Mary’s almost childlike obsession with the Prince of Spain to convince her to eliminate the threat of Elizabeth as a heretic before the Prince will agree to come to England and marry her. He preys on her vanity, reminding Mary that Elizabeth is younger and better loved by the people than she is. More surprisingly perhaps, the burning of Protestants that earned Mary the title ‘Bloody Mary’ and is so violently depicted in Kapur’s Elizabeth (1998) is only briefly mentioned, although she is blamed for them – “she is too devout.”17 While Mary is certainly not an ally to Elizabeth, she is not the villain that other representations depict her as. In fact, Elizabeth in this series appears to detest and deceive Mary more than the other way around.

17 “The Lion’s Cub”
By not characterising Mary as an explicit antagonist, the series, unlike other representations, does not use Mary as a means to compare and elevate Elizabeth’s character. In fact, Elizabeth is seen as just, if not more, conniving as her sister in their relationship. This is historically closer to the truth. Elizabeth certainly attempted to fool Mary into thinking that she cared to learn about Catholicism.\(^\text{18}\) The series also, rather than comparing Mary as cruel and violent with Elizabeth as peaceful and tolerant, does not shy away from showing the ways that Elizabeth’s reign, and the Queen herself, could be ruthless. The torture of Catholics under Elizabeth is shown, but is something that clearly few know about, though Elizabeth is well aware. While it is justified as being the means through which to gain information about possible conspiracies, the series also alludes to Francis Walsingham, a devout Puritan, taking pleasure in it, wanting to purge Catholicism, not too dissimilar in attitude to Mary and her hatred of Protestantism. She is often indecisive to the frustration of her councillors and holds harsh grudges. Also, after the defeat of the Spanish Armada, Elizabeth is seen to be unsympathetic in her refusal to continue to pay soldiers, or to pay any compensation to them, even though they are starving and dying, claiming that she shouldn’t be expected to pay now that the fight is done.

**Virginty as Protection**

Elizabeth’s virginity is largely an accepted fact and not something that takes up too much direct focus in this series. Of course her marriage is an important aspect of the series and her consistent rejection of the need for it reinforces the depiction of Elizabeth as a contemporary woman in the light of the Women’s Liberation Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. But the series makes an interesting choice in depicting her desire not to marry not just as Elizabeth’s refusal to prioritise marriage but as something born out of a deep seated fear of intimacy. Where Elizabeth’s virginity afforded her the protection of a justifiable authority as Hackett has argued, the eligibility to marry, and safety from a husband or heir taking power from her\(^\text{19}\), in *Elizabeth R* it is also seen as providing her protection from her personal fears.

No other representation of Elizabeth I explores, to this extent, the possibility that Elizabeth carried with her into her reign a degree of childhood trauma. This is likely due to *Elizabeth R* having the time and the dedication to explore more of Elizabeth’s early life.

\(^{18}\) Starkey, *Elizabeth: Apprenticeship*, 122

Elizabeth’s relationship with Robert Dudley (Robert Hardy) is significantly downplayed in this series and though it is made apparent that she loves him, their relationship is resolved with little drama by the end of the second episode when she refuses to marry him. Repeatedly in the series Elizabeth talks about having vowed not to marry at eight years of age\(^\text{20}\) and this is the reason she gives for avoiding marrying Dudley. She recounts to him that she watched Catherine Howard, Henry VIII’s fifth wife, plead to see the King, her husband, and beg for her life. Henry refused to see Catherine and she was instead dragged away to the Tower to be executed. It is not too far perhaps to assume that Henry VIII’s execution of her own mother and his subsequent four marriages, two resulting in the wife’s death, would have some impact on the young princess Elizabeth.\(^\text{21}\)

This series, unlike most other adaptations of Elizabeth’s history, also deals with her time with Thomas Seymour. After Henry VIII’s death, his widow Catherine Parr, a step mother that Elizabeth had a particularly good relationship with and with whom she lived, married Seymour. Seymour took up a flirtation with Elizabeth, who was fourteen at the time, visiting her chambers in his nightclothes, tickling and slapping her in her bed. Kat Ashley, Elizabeth’s most trusted lady, found these incidents improper and reported them to Catherine Parr. However, one particularly peculiar incident involved Catherine herself as she held Elizabeth while Seymour cut her dress to pieces, apparently in some sort of game. Eventually, Catherine sent Elizabeth away.\(^\text{22}\) The extent of the relationship between Elizabeth and Thomas Seymour is unknown and the impact it had on her can only be speculated on. When questioned by Kat Ashley, Thomas Seymour claimed that there was nothing untoward in his behaviour toward the young princess, and that any suggestion otherwise was slanderous.\(^\text{23}\) Tudor historian David Starkey, however, raises an important question which Elizabeth R also appears to pick up on, “[i]t is interesting to consider how these excuses would play in front of a modern panel of social workers and paediatricians, all sensitized to the faintest hint of child abuse.”\(^\text{24}\) While the question of whether Elizabeth was abused as a child by her guardian might be anachronistic for the historical Elizabeth I, for the writers and

\(^{20}\) Reportedly, Robert Dudley did in fact tell a French ambassador that an eight year old Elizabeth had made such a vow to him. See Weir, The Life of Elizabeth I, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998), 46.


\(^{22}\) Starkey, Elizabeth: Apprenticeship, 68-70.

\(^{23}\) Ibid., 69.

\(^{24}\) Ibid.
the audience of *Elizabeth R* in the early 1970s, this would perhaps be a natural response to the Seymour incidents.

In the first episode of the series, after Elizabeth has adamantly denied the accusation that she had planned to secretly marry Seymour, she stumbles through the halls back to her bedroom, and we get a series of flashbacks to these incidents. These are the most chaotic images in the series, having the fastest editing of the entire series. This indicates the onslaught of memories and the rush of emotion they bring to her, as we see through her in the present leaning against walls, clearly in distress (Fig. 13). The audience is put into Elizabeth’s memory as we see the events through flashbacks from her point of view. The frame appears slightly frosted around the edges, as if the memory is not quite clear. We see Seymour waking Elizabeth up and hovering over her (Fig. 14), his lingering glances, and the dress cutting incident, through Elizabeth’s eyes and hear her giggling. In between memories, we cut back to Elizabeth in the present. We hear her thoughts in voice over, “how could I help it?” The final of these memories is of Kat Ashley’s (Rachel Kempson) face in a direct address, and though we know she is talking to Elizabeth, she is also telling the audience the position the series is taking on the relationship with Seymour. “It was wrong” she declares. These incidents are established as something that has effected Elizabeth and potentially traumatised her and provides context for why she may have not wanted, or in fact, as is seen in episode three, why she may have been afraid, to marry. By presenting these memories to the audience in this way, we are reminded that Elizabeth I, the Virgin Queen, was once a girl, and one that was, according to this interpretation, taken advantage of by a man. Her emotional response to them indicates that these events have had a lasting effect on her, and thus who she becomes as a woman and as a queen are also influenced by this. Her distrust of men and her control over them throughout the series could be seen, then, to be in response to having learnt at a young age that men are not to be trusted.

25 “The Lion’s Cub.”
Figure 13: Elizabeth remembering Seymour in *Elizabeth R* (1971). Her memories of him appear to disturb her, creating the idea in this series that the events with Seymour had impacted her later in life, especially in her attitude toward men and marriage.

Figure 14: Thomas Seymour (John Ronane) in *Elizabeth R* (1971). Seymour is presented to the audience through a series of flashbacks.
Her relationship with the idea of marriage is complicated again in the third episode of the series, “The Shadow in the Sun.” This episode skips forward in time to what would have been the period of 1572-1581 and Elizabeth’s courtship with the French Duke of Anjou, formerly the Duke of Alençon. Francis, the Duke, is one of the only serious suitors Elizabeth ever entertained. She flirts relentlessly with the Duke and, if anything, the relationship is more disingenuous from his side, not hers, with him having his own vested interests in the marriage. However, as much as the Elizabeth might have wanted the marriage, it was not to be, as the English people were staunchly opposed to having a French prince as their King. Elizabeth’s frustration with this situation, and a desire perhaps to marry the Duke is evident when she confronts the council, unsure whether she should go ahead with the marriage or not. The scene is strange, with Elizabeth demanding to have the council’s advice before deciding what she wants and the council demanding Elizabeth decide what she wants before they give advice. The camera follows her in a circle as she stalks around the men, berating them for not giving her advice, or more accurately, not telling her what she wants to hear. The almost dizzying camera movement reflects her confusion and the fact that the conversation is quite literally going in circles. She carries on about wanting to be told to marry, that her marriage to the Duke would be a good idea, though there is the sense that she knows that it would be a bad decision, especially given the way that the people had turned on her sister Mary after her marriage to Philip of Spain. She gets worked up and must sit and the camera moves in to a mid-close up of her from a high angle, as she begins to cry. She becomes small and drawn in and does not have the same presence and command as she normally does. “You must forgive me,” she cries, “I am a woman… I have denied myself everything for my country.”

Through Jackson’s performance, we get the sense that, now into her forties, Elizabeth was starting to feel the weight of never getting married or having children, and this is compounded by the following scene where she admits to feeling alone.

Despite this, later in this episode when she agrees in haste to the marriage to the Duke of Anjou, this feeling appears to be reversed and we see the extent to which she appears frightened of marriage. After finding out about Dudley’s secret marriage to Lettice Knollys, Elizabeth sends him to the Tower, a rash move that the council must persuade her out of. Her advisor, the Earl of Sussex, is sent to her chamber and a moment of honesty passes between

Hackett, *Virgin Mother, Maiden Queen*, 94-96.

them. The scene takes place almost all in one take, the camera following the characters as they move about the set. They end up at the foot of Elizabeth’s bed, on either side of a bedpost, with the camera over Sussex’s shoulder so we are focused on the queen’s face. Jackson hangs her head, grips desperately to the bedpost, shaking both in body and voice, as she tells him:

I hate the very idea of marriage, I can’t do it. Every day I am more and more afraid … You must believe me. I have my reasons. I will not tell you what they are but they are good reasons. True reasons.28

Although she does not tell Sussex, we can assume from the series so far that these reasons include the trauma of both watching her father execute Catherine Howard and her experiences with Thomas Seymour. Again, her demeanour here is meek and drawn in. There is the sense in these vulnerable moments that we are seeing the woman and not the Queen. It is only in these private moments that she allows herself to be emotional and honest, whilst to the public she must appear strong and in control.

The courtship between Elizabeth and Anjou is a significant moment for the perception of Elizabeth as a virgin, both in the series and for the historical Elizabeth. Hackett identifies this courtship, as the period in which Elizabeth I began to be thought of in terms of perpetual virginity. She discusses how this courtship was seen as the first time in which it appeared Elizabeth was seriously considering a marriage but that her subjects, “[h]aving become accustomed to the rule of a single woman, disliking the French, and still rankling at the memory of Mary I’s marriage to a foreign prince, they now opposed her marriage.”29 The Privy Council debated the marriage but it was clear that Elizabeth would not be able to go against the wishes of the people.30 The importance of this moment is that it appeared to change the public’s attitude toward Elizabeth’s virginity. As Hackett states, what this courtship meant was:

[a] realisation by Elizabeth’s subjects that a Virgin Queen might be preferable to a married Queen; and, simultaneously, the end of any prospect that Elizabeth might

28 “Shadow in the Sun.”
29 Hackett, Virgin Mother, Maiden Queen, 95.
30 Ibid.
produce an heir of her body. From now on, she would be unequivocally celebrated as ever-virgin.  

Similarly and in keeping with the history, the end of the courtship with Anjou is the last time that any potential marriage is discussed in *Elizabeth R*. From this point forward in the series she is the Virgin Queen, and her romantic life is left to the wayside.

Due to the fact that Elizabeth avoids marriage out of a deep seated fear of intimacy, it could be argued that this series seemingly inverts the idea that Elizabeth prioritised her political life over her personal by suggesting that her role as the Virgin Queen protected her from what she feared in her private life. Where historically, as Hackett argues, Elizabeth claimed ownership of the masculine body politic as a means to justify her authority despite her feminine natural body, this series, to a greater or lesser extent, suggests that this prioritisation was necessary for Elizabeth to escape her trauma. In *Elizabeth R*, Elizabeth chooses to be the Virgin Queen because it keeps her safe.

**Elizabeth and the Women’s Liberation Movement**

The representation of the Virgin Queen in *Elizabeth R* (1971) emerges out of the context of the emerging Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM) of the 1960s and 1970s. This period was one of widespread social unrest and mass political activism and organisation, culminating in the slate of protests and rebellions across Europe and America in 1968. Numerous movements emerged and grew in strength in this time, including the Hippie, Peace, and Civil Rights Movements and with them, the WLM, known also as second wave feminism. Bruley and Forster define the WLM as “the upsurge in feminist activism and other feminist practices, agency and organisation in Europe, North America and many other developed countries between the mid-1960s and the mid-1980s.” While the first wave feminism of the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries was concerned largely with legal enfranchisement, feminists of the second wave were more concerned with ‘liberation.’ This was because the enfranchisement had not brought about equality. As Hekman points out, “[m]ost women continued to occupy an inferior status politically, legally, economically and

31 Hackett, *Virgin Mother, Maiden Queen*, 95.
socially.\textsuperscript{33} The WLM also focused far more on the differences between men and women. Rather than trying to simply become equal with men, these women wished to emphasise, celebrate, and value the ways that women were distinct.\textsuperscript{34}

The stirrings of the WLM came with the publication of Betty Friedan’s \textit{The Feminine Mystique} (1963), in which she “proclaimed that the very substance and centre of the American suburban dream – the contented housewife and mother – was a pernicious and destructive myth.”\textsuperscript{35} She called the lack of fulfilment in their roles as simply mothers and wives “the problem that has no name”:\textsuperscript{36}

Lived in reality, the life of the ‘happy housewife’ was stultifying and meaningless, offering no sense of independence, identity or achievement. And, just because it was \textit{believed} to be the ideal life, the end of the rainbow, women who were unhappy in their role felt that there must be something wrong with them.\textsuperscript{37}

\textit{The Feminine Mystique} was widely popular in both America and Britain and is believed to have empowered many women by demonstrating that they were not alone in these feelings.\textsuperscript{38} Along with de Beauvoir’s \textit{The Second Sex} (1949, English translation 1953), Friedan’s text is said to have been part of a group of texts through which second wave feminists attempted to “[build] a body of knowledge which specifically addressed the ways in which women have historically been marginalised, both culturally and socially.”\textsuperscript{39}

The first organisations of the WLM came from Betty Freidan herself when, in 1966, after feeling frustrated that women’s issues were not being taken seriously by other political organisations, she, along with other female activists, formed the National Organisation for Women (NOW). This organisation campaigned for women’s rights in numbers not seen since the suffragettes and quickly gained results and, importantly, awareness of their cause.

\textsuperscript{37} Bouchier, \textit{The Feminist Challenge}, 43-44.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 44.
\textsuperscript{39} Pilcher and Whelehan, \textit{Fifty Key Concepts in Gender Studies}, 145.
While the WLM was far more explicitly an American movement and had more impact in the US, the ideas spread quickly to Britain. “The American influence was quite direct,” Bouchier argues, “the early writings quickly found their way across the Atlantic via the network of radical journals and book distributors,” as well as through American women working in London in solidarity campaigns for other movements such as the Anti-Vietnam War organisations. Although there is no explicit moment of the emergence of the women’s movement in Britain, the earliest organisations can be seen in that critical year of 1968. Bouchier outlines the importance of this year and its influence:

This was, after all, International Human Rights Year, the fortieth anniversary of full suffrage, the year of the Race Relations Act, of student sit-ins everywhere, of the great anti-Vietnam war demonstrations and of the May revolution in France, which itself had generated a militant women’s caucus.

Organisation in Britain was a bit more fractured, but Bouchier argues that the more influential groups were those influenced by Marxism, as British society was more inclined toward class issues than civil rights, as in the US. But progress for British women was far slower to develop than for their American counterparts. Ultimately though, the WLM in both Britain and America left its mark. The enduring impact of the WLM is summed up by Bruley and Forster, who state that:

The WLM produced widespread structural and attitudinal change which had a profound impact on the western world in the late twentieth century. By developing an ‘imagined community’ of feminism, women created a new sense of female selfhood.

Glenda Jackson’s portrayal of Elizabeth I in Elizabeth R (1971) emerges directly out of this context. To begin with, it is an interesting moment to return to the story of the Virgin Queen. One of England’s great monarchs, she was a woman who seemingly refused and rebuffed the men in her life, choosing to remain unmarried and childless. At a moment in time when women were organising to collectively reject the notion that wives and mothers were the roles they should aspire to, a woman who held the highest position of power in Britain alone would have undoubtedly been a powerful image.

41 Pilcher and Whelehan, Fifty Key Concepts in Gender Studies, 145.
43 Ibid., 56-61.
44 Bruley and Forster, “Historicising the Women’s Liberation Movement,” 697.
Jackson brings a presence and dominance to Elizabeth that invokes some of Bette Davis’ power. But where Davis’ Elizabeth was a tyrant in desperate want of male attention, Jackson comes across more like a contemporary career woman, far more focused on herself and what is required of her than the attentions on the men around her. Sabrina Alcorn Baron describes the character in this series as one who seemingly triumphs despite the attitudes toward her gender:

Jackson’s Elizabeth is a calculating and successful head of state, attending Privy Council meetings, writing and signing orders, choosing officials and overruling her male councillors, and beating everyone at political cat and mouse (as well as cards), despite all of the sexist opinions and actions around her.45

While it does not ignore her marital status and the issue of her virginity, Moss argues that the series, “presents Elizabeth’s unmarried status as an important part of her life, but not the overriding passion and obsession of it.”46 In the fashion of the WLM, Elizabeth in this series is simply not as preoccupied with marriage as she is with her reign. She does not grow bitter for a lack of marriage and children, like Davis’ incarnation of the Queen, nor does she completely sacrifice her sexuality like Blanchett’s. Rather, her marriage is but one concern among many. As Moss states, “rather than being the sole focus, presuming that all women must be obsessed with marriage, Elizabeth R presents them as part of a multifaceted life. It is a life where policy is the dominant interest.”47 Importantly, Moss points out that where love and sex have been the dominant issues in a number of Elizabeth I films, including The Virgin Queen (1955), Elizabeth (1998), and The Virgin Queen (2006), the concern of Elizabeth R is “the postmodern difficulty of a woman trying to ‘have it all’”48 It is possible that Elizabeth is an alternative to that problem with no name. She is successful without ever conforming to the typically feminine roles of wife and mother.

This idea can be seen throughout the series but especially in a small moment in the second episode. At some point throughout this episode, it feels as if every male character utters the phrase, “a woman cannot rule alone,” While she is explicitly adamant in her refusal,

47 Ibid.
48 Ibid., 800.
one subtle scene speaks louder than all others, in setting up Elizabeth as a woman more interested in her reign than with her marriage. Elizabeth and Cecil are sitting at a desk in the council chambers, the camera keeping them both in a mid-shot, with Elizabeth to the right of the frame. He begins to tell her the pros and cons of each suitor as she continues to work, grunting and commenting here and there, appearing to be barely paying attention (Fig. 15) At one point, we cut to a shot of Elizabeth’s face straight on as she changes the subject, lamenting her personal accountant’s poor skills. Cecil asks her, “how long will you insist on handling your own household accounts?” It becomes clear that while Cecil has been listing off reasons she should or should not marry this suitor or that, Elizabeth has been doing her own accounting. This scene is only a couple of minutes long but says a lot about the kind of woman that this series is attempting to imply Elizabeth I was. She is a woman who can take care of her own household, not needing a husband. In the particular context of the growing WLM at the time of the series’ production, to have Elizabeth be far more invested in doing her accounts than in arranging a marriage speaks volumes. This is a woman who is not only capable of doing her own accounts, but is fixing the mistakes that a man has made in doing them and finds this a far more important use of her time. Subtly, she is rejecting the notion that she should simply become a happy wife and mother, instead proving that she is more than capable of taking care of her own household, and by extension, her own realm. By the end of this episode, she has made her famous speech to parliament, declaring that she would happily live and die a virgin.

49 “The Marriage Game.”
Baron would appear to ultimately disagree with the idea of *Elizabeth R* depicting a liberated woman, seeing this series as focusing far too much on her potential marriages and “downplay[ing] the real political problems she faced during her reign.”\(^{50}\) Given that two entire episodes centre on the question and the possibility of her marriage, this is not an unfounded criticism. Her fear of marriage, stemming from childhood trauma, also does for this Elizabeth what the same device does for the Elizabeth of *The Virgin Queen* (2006). By giving her a deep seated fear of intimacy, it, to an extent, undermines her political motivations in this series. It puts the onus of her choices on a primal fear of marriage and not on her political choices. However, in her discussions with her council and in her behaviour throughout the series, we get the sense that Jackson’s Elizabeth would be willing to do what must be done, what would be best for her nation regardless of her fear.

Baron does however, make an important point. This series depicts Elizabeth as both a career woman and as a woman that fears intimacy and occasionally expresses regret for her lost chance at motherhood. This relates her to the WLM but also fits her into traditional heterosexuality. Although she is predominately interested in her reign, she is also lonely. To some extent, this makes her appear as a multifaceted woman, but it also serves to simply

\(^{50}\) Baron, “Desacralizing the Icon,” 129.
cover all bases. She is thus relatable to an audience of women sensitised to women’s issues raised by the WLM but also to traditional ideas of womanhood.

Conclusion

Having nine hours to explore the life and reign of Elizabeth I enabled Elizabeth R (1971) to provide an in depth representation of the Virgin Queen. By striving for historical accuracy, this series presents an encompassing image of Elizabeth I. It depicts events and relationships that are often skipped over in over versions. This includes exploring the possibility that she experienced some traumatic events when she was a child that left a mark on her, including her step-mother’s death and the unusual attentions of her guardian Thomas Seymour. In this series, because of this potential trauma, her virginity becomes a means of defence from the intimacy that she perceives as threatening. However, the series also can be read in the context of the WLM, and in this light, Elizabeth is a woman who is more concerned with her role as queen than she is with conforming to traditionally feminine roles of wife and mother. This is not to suggest that she does not want these things at all, as we see that she is lonely and it is her fear that keeps her from marrying, but rather that she is not consumed by the need for these things and is able to focus on her political life. Thus she is both a modern woman in the mould of the WLM but is also relatable to traditional ideas about gender. This series is attempting to faithfully engage with the history of Elizabeth I whilst still relating it to the audience of its time and thus we can see in it the way that historical television drama can be both an engagement with historical discourse as well as a means to relate it to the present.

*Elizabeth*, when it was released in the UK in October 1998, was the first major film about Elizabeth I for nearly twenty years. It was met with critical acclaim and commercial success; it was third on the list of the most successful British films in 1998, amassing a total international gross of $34 million by September 1999.¹ The film was seen largely as a break with traditional British ‘heritage’ films that depicted British history in a way that reinforced and perpetuated a nostalgia and celebration of British history, particularly the histories of the privileged classes.² Rather than doing this, *Elizabeth* was perceived as ‘post-colonial’ and ‘un-reverential.’³ Both of these traits have been attributed to the particular approach of Indian director Shekhar Kapur. Rather than a depiction of a regal and confident Queen, as had been the route taken by previous films and series about Elizabeth I, Kapur chose to depict Elizabeth as an insecure young woman who must learn and grow to become the queen we know now from her extensive iconography. Written by Michael Hirst, the narrative centres on the early years of her reign, beginning with her imprisonment under Mary I and ending with her emergence as ‘the Virgin Queen.’ It focuses largely on her love affair with Robert Dudley and various assassination plots against her by Catholic conspirators. The film condenses about twenty years’ worth of history into a four-year span, but it does a compelling job of exploring a version of Elizabeth I not seen often in previous depictions. The film interestingly inverts the traditional narrative structure of virginal to experienced, instead depicting the Queen’s virginity as something she reclaims in order to also reclaim power. In this process, she sacrifices her personal life and desires in order to become the iconic queen with which we are now familiar.

For many, *Elizabeth* marked a significant move away from the style of British heritage cinema of the 1980s and 1990s. James Chapman describes the film as one of “remarkable cultural confidence and visual power … that represents a departure from the restrained and sober style of the heritage cinema of the previous decade.”⁴ British heritage

⁴ Chapman, *Past and Present*, 299.
films were generally “characterised by a leisurely narrative pace, slow editing tempo, and a preponderance of long shots and tableaux compositions.” For instance, *Elizabeth R* (1971), though made in the early 1970s, is more of an example of this kind of heritage style. *Elizabeth* (1998), however, largely breaks away from these traditions.

This approach has largely been attributed to Indian director Shekhar Kapur, who was making his first English-language film with *Elizabeth.* It is thought that Kapur approached the history of Elizabeth I without the reverence that a British director perhaps would have; Kapur was not protective of the mythology surrounding the Virgin Queen. In fact, the cast and crew were largely multinational, including a large number of Australians, most notably Cate Blanchett in the title role. For this reason, the film has been described as “a post-colonial take on a core moment in English history” with its “new” perspective on this national myth constantly emphasised by reviewers. Hirst and Kapur in *Elizabeth* seem to have wanted to avoid the standard biopic (biographical film) and instead chose to present the early reign of Elizabeth I as a conspiracy thriller. Thus, the narrative and the editing move at a pace more appropriate for this genre of film, that is, far more rapidly. Nor does Kapur continue the style of the fixed non-intrusive camera, opting rather to track Elizabeth’s movements and her frame of mind with a moving camera and unusual angles.

At the time the film was in production, the British film industry was experiencing “a time of apparent economic buoyancy and optimism.” Cinema attendance was on the rise and there was a surge in films financed, at least in part, in Britain. Despite this, with a £13 million budget, it was clear that the British market would not be enough to recoup the cost of production for *Elizabeth* and therefore the film needed to be saleable to international markets, particularly the American. The film has also been seen as a product of New Labour’s ‘Cool Britannia’ movement by making the history of Elizabeth I appealing to a young audience. Because of these factors, Chapman labels the film as a ‘cross-over’ between mainstream and art-house audiences:

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5 Ibid., 306.
8 Chapman, *Past and Present*, 301.
On the one hand, it exhibited all the characteristics of a quality middlebrow film production: a literate and intelligent script, attention to period detail and sumptuous visuals…. On the other hand, it also included certain ‘box-office’ elements (sex and violence) that are not typical of the genre. Its promotional discourse sought to assert its difference from the more familiar style of British period film-making.10

This need for the film to be saleable to a mass international market and a young audience helps to explain why the film might have opted to prioritise the more suspenseful narrative of political corruption and intrigue and the tragedy of the loss of romantic and sexual love.

**Learning how to rule**

In depicting the early years of Elizabeth I’s reign as a conspiracy thriller, Hirst and Kapur focus on the violent opposition between Catholics and Protestants. Kapur’s interpretation is strongly pro-Protestant, as the film portrays the relationship of Protestantism and Catholicism as a good and evil dichotomy in which the good, tolerant Queen Elizabeth (Cate Blanchett) is under attack by ruthless and murderous Catholics. He creates this dichotomy particularly through his use of light and colour. The traitorous Catholic characters are largely depicted in dark or dim lighting, dressed in black, whereas Elizabeth herself is usually bathed in light and is often dressed in brighter colours, particularly white. In all cases, she is visually contrasted against those who would oppose and betray her. We see this first through the contrast between Mary I (Kathy Burke), Elizabeth’s half-sister and predecessor, and Elizabeth herself.

The film begins in 1554 during Mary I’s reign. Mary was a staunchly Catholic Queen responsible in her time for harsh prosecution of Protestants, disturbingly depicted by Kapur. The cruelty of Queen Mary (who was known historically as Bloody Mary) and by extension in this narrative, the cruelty of Catholics in general, is established in the opening sequence of the film. After the credit sequence and the title cards, that establish the central conflict as “Catholic against Protestant,” the first diegetic sound the audience hears is the frantic, crying, prayers of a woman. We see where these cries are coming from through a high angle shot looking directly down on a kneeling woman in a white smock whose hair is being roughly shorn by a guard. She continues to pray as the guard washes the knife of her blood and we see another Protestant lying on the floor. The scene cuts to the Protestants being brought to the

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10 Chapman, *Past and Present*, 305.
stake to be burnt with the Bishop Gardiner, who will come to oppose Elizabeth later in the film, listing their crimes and expressing the hope that they burn in hell. As they burn, they cry out for help, and while it appears that many in the gathered crowd would wish to help them, many just stand idly by. As the flames rise and consume them, we look down on the Protestants again from above the pyre. This consistent high angle through which we view the Protestants martyrs may be to emphasise the domination of Catholics over them at the time but could potentially also imply a more divine view, especially as the film certainly takes the position of favouring Protestantism over Catholicism (Fig. 16). Beginning the film with these confronting and violent scenes immediately establishes Mary and the Catholics as villainous and creates empathy for Protestants. It also serves as a means to juxtapose Elizabeth when later she appears to be tolerant of the Catholic faith — “we all believe in God” — and to establish the political and religious dynamic of the period.

As Mary’s immediate successor and a Protestant, Elizabeth was perceived by Mary, or Mary’s Privy Council at least, as a serious threat to her rule. They believed that Protestant conspirators planned to overthrow Mary and place Elizabeth on the throne. In March 1554, Mary imprisoned Elizabeth in the Tower of London on suspicion of treason. Mary is first to

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be introduced in the film and her court is depicted as dark, gloomy, and almost gothic. Mary herself is dressed largely in black (reminiscent of her portrait by Anthonis Mor), as are her ladies, her advisors, and her husband, Prince Phillip of Spain. The lighting is dim and the aura of the scene is one of darkness and suspicion (Fig. 17). Even the news of Mary’s supposed pregnancy does nothing to brighten the mood, perhaps reflecting the sense that not many believed this news to be true. This scene, in which Elizabeth’s potential arrest is debated and decided by Mary’s almost reluctant agreement, is immediately followed by the film’s first introduction to the young Elizabeth Tudor. The scene takes place outside, in bright sunlight. Elizabeth is bathed in light and dancing in a bright green and pink dress with her face free of make-up, a natural flush adorning her cheeks, her bright red hair hanging free (Fig. 18). She is every bit the opposite of Mary; young, beautiful, and seemingly carefree.

Jeannette Delamoir, in her article on the costuming in *Elizabeth*, notes the importance of the colour in this first shot of Elizabeth for establishing her character and her difference from her half-sister:

The green keys her to the natural outdoor world. The scenes directly before this are gloomy and bathed in cold blue light, showing heretics being burned and then the stone interior of Queen Mary’s castle. Elizabeth’s green costume, and the sunlit grass on which she dances, provide both visual and emotional contrasts.

Immediately, Kapur establishes Elizabeth as more open and youthful than Mary, her violent, predecessor.

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14 Delamoir, “Elizabeth’s Costumes,” 46.
Figure 17: Mary I (Kathy Burke) in *Elizabeth* (1998). Mary and her fellow Catholics are seen only in dark clothes and Mary’s interior is equally dark and gloomy.

Figure 18: Cate Blanchett as a young Elizabeth I in *Elizabeth* (1998). Elizabeth is bathed in colour, visually contrasting her from her sister Mary.
This kind of contrast is one Kapur maintains throughout the film. When Elizabeth is brought to the Tower of London for imprisonment, she is dressed in a white gown symbolising not only her innocence and vulnerability but also subtly connecting her with the Protestant martyrs burned in the beginning of the film. As she is interrogated by three bishops, she kneels on the floor in this gown, as they circle her all in black robes. She is shot from a high angle, making her appear small and meek and the bishops overbearing, but also continuing to connect her to the martyrs.

Elizabeth’s costuming continues to distinguish her and to demonstrate her character. In the first Privy Council scene, this is used in a way that connotes her insecurity, rather than any sense of power. Kapur and Blanchett convey a sense of Elizabeth being overwhelmed and unprepared for her role as Queen as she sits at the head of the table, still in her dressing gown (Fig. 19). Her hair is curly and unruly and she appears as though she has just crawled out of bed, which we know she has, as in the previous scene, Norfolk (Christopher Eccleston) unceremoniously wakes her himself. Elizabeth looks confused and uncertain as the council tries to convince her to send troops to Scotland, which would constitute an act of war (a decision the historical Elizabeth I would certainly not have had to make on her first morning as queen). She comes across as vulnerable and overwhelmed, despite showing fortitude in her insistence on seeking the opinion of Sir Francis Walsingham (Geoffrey Rush), and ultimately agrees. As the film progresses, we see that this decision, urged by her council, is a fatal mistake.

Figure 19: First Privy Council of Elizabeth (1998). She looks undone and unprepared, in contrast to other representations which depict the Queen as confident and prepared.

Delamoir, “Elizabeth’s Costumes,” 46.
16 Elizabeth.
This scene stands in stark contrast to a similar scenes in the depictions gathered here. In both *Elizabeth R* (1971) and *The Virgin Queen* (2006), Elizabeth (Glenda Jackson and Anne-Marie Duff respectively) faces her first Privy Council meeting with a clear set of plans on how she wishes to rule. She is dressed confidently and speaks with precision and conviction. In both cases, her councillors are surprised and clearly taken aback at the queen’s confidence and desire to be involved in state affairs. Kapur chose not to take this route, instead depicting her as not ready for this meeting or for her responsibilities as queen. For Kapur, it was more important to show that Elizabeth had to fail and learn from her mistakes before she could become a great and confident ruler.

Cate Blanchett herself is important to consider in establishing this narrative of a young, insecure queen. At the time of the film’s production and release, Blanchett was a relatively unknown actor, her name having none of the weight it now holds (Blanchett has since won two Oscars). Certainly she did not have the star power of Bette Davis nor the authority of Glenda Jackson. As such, she was as virtually unknown and untested to the audience as the Elizabeth of the film is when she first becomes queen. Her performance however, going from the naïve young woman to the confident and powerful Virgin Queen, earned her an Oscar nomination in 1999.

One of the most important scenes in the character development of Elizabeth and one that serves as a turning point for her reign is one that appears about half way through the film. This is when she faces the parliament in order to persuade them to pass her proposed Act of Uniformity (1559). This would essentially see Protestantism become the official religion of Britain. Although Elizabeth would not have been there personally to debate the act, this sequence is a powerful moment in the narrative of the young, inexperienced, and insecure Queen, becoming more comfortable and commanding in her role.

The sequence begins at the fifty-minute mark with Norfolk in his chambers dressing for parliament, reveling in his belief that “today I shall watch the fall of that heretic girl.” In this shot, we can only see Norfolk’s face in the two mirrors he stands before as the camera moves in on him. He is dressed in black and his chamber, with its dark grey stone walls, is very dimly lit, similar to Queen Mary’s chambers in the early scenes of the film, thus aligning the two characters (Fig. 20). We begin to hear Elizabeth in voice-over, and Kapur cuts to the young Queen practising the speech she intends to deliver to parliament, in a direct address.

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This establishes the contrast between Elizabeth and Norfolk, as Elizabeth is in a white night gown in an airy room, surrounded by white curtains (Fig. 21). While Norfolk is coded as duplicitous and untrustworthy, Elizabeth is open and innocent. As she continues to practise her speech with increasing frustration, we delve into a sequence of rapid jump cuts between her in her chambers and a point of view shot, as if the audience were taking on Elizabeth’s position, walking into the intimidating parliament. The bishops that make up the parliament stand in their black robes like a sea that steadily and reluctantly parts as the camera moves forward. The rapid editing of this sequence gives us insight into the anxiety and insecurity of the young queen facing a crucial test, eventually coming to tears as she struggles to find the right words. This culminates in the reveal of the throne-like seat she will take at the head of the parliament, a daunting sight that we linger on as Elizabeth’s voice-over reminds the audience and herself, that she has the power over the bishops — “your votes are nothing without my consent.”

Figure 20: Norfolk (Christopher Eccleston) in Elizabeth (1998). Here Norfolk is coded as duplicitous and visually connected with Mary I.

18 Elizabeth.
The debate of the Act itself begins with a shot looking directly down on the red seat as the queen comes into frame in a regal red dress and sits, visibly anxious. This then cuts to a wide shot, from a perspective as if the audience were themselves a part of the parliament, looking at the scene before them. We see the vast number of bishops gathered to debate the Act of Uniformity, all dressed in black, a seemingly immovable mass, but we also see Elizabeth, in front of them all, in a stark red dress. Delamoir points out the importance of this dress, arguing that after wearing various shades of red up until this point in the film, this vivid red dress is a “crescendo of intensity.” She suggests that this particular costume, especially in contrast to her night gown in the preceding scene, “conveys – to us, as well as the diegetic audience – that she is a potent force.” Streams of light through stained glass windows illuminate her in a kind of divine spotlight, perhaps associating her with her position, as a Protestant monarch, as the head of the church and God’s representative on Earth. It may also prefigure the association with divinity that her virginity will go on to have (Fig. 22).

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20 Ibid.
Despite this, Elizabeth begins the scene nervously. She tries to make her case that the realm must be united under Protestantism as the official religion, and the bishops staunchly oppose her. We view her consistently from the perspectives of people sitting in the parliament. These point of view shots vary in distance and angle from her, and situate the audience within the parliament, as if we are viewing her how they would, to the point where she is partly obscured in a series of shots (Fig. 23). When we view her on her own, it is only from a high angle shot, making her appear small, overwhelmed and uncomfortable.

Steadily throughout the scene, brought home by a measured performance by Blanchett, we see Elizabeth begin to gain more confidence. This shift begins with her statement in response to a bishop who contends to her that “[b]y this act you force us to relinquish our allegiance to the Holy Father.” We cut from this ageing bishop to a shot of Elizabeth through the crowd, as she responds with a smirk, “[h]ow can I force you, your grace, I am a woman?” In this line, Elizabeth is appropriating the perception that has been thrown at her throughout the first part of the film, that as a woman, she cannot wield any power until she marries. That ultimately, her power is dependent on a man. Thus, in this scene, she wittily turns their hypocrisy back on them; she uses their critique of her rule to
make her point. It is a subtle but powerful moment that begins a shift in tone. From this point forward, Elizabeth begins to take control of the scene.\footnote{Elizabeth.}

Kapur signifies this shift in power and control through his shift in the way we see Elizabeth in the scene. It is not until just after she begins to use her wit that we finally see a shot of Elizabeth straight on (Fig. 24). Significantly, this directly follows a shot of the bishops Walsingham has locked away from the debate with perhaps the most fanatically Catholic Bishop, Gardiner confident in his belief that the parliament would not pass the Act of Uniformity. This then cuts back to Elizabeth who Kapur has brought out from behind the crowd to sit confidently before the parliament as she goes about proving the bishop wrong. She stays in the centre of the frame from this point forward, continuing to outwit the parliament and their criticisms of her, namely her refusal to marry, to which she responds that while they continue to dispute between themselves to which country she should or shouldn’t marry, she is unable to marry at all. Again, she is pointing out the ways in which the parliament of men, by trying to control and criticise her, make it harder for her to do anything at all. Once it is clear she has the parliament more onside, the tone becomes serious again and Kapur focuses solely on a close up of Elizabeth, as she explains the importance of the Act – “in your hands, upon this moment, lies the future happiness of my people and the peace of

Figure 23: Parliament scene of Elizabeth (1998). These point of view shots situate the audience within the parliament so we can see Elizabeth as they would. This makes her appear overwhelmed and implies that they have control over the scene.
of this realm.” He steadily tracks across her face, a triumphant score begins to play and we get the sense that she has won this battle, which we find out later, she has.  

It must be said that Elizabeth’s strength is potentially undermined in this scene. In each instance of her use of wit to defend against the parliament’s lack of faith in her, Kapur cuts to the approving look of a man. Twice he cuts to Walsingham to show his proud smile. The first of these comes after her statement, “I am a woman,” and it almost seems as though this gives her more confidence. Later, when she jokes about marriage, Kapur gives us a mid-close-up of Robert Dudley, Elizabeth’s lover in this film, also looking proud of her. It could be argued that they are simply in awe of her. However, the ending of the sequence seems to make Elizabeth appear dependent on the help and approval of the men in her life. The result of the Act’s passing by five votes is told to the audience through Walsingham relaying the news to the six bishops whom he had confined. This appears to lay the responsibility for this success at his feet rather than Elizabeth’s. Although clearly her wit, encouraged by the approval of Walsingham and Dudley, moved enough of the bishops to force such a close

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22 *Elizabeth.*

23 Ibid.
vote, it is clear that, in the plot of this film, she would have lost the vote had Walsingham not cheated the system. By the end of the film however, she has gained power in her own right.

**Becoming a virgin**

One of the biggest issues that historians and critics alike had with Kapur’s interpretation of Elizabeth I was with the question of whether the Virgin Queen was indeed a virgin at all. The film very clearly comes down on the side of not. This is certainly not the first version of Elizabeth I’s history to imply that her relationship with Dudley had been more than a flirtation. As Kathryn Schwarz notes, “in representations extending from the sixteenth century to the present day, the possibility that ‘virgin queen’ might have be a misnomer has been a scandal but hardly a secret.” Elizabeth (1998), however, is one of the few films to depict Elizabeth and Dudley in a sexual relationship so explicitly by including a sex scene between the two of them. As Chapman notes in his chapter on Elizabeth, this was a source of outrage at the film, an outrage that Chapman argues brings the tension between history and film into focus. While academics, including prominent Tudor historian David Starkey, publicly denounced the idea that Elizabeth and Dudley would have had a sexual relationship, the writer of the film Michael Hirst was quick to defend the move. He argues that whilst there is no evidence that Elizabeth and Dudley were physically intimate, there is also no evidence that they were not. Therefore, in order to drive the narrative forward and to refrain from ambiguity, the filmmakers deemed it acceptable and necessary to add this element of the relationship. For Hirst, the point in depicting the relationship in this way was to show the danger in the fact that they had behaved as lovers (which is well documented). To be the queen that England needed, the film argues, Elizabeth had to step back from Dudley, a move that the film portrays as a reclaiming of the virginity she had lost to him.

Shelley Cobb sees this reclaiming of virginity as an inversion of audience expectations of “the narrative of female sexual maturity.” Cobb argues that “[i]n the film, sexual activity is associated with youth; virginity with age.” The film, in many respects,

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25 Chapman, Past and Present, 309.
28 Ibid.
depicts Elizabeth’s journey as one from natural youthful sexual freedom to a kind of performative virginity. This can be seen in the way that the film only uses the term at the end when the final title card reads “ELIZABETH I: THE VIRGIN QUEEN.” This implies that she has fulfilled her narrative, ending up in a particular place, becoming the icon with which we are now familiar.

Elizabeth’s character arc can largely be traced through the costuming. The flowy, less restrictive dresses of the earlier part of the film give way to more ornate, rigid dresses. As Elizabeth’s confidence grows, Delamoir notes that over the course of the film the added levels of embroidery, decoration, and heavier fabric certainly reflect the historical Elizabeth’s turn to more elaborate fashion during her reign.29 This culminates in her transformation in the final sequences of the film. She shears off all of her hair, opting for elaborate wigs instead, and begins to paint her face white. As this transformation is taking place, we see a montage of images of the younger, more carefree Elizabeth. This is then contrasted to her standing with her shorn head and white smock – invoking the image of the martyrs from the beginning of the film – as she professes “I have become a virgin.” When she enters the throne room in the last scene, she is dressed in a stark white dress with a high ruff, a stiff red wig, and painted white face (Fig. 25). She approaches Cecil – in the film, the most ardent proponent of her marrying – and proudly professes that she has chosen to marry England.30 This visually creates the sense of what Hirst meant; to be the queen that England needed, the icon that history has become so familiar with, she must reclaim her virginity.

29 Delamoir, “Elizabeth’s Costumes,” 51.
30 Elizabeth.
As Hackett has argued, Elizabeth I gained a sense of authority from the associations with the iconography of the Virgin Mary, and this is a point that the film also greatly emphasises. Even before Elizabeth becomes Queen in the film, her sister Mary pleads with her to uphold the Catholic faith when she ascends. Mary begs Elizabeth, “do not take away from the people the consolations of the Blessed Virgin.” This foreshadows, with a bite of irony, the way that by the end of the film, Elizabeth has met this request (though this is unlikely in the way that Queen Mary would have preferred). In one of the last scenes of the film, before Elizabeth begins her transformation, Kapur makes the connection with the Virgin Mary explicit. In this scene, Elizabeth is knelt below a statue of the Virgin Mary and we first see the Queen from a high angle shot from above the statue with the Virgin Mary to look down on the Queen. (Fig. 26). Walsingham joins her and Elizabeth laments that she feels she must forgo intimate relationships in order to rule. The scene cuts to a wide shot with the statue of Mary between Walsingham and Elizabeth in the frame. Walsingham tells her “all men need something to look up to and worship” and as it cuts back to the high angle shot of Elizabeth he continues, “they must be able to touch the divine here on Earth.” The implication looms over them like the statue until Elizabeth looks up and addresses it for the first time. “She had such power of men’s hearts,” she cries and the camera focuses on the Virgin Mary’s stone face, “they died for her.” Walsingham’s final line follows the thought
through and is left to explain Elizabeth’s transformation into a virginal figure – “they have found nothing to replace her.” 31

The film is following a line of argument that Hackett identifies, that is, that Elizabeth I became the Virgin Queen in order to fill a post-Reformation gap or longing for a virginal mother figure like the Virgin Mary. 32 While Hackett argues that this argument breaks down when considering the long line of worshipped virginal figures in history, the power gained by stepping into this model is no less important. In the film, Elizabeth consciously chooses to refashion herself into a version of the Virgin Mary, in the hopes that she can inspire the same devotion that had inspired the Catholics to try to have her assassinated. As mentioned earlier, the film ends on an image of her white face and the title cards naming Elizabeth as the Virgin Queen for the first time in the film, implying that this move was successful.

Historically, as we have seen, the image of Elizabeth as a virgin brought her a sense of authority. This was both because it lent her the power of the iconography of the Virgin Mary and because, in the context of Protestant theology, the notion of being able to maintain

31 Elizabeth.
virginity brought her symbolically closer to the divine. Although in the film she is not literally a virgin, in the sense of never having engaged in sexual intercourse, and cannot actually embody these things, there is a sense of power and agency in choosing to reclaim her virginity and present herself as the Virgin Queen. This is also a powerful notion for the time the film was released. By inverting the traditional narrative of feminine sexuality, Cobb and Schwarz, argue that the film exposes virginity as a constructed status rather than something inherent physically. Schwarz claims that “[i]n reversing this seemingly natural teleology, Elizabeth presents virginity as an aggressive fiction which, projected backward, becomes history.”33 She describes the virginity in the film as “a makeover, a cosmetic effect that changes what the body means…. Elizabeth’s virginity proves her mastery both of signification and of monarchical authority.”34 This is a strong statement and one that demonstrates a revision of how and by whom assumptions about virginity are made.35

**Virginity as Performance**

The notion of a monarch possessing two bodies, a body natural and a body politic, has also been argued to be a means through which Elizabeth I’s authority was justified. By claiming ownership of the masculine body politic, Elizabeth was asserting her authority over the concerns that she could not rule because she was a woman. Whilst this imagery is more explicitly employed in the 2006 series *The Virgin Queen*, as we will see in the following chapter, in *Elizabeth* (1998), the choice Elizabeth makes to become a virgin could be seen as an assertion of this idea of the two bodies. In the scene in which Elizabeth and Walsingham appear to come to the decision that the people need a virginal mother figure like the Virgin Mary, Elizabeth refers to the sacrifice she must make. Kneeling beneath the statue of Mary, Elizabeth asks, “am I to be made of stone, touched by nothing?”36 Given that she has been in a romantic and a sexual relationship in the film, the idea of being touched by nothing appears to refer both to emotional and physical intimacy, as well as the necessity for a stoic political leader. In this sense, the Elizabeth of the film chooses to sacrifice her natural body, in terms of her desires and emotions, for the body politic and this choice is physically manifested in her transformation into the iconic Virgin Queen.

34 Ibid.
36 *Elizabeth.*
This choice parallels, to an extreme perhaps, the perceived choice women of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century must make between family and career. If we consider the natural and political bodies as parallels for the personal and professional lives of Elizabeth as a woman, her choice at the end of the film has a particular significance for late twentieth century feminism. In this context, Elizabeth is a young woman, frivolous in her relationship with Robert Dudley. This relationship is ill fated and puts her reign in danger, putting off potential suitors and thus jeopardising international relations. In this sense, her relationship conflicts and interferes with the demands of her ‘career,’ that is, her responsibilities as queen. Eventually, helped largely by Dudley’s multiple betrayals, she opts to put her career first. In this case, she does this to the point of seemingly sacrificing any potential family life in the future. For Elizabeth her reign comes first but this is not an easy decision, nor is it entirely an empowering one. Whilst she certainly does gain political power from this move, it is clear that this is a lonely path. Whether this is a criticism or a celebration of career woman discourses is not entirely clear. What we can assume though, is that for an audience of young women in the midst of Girl Power (made popular by the Spice Girls) a female protagonist who declares herself “no man’s” and ultimately becomes the most powerful woman in Britain is a potent image.

Kapur’s depiction of Elizabeth I has also been seen as having a contemporary resonance with women of power in the late twentieth century, primarily Margaret Thatcher and Princess Diana. For Cobb in particular, Elizabeth’s performance of virginity in the film parallels the Princess of Wales’ sense of performativity in the media. She argues that Elizabeth’s transformation into a contemporary Virgin Mary in order to gain the support and love of the people is akin to Princess Diana’s reinvention of herself through image following her divorce from Prince Charles. Cobb explains how feminist writers have viewed Diana as “a female victim of the patriarchal monarchy who fought back and made a new independent version of herself,” something it could be said that resonates with Elizabeth’s refashioning of herself into a virgin in order to gain control and power in the final scenes of *Elizabeth* (1998). Cobb herself argues that “Elizabeth’s performance of virginity and her self-refashioning into the icon of the Virgin Queen evokes Princess Diana’s relentless self-(re)fashioning after her divorce.” She also sees this connection of Elizabeth I to Princess

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37 Cobb, “Was She or Wasn’t She?” 210.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
Diana as continuing the idea of a societal need for a feminine or maternal icon that Hackett suggests. She states that the “instinctive comparison” between Elizabeth and Diana made by critics “seems even more suggestive now, tied together as they are by some cultural need for a female icon that is both of this world and exception to it.”

It is interesting perhaps to compare Diana’s presentation of herself in her 1995 BBC interview with Martin Bashir in which she exposed the troubles of her marriage, to Elizabeth’s transformation into the Virgin Queen in *Elizabeth*. Dressing completely in black as she did, Diana fashioned herself into a woman in mourning and acted as such. It is thought that this won her much sympathy and added to her popularity, now in opposition to the Windsors.

This contextual connection to Princess Diana is one of the reasons given by many to explain why the depiction of the sexual relationship between Elizabeth and Dudley in *Elizabeth* caused such outrage amongst historians and critics. As Chapman notes, the 1971 film *Mary, Queen of Scots* (directed by Charles Jarrot) involves a scene in which Elizabeth and Dudley are in bed together – though not nearly as explicit as *Elizabeth* – but this did not cause a stir amongst historians who were more concerned with the fictitious meetings between the two queens. Chapman’s suggests that it is the parallels drawn between the late Princess Diana and the Elizabeth of Kapur’s 1998 film that led to the particular controversy after the film’s release. He points to the role that Diana, or her legacy at least, played in the making of the film: “the production discourse of the film had made a point of how the shadow of Diana loomed over the filming.” Therefore he begs the question,”“[i]s it entirely too fanciful to suggest that the defence of Elizabeth’s reputation in response to the film was also, in some way, a defence of the memory of Princess Diana?”

Especially in light of the recent death of Diana and the controversy surrounding it, I would suggest not.

Many scholars and critics have been quick to also view the film in light of former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. In his article, “A Queen for Whose Time?” David Grant Moss argues that Thatcher is a far closer point of comparison for Elizabeth I than that of Diana or Queen Elizabeth II. This is because the British monarchy has largely been relegated to a symbolic position. Elizabeth II is more of a figurehead than a ruling sovereign, and therefore, Thatcher, in her role as Prime Minister, held a more comparable position of

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40 Cobb, “Was She or Wasn’t She?,” 211.
41 Ibid., 211-212.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
political power as Elizabeth I would have during her reign. According to Moss, Thatcher actively attempted to use these similarities to her advantage in her own self-presentation. He argues that “[w]hen Thatcher became Prime Minister in 1979, she began a process of assumption… of royal imagery and metaphor which was, in many instances, overtly Elizabethan.”

He suggests that Thatcher’s victory in the Falklands War evoked Elizabeth’s victory against the Spanish Armada and the famous image of Elizabeth in full armour, rousing her troops at Tilbury. The accuracy of this legend is irrelevant given its iconic place in British history.

Elizabeth’s prioritisation of the body politic over the natural, or her career over her personal life, if you will, also links this depiction to Thatcher. Thatcher was undoubtedly a career woman but one who did not appear, in her attitudes and in her policies, to believe that was a path that should be open to all women. As I have mentioned (and will go into further detail in the next chapter), Elizabeth’s use of the rhetoric of the monarch’s two bodies and her ownership of the masculine politic was also a means of separating herself from other women. This showed that she was capable of being both a woman and a ruler because she was not like other women in that she held masculine traits. This reflects the way in which, as Cobb and Schwarz suggest, Elizabeth I was likely just as keen to reassure her patriarchal society as to challenge it.

In Elizabeth we can perhaps see the reflection of Thatcher in the sense that while she is a woman in power, she is powerful in a way that serves to reinforce the patriarchy as much as to stand above it.

Conclusion

Of the four examples gathered in this thesis, Kapur’s film represents the furthest departure from the others. Where The Virgin Queen (1955), Elizabeth R (1971), and The Virgin Queen (2006) all depict an Elizabeth that is either an established ruler, or a woman that is ready to rule, this film takes the opposite approach. Cate Blanchett’s Elizabeth is insecure and vulnerable as a young queen and must gain confidence and suffer through

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46 Ibid., 809.
47 Ibid., 808.
48 Ibid., 811.
49 See Cobb “Was She or Wasn’t She?” and Schwarz, “The Wrong Question.”
heartbreak before she is able to become the iconic Virgin Queen. Unlike the other versions, she is depicted as sexually experienced and in the ending of the film, when she refashions herself as a virgin, her virginity is thus symbolic and performative, providing her with a stability that she has yet to have known in the film. By presenting herself as virginal, a transformation that is achieved and communicated through the colour and the costuming throughout the film, she becomes the powerful monarch she needs to be to fend off any future, presumably Catholic, threats. This transformation in the film is explicitly meant to align Elizabeth with the Virgin Mary, and represents the ultimate sacrifice of her personal and natural desires for the benefit of the political. In creating this performative and exceptional Elizabeth, Kapur is referencing not only the historical Elizabeth I but also twentieth century women in power, Princess Diana and Margaret Thatcher. Although the film is not necessarily the most accurate of productions, it does highlight the way that Elizabeth I, whether literal virgin or not, performed as a virgin and the way that this brought her power and authority. It also makes an interesting point for its audience in depicting a woman choosing the path of virginity as it offers the most stability. This film is an example of the way that filmmakers reinterpret history. This film takes a new perspective on the existing historical discourse, one that is relatable to the contemporary examples of women in power.
5. *The Virgin Queen* (2006): A Postfeminist Queen

In 2006, just over fifty years after Bette Davis’ film of the same name, the BBC ran a mini-series about Elizabeth I called *The Virgin Queen*. This series stars Anne-Marie Duff and depicts the life of Elizabeth I from her imprisonment under her sister Mary until her death over the course of four, hour-length episodes. While not quite having as much time to work with as the six episode series, *Elizabeth R* (1971), *The Virgin Queen* (2006) takes a similar approach, covering a number of significant events in Elizabeth I’s life over its four-hour running time. The series depicts her as politically adept, highly intelligent and confidently prepared for her role as queen, in a contrast to Kapur’s *Elizabeth* (1998). However, it does place the focus on her internal life, suggesting that, like *Elizabeth R*, the Queen was plagued with a fear of romantic and sexual intimacy and that this is ultimately the reason for her political actions. As one reviewer for *The New York Times* wrote, “‘The Virgin Queen’ makes a convincing argument for virgin presidencies.”¹ The series articulates the relationship of her fear of intimacy and her political life through the rhetoric of the monarch’s two bodies, positioning her virginity as a means of keeping herself safe from hurt as well as protecting her power. I argue that this is an idea that is reflective of the postfeminist context from which the series emerged.

This series is far more restrained than any of the other examples in this thesis, both in terms of its costuming and its settings, taking place largely within the confines of Elizabeth’s court, in the same few interior spaces. This is perhaps due to budgetary requirements but also works to the advantage of the series. It is largely focused on the internal life of Elizabeth, attempting to depict her psychological motivations and the way that she responded to crises and how she made decisions, which would have been done inside the walls of her court. These walls are also perhaps allegorical for the walls of her mind. It often appears to have been shot with a handheld camera that is at times shaky and erratic, and the camera often zooms in on characters. For example, the fight that takes place in the third episode between Dudley and Elizabeth, when she discovers his secret marriage to her former lady Lettice,

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employs a zoom on both Elizabeth and Dudley at various points, as they become increasingly frustrated and upset with each other.2

This kind of style for television series was also in vogue at the time The Virgin Queen was produced. Lez Cooke, in his book, Style in British Television Drama, discusses television series from the early 2000s and says that what they share is “a faster narrative tempo and a quirky, non-naturalistic style where the camera is liberated, freed to film at a variety of angles and focal lengths, often using wide-angle lenses and fast zooms.”3 Although he is referring to fictional drama series, some of these elements are also seen in The Virgin Queen. These elements are a distinct contrast to the style of Elizabeth R, from thirty-five years previous, with its slow editing and largely still camera. For its time, this gives The Virgin Queen a contemporary feel, having a style that audiences would have been familiar with from the drama series of the same time rather than having the more typical heritage style that has been associated with period dramas.

Elizabeth and Elizabeth

The Virgin Queen (2006), screened eight years after Elizabeth (1998), appears to consciously reference the latter film and presents a contrast to the kind of narrative presented by Kapur. This is perhaps because, as will be discussed later in the chapter, the writer of the series was not familiar with the history of Elizabeth and sought popular knowledge whilst also wanting to present a unique interpretation. Whilst Kapur’s Elizabeth is insecure and must grow into her position, the Elizabeth of The Virgin Queen is an intelligent, confident, capable woman more than ready to be queen. After she has been named queen and is beginning to assemble her council, she is met by her cousin Norfolk, who offers advice but clearly wants power. She responds to him with immense sarcasm and wit, reminiscent of the parliament scene in Elizabeth (1998). He kneels before her and she is shot first from a low angle and then at eye level but with her constantly looking down at him as she paces back and forth. She clearly sees herself as superior to him and lists off her abilities one by one, her fluency in five languages and her expertise in art and poetry, for example. She then rounds back to him

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and says in a sarcastic tone, “but should I ever require advice, you’ll be the first to know it.”

She is, from the outset of this series, confident in her intellect and in her ability to rule.

Elizabeth’s confidence in The Virgin Queen (2006) can be more clearly seen in the first meeting with the Privy Council toward the end of the first episode. In its construction, this scene echoes the parliament scene in Elizabeth (1998). As the council gathers for the first time, all in black robes, the director, Coky Giedroyc, intercuts images of Elizabeth preparing for the meeting. She puts on her coronation ring and looks at herself in the mirror, clearly nervous (Fig. 27). As it cuts to her walking down the corridor to enter the council chambers however, she has a crown adorning her head, walking tall, stopping only briefly to gather herself with Cecil, her most trusted advisor. This small sequence is in slow motion and has only three cuts. If, in Elizabeth, the rapidity of the parallel editing between the young Queen practising her speech and her walking into the parliament signals her nervousness and fear, the slow motion and editing of this similar sequence in The Virgin Queen signals her confidence and stoicism. Her speech begins in voice-over as she walks in, outlining what she expects from herself and her councillors (Fig. 28). As she sits down at the head of the table, we view her as if the camera were sitting at the other end. “Here are my wishes and intentions,” she declares, the camera tracking in on her, as she explains her positions on the economy and foreign policy. Rather ironically, she deems she will not waste money expanding England’s borders and claims “you shall find me resolute on this,” though of course we know that it was under Elizabeth that the expansion of the British Empire really took off. When she begins to discuss her position on religion, Giedroyc cuts to a close up of Elizabeth, as she expresses her desire for services to be conducted in English rather than Latin, a controversial notion that the councillors clearly disapprove of, as we see through cuts to their disgruntled faces. Nonetheless, she is unfazed and a tight close up of her from the right side as she uses the historical Elizabeth’s own quote, “there is but one Jesus Christ, the rest is trifles,” demonstrates that she appears to find the whole issue tiresome. Upon this declaration, she stands and leaves, having said her piece. In comparison to the scene in Elizabeth where she is overwhelmed by the demands of the council, in The Virgin Queen the young queen is determined and prepared to rule in her own way.

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4 “Episode 1,” The Virgin Queen, season 1, episode 1, directed by Coky Giedroyc, January 22, 2006 (London: BBC, 2006).
5 Ibid.
Figure 27: Anne-Marie Duff as Elizabeth in *The Virgin Queen* (2006). Here she is nervously preparing for her first Privy Council meeting in a scene similar to the parliament scene in *Elizabeth* (1998).

Figure 28: Privy Council of *The Virgin Queen* (2006). She has gathered herself and addresses the council with confidence.
Late in the second episode, we see another parallel to *Elizabeth* (1998). After she recovers from her bout of smallpox, Cecil informs Elizabeth that the parliament has urged her to settle the matter of her marriage (though historically this did not occur until four years after her illness in 1562). Elizabeth responds to this head on. The parliament gathers in her court and she emerges for the first time in the series in the iconic imagery of the elaborate wig and white face paint, as opposed to her clean skin and loose hair prior to this. Although this change is in part a means of hiding the effects of her illness, the loss of hair and scarring, the transformation has a similar effect to the transformation in *Elizabeth* of solidifying her power after a threat to it. In this case, the threat is her potential death from smallpox rather than Catholic conspiracies. When *The Virgin Queen*’s Elizabeth walks into the court, it is with confidence to stand before her throne. We see her in a similar way to how we see Elizabeth in the parliament scene of *Elizabeth*, through a series of medium-long shots as though through the crowd as she berates them for attempting to force her into a marriage. She claims that it is up to God whether her heart is turned to marriage or not and that none but him shall command her to it. As she continues, we see several shots of her councillors looking sheepish, as if being lectured by a mother. As the scene settles back to a mid-close up, she proclaims to have married England and utters a version of the historical Elizabeth’s own words, “it shall be sufficient to me when I die, that a marble headstone declares that this queen having lived for such and such a time, lived and died a virgin!” (Fig. 29). With that she leaves and, rather like Bette Davis in 1955’s *The Virgin Queen*, though less maniacally, cackles her way down the corridor.

“Like the coin that bears her image…”

Helen Hackett argues in her book *Virgin Mother, Maiden Queen* that Elizabeth I, in the early parts of her reign, was able to justify her authority through the rhetoric of the monarch’s two bodies. She argues that at a moment when female rule was under question by John Knox and his supporters, Elizabeth claimed ownership of both the feminine natural body and the masculine body politic as a means of showing herself capable of ruling. This imagery is also depicted in the representations of Elizabeth, but most explicitly in the 2006 series *The Virgin Queen.*

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7 “Episode 2.”
In the second episode of this series Anne-Marie Duff’s Elizabeth describes how she conceptualises herself as a female monarch, using the analogy of a coin to describe both sides of the queen: the natural, and the politic. Interestingly this occurs in a scene between her and Robert Dudley (Tom Hardy) with whom, it has been established, she has a close but not a sexual relationship. It is clear that they are both interested in each other romantically and this scene is one of relative intimacy. They sit close together on the floor of her bedchamber, lit only by the light of the fireplace, and she is lit with soft, typically romantic lighting (Fig. 30). A conversation ensues through a shot-reverse-shot sequence, in which she likens a queen to a coin. On the one side, she suggests, “she embodies the feminine frailty of her sex” and on the other, she embodies “the body politic.” This duality is something that historically Elizabeth appeared to believe in, though perhaps in a slightly different context to how it is presented in the series. In her accession speech, Elizabeth I referred to herself as having both the “body naturally considered” and the “body politic to govern.”9 For Anne-Marie Duff’s version at least, the relationship between these two sides of the queen seems clear. The natural body must always listen to the counsel of the body politic and after this conversation, any romantic life in the series becomes virtually non-existent. Later in the episode, Elizabeth banishes

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Dudley from court after the rumours that he murdered his wife to be with her spread and utters the famous lines “I will have one mistress here and no master!” It is also the end of this episode that she declares herself a perpetual virgin and married to England.10

In this series, her virginity is not a ploy or a performance, but rather a claim to what she seems to think is the wisest condition. She fears the intimacy of a sexual relationship, as we shall see, but is also fearful of the threat that an intimate relationship might pose to her rule. How can she know if someone wants her power, or recognise a threat to her throne, if she is to rule with her heart and not her head? This is the implication of her actions throughout the series. She is not only concerned about the threat from a romantic partner but also from the ambitions of an heir. In this scene with Dudley, he asks her whether she would be willing to give up motherhood just to avoid marriage as she had vowed to do as a child. “It is not only men who can be corrupted by power,” she replies, “an heir can be as much of a threat as a comfort in that.”11 In this sense, Elizabeth’s virginity here is a means of confirming her power through the two bodies and protecting it from potential threats.

10 “Episode 2.”  
11 Ibid.
This fear of a threat appears to be justified through Elizabeth’s relationship with Robert Devereux (Hans Matheson), the 2nd Earl of Essex and Robert Dudley’s stepson, which is dealt with in the final episode of the series. Essex is often seen as a love interest for Elizabeth in her later life but in this series, the relationship is, at least from Elizabeth’s side, a maternal one. Historically, this is probably far closer to the case. Alison Weir argues that whilst Elizabeth certainly enjoyed his company and attentions, “she seems to have regarded him as the son she never had rather than a lover or suitor.” This is not to say that their relationship was always caring and kind, rather they often argued bitterly. According to Weir, Essex was in fact rather misogynistic in his attitude toward her:

He would not allow any woman, even the Queen herself, to rule him; in fact, he was to an alarming degree hostile towards and contemptuous of, her authority, and detested his servile role, believing that a man like himself was far superior, not only in strength but in intellect.

However, Essex knew that she favoured him despite this and would come back to her with kind words after their arguments, her favour furthering his political and military ambitions, though the seed of his rebellion was steadily growing. The most famous blow up between the two occurred in July 1598 after they disagreed over who should be Lord Deputy in Ireland, where Elizabeth was fighting rebellion. Essex turned his back on the Queen and she clipped him around the ears. He reached for his sword claiming that he would not even put up with this treatment even had it come from her father, Henry VIII. Their relationship was never quite the same after this point. In early 1599 he set off for Ireland as the new Lord Deputy though he had little success there, actively disobeying the Elizabeth’s demands. After he returned to court from Ireland without permission and burst into the queen’s bedchamber unannounced whilst she was not yet dressed or made up, Essex was placed under house arrest.

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14 Ibid., 387.
15 Ibid.
17 Ibid., 327-328.
Late in 1600, Essex began to plan a coup against Elizabeth, gathering about him “disaffected peers.” On February 7 1601, Essex’s supporters paid for a performance of Shakespeare’s Richard II hoping the people would see him as Henry Bolingbroke and Elizabeth as Richard II, and thus rise to support his coup which would take place the next day. Unfortunately for Essex, though he was popular with the people, his reliance on them to rise with him was misplaced and they did not, remaining loyal to Elizabeth who had not doubted them. He was executed for treason on the morning of the 25th February 1601.

The Virgin Queen follows this relationship rather faithfully, emphasising Elizabeth’s maternal feelings toward the brash and arrogant Essex. She cares for him like a mother, fussing over him when he is ill, though their relationship is equally fraught often fighting and having to make up. After the scene in which he pulls his sword on her in the Privy Council, Essex’s actual mother Lettice Knollys, urges him to make peace with the Queen, and appears throughout the episode to be more interested in returning to favour through her son than in her son’s wellbeing. When Elizabeth and Essex finally reconcile he asks her, “[d]oes not any son rail against the rule of his mother?” He claims that this does not mean that their bond is weakened. We watch her from over his shoulder as her expression softens, and she delicately brushes his hair away from his face in a loving gesture as she replies, “[a] mother’s love obeys only one rule, that it is given without expectation of any in return” (Fig. 31). This exchange provides the sense that though Elizabeth has not had any children of her own, she understands a mother’s love. However, in this series, this scene is meant to create audience empathy with Elizabeth as we know that Essex does not genuinely return her affection. Throughout this final episode, it is made clear that Elizabeth is losing popularity with young people and she becomes something of a joke. Earlier in the episode, after Essex appears to be hurt by her scorn for him and professes his affection for her, he meets his friends and reveals that he was pretending in order to restore her favour in him. He mocks her belief in his charade. Through his behaviour, Elizabeth’s fear that someone might only want her for her power is being well justified.

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19 Ibid., 459.
20 Weir, The Life of Elizabeth I, 461.
21 Ibid., 461-462.
22 “Episode 4,” The Virgin Queen, season 1, episode 4, directed by Coky Giedroyc (London: BBC, 2006).
When Essex stages his rebellion, again we can see the way that Elizabeth’s fear is not misplaced. The rebellion is not given a lot of screen time, the failure of Essex’s plan is dealt with rather swiftly but we see the impact on Elizabeth. She wears armour as the rebellion is taking place, and is unwavering in her faith in her subjects. After the rebellion has been quashed, we see Elizabeth sitting by the fire, slumped asleep. In her hand is a sword (Fig. 32). In the first episode of the series before Elizabeth becomes queen, there is a scene in which Mary I, her sister and the queen at the time, confronts Elizabeth’s about her possible treason. Mary is wearing armour and discusses how she must sleep with a sword for fear that the plots against her life will come to fruition. In this early scene, to the audience and to Elizabeth, Mary appears paranoid (Fig. 33). However, by the final episode, we see Elizabeth, facing rebellion from someone she treated like a son, asleep in armour gripping a sword. Ultimately, in this series, she has ended up in the same place as Mary, threatened by someone that could potentially be a successor. It serves to justify her earlier fears that a child could be just as much of a threat to her reign as anyone else.

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23 “Episode 4.”
Figure 33: Mary I (Joanne Whalley) in *The Virgin Queen* (2006). Mary wears armour and sleeps with a sword, frightened of rebellious plots. She appears paranoid, though as we see in Episode Four, Elizabeth also ends up in the same state of mind.
“An unconscious recoil from love”\textsuperscript{24}

In January 2006, as a prelude to The Virgin Queen airing later in the month, the writer of the series, Paula Milne, penned an article for the UK publication, The Telegraph. This article outlined her process and intentions in writing The Virgin Queen. The opening paragraphs are likely to make any historian wary of the show. Milne is not a historian, and in fact admitted that she barely knew who Elizabeth I was. She describes her process as such:

The BBC offered to put me in touch with various TV historians to help my research process, but I instinctively declined the offer. If the job of a historian is to interpret history, my ignorance made me vulnerable to any theories they might want to promulgate. Instead, I talked to history teachers in secondary schools, knowing that they were probably rooted in empirical historical fact rather than imposing their own interpretations.\textsuperscript{25}

On the surface, these statements are concerning. Mainly, because her implication that there is a version of Elizabeth’s history that is ‘empirical historical fact’ free from interpretation demonstrates a superficial understanding of history as a discipline and a practice. However, I think her intention is fair, that is, to come to her own interpretation through her own research. Also, by approaching high school history teachers she is going to a source of popular memory, discovering the narrative of Elizabeth I that is taught in schools and that the audience might thus be most familiar with. Later in the article she discusses being “struck by how different generations of biographers and artists have portrayed her according to their needs” and how these various interpretations were “liberating” for her in defining her own version.\textsuperscript{26} The result is a version of Elizabeth that is directly influenced by contemporary circumstances and contexts. Milne discusses how she “focused on how a contemporary audience could relate to [Elizabeth]” and how she then attempted “to try and identify the themes of her life which might have a current relevance.”\textsuperscript{27} She did this by drawing on images of Thatcher and Princess Diana, and in a move that is interesting in the postfeminist context of the series, making Elizabeth’s frustrated love life the “spine of the story.”\textsuperscript{28}

\textsuperscript{24} Paula Milne, “In bed with the Virgin Queen,” The Telegraph, January 7 2006.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
Milne’s unique approach, according to her, was in exposing and exploring Elizabeth’s psychological life. She discusses how she engaged in what no historian or writer can seem to escape, that is, attempting to understand Elizabeth’s virginity. The conclusion she came to, and what she tried to centre the series on, is the notion that Elizabeth was scarred by her mother’s death and that this left in her a “primal fear” of love and intimacy. Milne saw the fact that Elizabeth was not yet three when Henry VIII ordered her mother’s execution on charges of adultery and incest, and that she refused to speak about Anne Boleyn, as evidence of this trauma, and questioned, “what girl wouldn’t grow up perceiving the mortal danger of where sexual intimacy can lead?”

This interpretation is not new. Many historians have suggested and argued that childhood trauma certainly influenced her refusal to marry. Because Elizabeth as an infant when her mother was killed, historians more commonly point to the death of Catherine Howard, Henry’s fifth wife, when Elizabeth was eight, or to the incidents with Thomas Seymour when she was a teenager, as more significant events. It is also not the first series to explore this avenue. Glenda Jackson’s Queen in Elizabeth R is also plagued by the trauma of her youth, though this is more explicitly explored.

What is interesting about Milne’s interpretation is that she sees these traumas as a truth that lies behind Elizabeth’s political actions. The show clearly depicts Elizabeth as a strong-willed political mind, one who saw her virginity as a necessity, both for her reputation and for her power. However, Milne’s own writing reveals that this was not the sole intention. She states:

So it was that I decided to focus on this internal emotional aspect of Elizabeth’s journey, revealing that her politically pragmatic reason for remaining a virgin was in fact based on an unconscious recoil from love out of sheer self-preservation.

This does not necessarily undermine Elizabeth’s political mind and actions, but by having them come from her sense of sexual frustration and fear of intimacy, it does base her reign in her love life, a device that is frustratingly reductive.

29 Milne, “In bed with the Virgin Queen.”
31 Milne, “In bed with the Virgin Queen.”
Elizabeth for a postfeminist age

Post-feminism is a term largely used to characterise the state of feminism in the contemporary world. It is not an easy one to define as it has come to have multiple understandings. Jennifer Clark, in her article “Postfeminist Masculinity and the Complex Politics of Time,” outlined three main ways it has been understood. First, it is seen as a periodisation referring to the period following the end of second-wave feminism. Secondly, it is seen as “a conceptual framework.” In this framework, feminism has been depoliticised and its tenets have been adopted “into the cultural imaginary and social relations,” meaning that overt sexism has largely disappeared. As Clark says, “[p]ostfeminism has made feminism a known quality, a given.” Finally, she points to the idea that postfeminism actually represents a backlash to feminism. This appears to come from notions that feminism is no longer needed and subsequently, women who continue to advocate for it have come to be seen as ‘feminist killjoys’ or women who complain and argue unnecessarily, can’t take a joke, or are simply covering up their failure to progress in a meritocracy. Therefore, young women are increasingly distancing themselves from feminism in order to disassociate from this stereotype.

For film and television, scholars have argued that postfeminism has influenced the way that women are being depicted. This includes the idea of retrosexism, which is used to describe the trend of television shows in particular that are set in historical periods that are ‘pre-feminist’ and function as a “retreat” to “rebuild a social order that offers men affirmation of conventional gender roles, safe expression for their desires, and unquestioning acceptance from others.” This can be seen in series such as Mad Men (2007-2015) and Game of Thrones (2011—) where the historical periods in which they are set are used to justify misogynistic behaviour. Jean-Anne Sutherland and Kathryn M. Feltey also argue that while Hollywood often appears to have strong female characters that appear feminist in their rejection of typical feminine roles of wife and mother, they are undermined by the dominant

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33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
trend that these women “pay the price in loneliness and isolation.”\textsuperscript{37} This is a trend that I would argue is obvious not only in both Elizabeth (1998) and The Virgin Queen (2006) but also 1955’s The Virgin Queen.

While I would not suggest that The Virgin Queen (2006) is engaging in retrosexism or that it represents a complete rejection or undermining of feminist ideals, I would argue that it is, to an extent, engaging in postfeminist discourse. Jennifer Clark looks specifically at Mad Men, The Sopranos (1999-2007), Life on Mars (2006-2007), and Bored to Death (2009-2011), and argues that these shows, like many others of the time, “key into the contradictory elements of postfeminism and can, within a single text, express both rejection and celebration of feminist gains.”\textsuperscript{38} I would argue this is also happening in The Virgin Queen. Whilst it is depicting a woman in power by emphasising her political skill, intelligence, and wit, it also reduces her to a woman driven by sexual frustration, similarly, though not to the same caricatured extent, as Bette Davis in the 1955 film of the same name.

A rejection, or at least disregard for feminist ideals can also be seen in the series’ explicit use of the idea of the monarch’s two bodies. Hackett argues that this rhetoric of the two bodies was, for Elizabeth, not a means to elevate the idea of female rule but to distinguish herself from other women. In this sense, she was upholding the notion that in general women should not rule but, in this case, she could because she also held the masculine qualities of the body politic. In The Virgin Queen this implication in the employment of the two bodies, links Elizabeth I to former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Thatcher similarly presented herself as the exception that proves the rule, seeming to believe that women should stay confined to the domestic sphere, actively dismantling programs designed to help working mothers.\textsuperscript{39} David Grant Moss argues that while both women were subjected to misogynistic criticism of their leadership, “[n]either showed any interest in advancing the rights and causes of women in any significant way, and in fact showed a distinct apathy toward doing so.”\textsuperscript{40} Moss is particularly critical of the way Thatcher presented herself stating that “[s]he presented herself not as a wife and mother like other women, but as a stronger, iron woman who rose above such banalities to achieve greater

\textsuperscript{37} Jean-Anne Sutherland and Kathryn M. Feltey, “Here’s Looking at Her: An Intersectional Analysis of Women, Power and Feminism in Film,” Journal of Gender Studies (2016): 2.
\textsuperscript{38} Clark, “Postfeminist Masculinity,” 448.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 811.
things, thus devaluing the achievements of other women rather than celebrating them. In *The Virgin Queen* when discussing herself as a coin, Elizabeth begins by saying that, “a woman ruler is not like other women is she?” She distinguishes herself from other woman in the same way that Hackett argues and that Thatcher arguably did. While Elizabeth’s position on women is never explicitly addressed, throughout this series, and indeed through all representations in this thesis, Elizabeth is not depicted as having any strong relationships with other women besides her lady Kat Ashley. She is largely harsh and jealous toward other women, especially those associated with men she is close to, such as Beth Thogmorton in *The Virgin Queen* and Lettice Knollys, the second wife of Robert Dudley in this series as well as *Elizabeth R*. In this regard, the connection of Elizabeth and Thatcher does not seem too far of a stretch. It also represents the kind of ambivalence toward feminist goals that is indicative of the postfeminist era.

**Conclusion**

*The Virgin Queen* (2006) is a reinterpretation of Elizabeth I for the twenty-first century, reflecting both a modern woman, in terms of her political career and independence, as well as the subtle rejection of feminist ideals through elevating herself above other women and the reduction of her political life to her lack of romantic and sexual love. This dual reinforcing and rejecting of feminist ideas is a reflection of the state of contemporary gender politics, that is, the complicated notion of postfeminism. This series presents a contrast to the narrative of *Elizabeth* (1998) with the young princess ready to be queen and remaining confident in the role until her end. This Elizabeth uses her virginity as a means to protect both herself and her power and ultimately this is justified through the betrayal of Essex whom she loved like a son. In this case study we see the reorientation of Elizabeth I for a new audience only eight years after the last major screen interpretation, that of Kapur’s. Whilst the series maintains the essence of the Virgin Queen, both historically and cinematically, in Milne’s testimony we can see that there was an attempt to explore a side of Elizabeth previously thought to be unexplored. The choice to explore this aspect, the psychological life of Elizabeth and her fear of intimacy, is arguably a direct result of the social and cultural context from which it emerged.

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41 Moss, “A Queen for Whose Time?,” 813.
6. Conclusion

By taking the examples of various depictions of Elizabeth I in moving image documents, to use O’Connor’s term, over the course of fifty years, I have attempted to demonstrate how film and television engage historiography in ways unique to the medium and also reinterpret history for its contemporary audiences. Each of these case studies, The Virgin Queen (1955), Elizabeth R (1971), Elizabeth (1998), The Virgin Queen (2006), presents a new perspective on the history of Elizabeth I but one that is also invariably influenced by the historical, social, and gender contexts of the production.

As we can see through these examples, there are some ideas about Elizabeth I that remain fairly consistent, regardless of the period in which the representation is made. Elizabeth’s reputation as strong-willed, independent, and intelligent, comes through in all the depictions gathered here. In The Virgin Queen (1955), Elizabeth R (1971), and The Virgin Queen (2006), she is already commanding and confident when we are first introduced to her. This is more significant for Elizabeth R and The Virgin Queen (2006) because these begin before her ascension to the throne, establishing Elizabeth I, as a young woman ready to rule when the opportunity arose. In Elizabeth (1998), Kapur contests this idea by depicting Elizabeth as a young, insecure princess who must grow into her role as queen through experience and learn from her mistakes. Ultimately though, through the sacrifice of her youth she becomes the iconic and powerful queen that we have come to know from history and that is seen in the other representations. The question of the Virgin Queen’s virginity is also, naturally, dealt with in each representation and most take for granted that the queen was indeed a virgin. Kapur’s which suggests that virginity is something she chose to reclaim, is an exception.

The differences in the approaches to how these ideas are interpreted and conveyed, I argue, is due to the particular contexts from which each case study emerges. In the case of The Virgin Queen (1955), Elizabeth, contrary to most representations, is depicted as the antagonist to Raleigh’s hero, jealous and bitter over his marriage and child with Beth Throgmorton. This is conveyed through colour, music, and Davis’ performance. She uses the prospect of marriage to manipulate international relations, particularly the relationship with France, explicitly calling it “my policy.” In this film, Elizabeth’s strong personality and her tyrannical actions are ultimately attributed to infertility. I argue that this invention is a means
to justify Elizabeth I’s choice not to marry or have children in the context of the 1950s in which maternity was still assumed to be the natural role of a woman in society. By declaring Elizabeth infertile, it makes her actions throughout the film a product of these ‘natural’ desires for motherhood being frustrated. This makes her accessible and relatable to a 1950s audience.

In contrast, the strength of the Elizabeth of *Elizabeth R* is independent of her romantic life, and her virginity is only a small part of a larger, multifaceted existence. She is politically minded and a competent queen in the vein of a contemporary late 1960s, early 1970s ideal of a career woman, able to run her own household, and nation in this case, without the necessity of a man. She is successful regardless of whether she conforms to the traditional roles of mother and wife. This is largely conveyed through the commanding performance of Glenda Jackson. I argue that this is a product of the context of the growing Women’s Liberation Movement that fought for women’s legal, financial, and sexual freedoms. In this series though, she is also depicted as having a deep psychological life, carrying with her a fear of intimacy left from her experiences as a child. In this sense, her virginity functions a means of protecting herself from the intimacy that she fears. I would suggest that this is an attempt to make her both a liberated woman but also to interpret her in terms of traditional heterosexuality. She would marry if she were not afraid and often expresses regret at not having children.

Kapur’s interpretation of Elizabeth I in *Elizabeth* (1998), represents the biggest departure from the standard version of the history that appears in most adaptations. Kapur, perhaps inspired by a lack of reverence for British history as an Indian director, reinterprets the story of Elizabeth as a conspiracy thriller in which a young inexperienced queen must survive Catholic assassination plots and grow to become the iconic queen that is familiar from history. In this version, Elizabeth engages in a sexual relationship with Robert Dudley and thus her power is dependent on the virginity of the Virgin Queen of accepted history being reclaimed. This exposes virginity as a construct and reflects the way that the perception of Elizabeth I’s virgin status among her subjects was essential to her authority, especially in regard to the iconography of the Virgin Queen. This relates Elizabeth I to modern women of power, specifically Margaret Thatcher and Princess Diana, in terms of performing a particular image of gender as a means of holding and maintaining political power.
The BBC’s 2006 series *The Virgin Queen* represents a reversion back to the kind of narrative of *Elizabeth R* but with a contemporary edge. This series stands in contrast to *Elizabeth* (1998), representing a young woman who is confident and ready to be queen and who largely rejects the advances of Dudley, her virginity being accepted as in the canonical history. Like Glenda Jackson’s 1970s Elizabeth, this version sees the queen plagued by a fear of intimacy and this is articulated through the rhetoric of the monarch’s two bodies. The natural body must listen to the counsel of the body politic and intimacy poses a threat both to her person and to her power as she cannot trust the ambitions of a husband or an heir, a suspicion that is justified through the betrayal of her surrogate son, the Earl of Essex. By employing the rhetoric of the two bodies, Elizabeth is established as exceptional from other women. This series, I argue, reflects its postfeminist context, in which feminist ideals are both celebrated and rejected. Whilst Elizabeth is strong and independent, she is sexually frustrated and perpetuates an idea, like Margaret Thatcher, that women in power are exceptional from other women.

Examining the examples of representations of Elizabeth I and investigating why the differences might be so, led me to discover more about Elizabeth I’s history myself. Part of the inspiration for this thesis was the idea that history, for the majority of people, appears to come through popular culture as much, if not more, than traditional history and traditional teaching methods. The general public’s idea of history is informed by what they see and learn from film and television, as well as other popular culture media like novels and comic books. My goal was to try and understand how these media function in communicating history. I had thought that I knew a fair bit about the history of Elizabeth I but as I examined different films and series, I realised that the image that I had of the Virgin Queen was largely informed by depictions I had seen, this image being challenged and reinforced by the multitude of screen versions I watched. I found that as the research for this thesis progressed, I was searching for evidence in the academic history to prove or refute the things that were being presented in the films and series, and in the process learning more about the Queen and her times in general. This is the hope and the potential of historical films. By engaging the public through the narratives and techniques of popular films and television series, moving image documents have the capacity to spark an interest in the history being presented. By reaching people who might otherwise be disinterested in academic histories, film and television present, hopefully, a springboard through which those people can begin to learn more about history and relate it to themselves. At the very least the media represents a place history can continue to thrive.
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