**Queen Elizabeth's Public Face**

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Tarnya Cooper looks at the wider iconography of Elizabeth, and how this evolved during her reign.

In 1603, when Elizabeth I was on her death bed, a young law student named John Manningham was staying near the court at Richmond. His diary of that year chronicling the Queen’s illness and final death on March 24th, includes a remarkable statement about the power of historical evidence. Towards the end of his notebook appear the words:

Goe litel book I envy not thy lott, Though thou shalt go where I myself can not.

Manningham’s words seem to envisage a future for his diary beyond his own mortal life. The concept of passing time is, of course, fundamental to all forms of historical record, whether personal memoir, official charter or portraiture.

Portraits of a monarch, however, did not abide by the conventions that applied to portraits of private citizens. The royal portrait did not strive to perform the role of carefully observed presence – to record the features of the sitter for posterity – but aimed to reflect a perfected emblem of that presence during the monarch’s lifetime. Images of Elizabeth acted as idealised symbols of embodied statehood and just, God-given order. In this respect, royal portraits had more in common with images of religious deities, as they needed to be depicted as distinctively monarch-like, rather than wholly individualistic.

The famous painted portraits of Elizabeth that now hang in our national museums were almost all produced for a courtly audience. Iconic images of the Queen, such as the Ditchley portrait (Marcus Gheeraerts, c.1592,) showing her standing on a map of England (commissioned by Sir Henry Lee), and the ‘Sieve’ portrait (by George Gower), displayed as a centrepiece of the*Elizabeth* exhibition at the National Maritime Museum, were commissioned by loyal courtiers and favourites. These images were designed to speak to an elite audience of educated courtiers and they frequently include elements of an elaborate chivalric ritual. Elizabeth appears in these portraits sumptuously dressed, with a range of emblems that encouraged an audience schooled in Renaissance symbolism to reflect upon her special virtues of virginity, charity and wisdom. Yet, the complex iconography of these large-scale portraits was rarely translated wholesale for audiences outside the court. There was a considerable difference between the types of portraits of Elizabeth seen at court and the printed images or small-scale painted copies of the Queen produced for the popular market.

Interest in portraiture had increased dramatically by the second half of the sixteenth century and Elizabeth and her Tudor kin became the most visible rulers in English history to date. Several hundred contemporary portraits of her survive. The Queen’s public profile and reputation for subjects at home and in Europe, depended in part upon the effective use of visual imagery. Like her father Henry VIII before her, Elizabeth made good use of the power of such material to project the right image of monarchy. The Queen’s right to rule had to be asserted visually, but from an early stage it was clear that this needed careful management. As an unmarried female, Elizabeth had both more to prove and more to lose in being portrayed than most European rulers. It was recognised that her public profile had to attest to her unique status as a woman apart from her sex. With the cunning of a modern PR guru, ministers like Lord Burghley considered how this could best be done. In 1563, just over five years into Elizabeth’s reign, a proclamation was drafted that set out rules for artists when making depictions of the Queen’s image. The proclamation in effect forbade further portraits of Elizabeth from being made at all until a model of an appropriate positive image (in the form of a face pattern) could be provided for artists to copy from. In the event the proclamation remained in draft form and was never issued. Yet its existence shows how important it was to her regime to get the Queen’s image right.

By the mid-sixteenth century the power of visual imagery to influence opinion and capture the imagination was already recognised. It is hard to imagine now, but before the age of mass reproduction, painted images could appear as magically seductive in the way they established a sense of confusion between the represented and the actual object. Following Calvinist thought, Reformers had long argued against the merit of religious images on the grounds that these deceived the beholder into offering prayer to empty idols, rather than to the spiritual entities they symbolised. Images considered idolatrous were therefore being removed from places of worship. In England, in particular, Protestant preachers were often critical of the corrupting power of all visual stimuli. Yet, historians have often ignored the obvious parallels presented by the visual representation and celebration of the monarch.

So, how did ordinary people in Elizabethan England see the likeness of their Queen? In one respect her image was literally everywhere, as a profile of her features appeared upon the newly minted coins produced first in 1558-60 and then again from 1561 under an ambitious programme of re-coinage. Like monarchs before her, the Queen’s face jangled about in the purses and pockets of England’s wealthy, and was coveted by ordinary working men and women. The decision to embark upon re-coinage meant that  Elizabeth’s features were associated with this bold economic initiative. Re-coinage also meant that debased money was largely removed, and that there were a far greater number of coins in circulation carrying the Queen’s head, rather than those of her Tudor forebears. These coins even included some useful new denominations in an attempt to ease the problem of a lack of small change by introducing the three-half pence and three-farthing coins. The Queen’s profile on the newly minted coins showed a crowned young woman with her hair loosely flowing to stress her status as a maiden, and on the sixpence this was accompanied by the Tudor rose to emphasise continuity and her right to rule. As with all such imagery showing the official face of monarchy it was simplistic but effective. Amazingly, the coinage carrying these images of Elizabeth remained common currency up until 1694, and thus served as the popular image of the Queen for around three generations after her death.

Coins were clearly commonplace, but what other images might be described as popular? Later in the seventeenth century the Stuart populace would enjoy ceramic delftware decorated with portraits of their monarchs, from Charles I to William and Mary, but few popular decorative objects of this sort seems to have been made (or have survived) from Elizabeth’s reign. Instead, paintings and prints could be purchased both to order and ready-made. Among artisan, professional gentry and noble households there were many who probably owned portraits of their Queen. Susan Foister has shown in her work on inventories (1981) that where Elizabethan households owned a painting at all, this was most likely to be a depiction of the monarch. Indeed, the draft of the 1563 proclamation forbidding the further execution of portraits of Elizabeth was produced to legislate for just such this trade in royal imagery. The proclamation accepts the ‘natural desires that all sorts of subjects and people, both noble and mean,’ will ‘hope to procure the portrait and picture of the Queen ...’. It goes on to say that these ‘desires’ had in the past been satisfied by all manner of painters who ‘do daily attempt to make in short manner portraiture of her majesty in painting, graving and printing’.

Further evidence of the widescale availability of royal imagery appears later in the reign, in 1596, when the Privy Council needed to issue an order that a number of portraits – presumably on public sale – should be defaced, while new images should be approved by George Gower the Serjeant Painter working for the crown. Some of these public images were cheaply produced printed woodcuts that were probably sold alongside ‘broadsheets’ displaying the text of ballads or tabloid-style news items such as the birth of monstrous creatures or the appearance of comets. Few of these popular woodcuts survive. The existence of a small number of portraits of Elizabeth made for a popular market is remarkable and offers a wonderful insight into how citizens from relatively modest backgrounds might have viewed their queen. But the term ‘popular’ is highly suggestive, indicating that all sorts of people from different social backgrounds owned or saw these images, which may not be the case. Itis certainly difficult to speculate how images sold as single leaf prints were used, but they could have been purchased to be pasted into a Bible or a commonplace book or even to be displayed upon the wall. The historian Tessa Watt has argued in her book *Cheap Print and Popular Piety* (1991) that broadsides and chapbooks were aimed at a broad audience and that ‘buyers remained socially variegated’ probably ‘drawn from the middling ranks of yeomen, husbandmen and trades people and that even gentry readers were not uncommon’. It is difficult to estimate the costs of printed portraits, but popular ballads sold for between a half penny and a penny between 1520-1640. Popular printed portraits of Elizabeth may have been more expensive but they would have been in reach of yeomen, artisans, clerks and many others who lived above a subsistance income.

The early years of Elizabeth’s reign was dominated by the expectation of her marriage, upon which the fate of the realm would hinge. Early imagery therefore tended to display her feminine virtues alongside her regal status or placed her as a providential heroine. One of the most well-circulated printed images of Elizabeth from the first decade of her reign appears in the frontispiece to the Bishop’s Bible published from 1568. Other surviving images of the 1560s are found mostly as engravings in printed texts and show her not yet as a defiant Virgin Queen, but in the more sober role as champion of the Protestant faith. The title page of the quarto edition of the Bishop’s Bible of 1569 depicts Elizabeth as a heroine being crowned by Mercy and Justice, reflecting her role as ‘supreme governor’ of the Church of England. The small scene at the base shows a priest preaching to his parishioners, and Elizabeth’s presence above is designed to signal her role as divine protector overthe orderly practice of reformed religion. The genre of engraved portraits as independent printed images, so well established in the Netherlands, France, Germany and Italy, is barely evident in England in this period and these early examples borrow heavily on classical iconography.

Another image probably produced for sale on the open market is a large (50.5 x 68 cm), relatively crude woodcut of the Queen with the Latin words ‘Elizabetha Regina’. This is a rare example of a once popular print and presents a traditional representation of the monarch with crown, orb and sceptre, the instruments of monarchical power. This woodcut was probably sold singly designed for wide dissemination. Woodcuts were cheap to produce as they could be printed in quantities of many thousands, rather than the hundreds that etched images on copperplate could yield. They were also the natural choice where images were required to accompany text as letterpress text and woodcut could be printed on the same press.

Some images of Elizabeth, therefore, also appeared with a celebratory printed text. Again, a very rare popular woodcut dates from after the Spanish Armada of 1588 when images of the Queen were used as emblems to rally national pride. The example, which found in the British Library – possibly after a design by Nicholas Hilliard – has been enlivened by a speedy application of watercolour perhaps by its printer or vendor which may indicate that it was once intended for display. It shows the Queen with orb and sceptre as emblems of her rule appearing queen-like rather than as an individualised subject. And, as in all her portraits whether popular or for a court audience she appears contained by the elaborate splendour of her attire. The accompanying text celebrates her virtue and health in typically winsome and florid language:

Loe here the pearle,  
Whom God and man doth love;  
Loe here on earth, the onely starre of light:  
Loe here the Queen, whom no mishap can move;  
To chaunge her mynde, from vertues chief delight:  
Loe here the heart, that so hath honord God;  
That for her love, we feele not of his rod:  
Pray for her health,   
Such as good subjects bee: (Oh princely Dame,) there is none like to thee.

Elizabeth is described in both text and image as absolutely set apart, not only from her subjects, but from her sex and she is literally heralded as a prince-like ‘dame’. Through her achievements she is almost compared here to a second Christ whose sacrifice has spared England the rod of God’s wrath. The formulaic quality of most popular portraiture of Elizabeth comes into focus in the light of such a text as it stresses her constancy as the source of virtue, a theme that was also reflected in her personal motto ‘semper eadem’ (always the same).

It is clear that images of Elizabeth were widespread in urban centres, not just in printed form but also as painted imagery. In some only modestly affluent households a royal portrait may have been one of the few paintings in evidence. In contrast, the aristocracy and wealthy gentry increasingly used portraiture and subject pictures in the decorative programmes for their country houses. By the end of the sixteenth-century a fashion for long galleries emerged in the houses of the nobility. These were designed as spaces where important visitors and friends could be amused by passing through a collections of images of ancient heroes, legendary characters, past monarchs and ancestors. An early portrait of Elizabeth recently put on display at the National Portrait Gallery provides an example of the type of image that may have hung in such a gallery. Roy Strong has rightly described this painting as ‘unsophisticated’, but it is worth asking – unsophisticated to whom? The painting was purchased from an aristocratic collection in the early twentieth century but it may have originally formed part of a sequence of paintings of monarchs that hung in a domestic long gallery or it may have simply been specifically commissioned from an artist. The muddy brown background would have originally been bright blue in colour and can be identified as a pigment called smalt which has dramatically faded over time. The image shows the Queen in the first decade of her reign before a more elaborate pattern of iconography had been established, but many other images of this ready quality originating from later decades still exist .

What emerges in looking at a category of representation probably produced for a non-court audience is how constant the iconography appears after the first decade, indicating that the articulation of female power needed careful branding. We cannot precisely reconstruct the responses of Elizabethan viewers to these images, and what they reveal about popular perceptions of monarchy is frequently difficult to unpick. However, while few historical artefacts speak as directly to an audience as John Manningham’s statement, it is clear that many of these images were designed, despite their media, as lasting records of female rule.

**For Further Reading:**

Susan Foister, *Burlington Magazine* (Vol.123, 1981); Robert Parker Sorlien (ed.), *The Diary of John Manningham of the Middle Temple 1602-3* (University Press of New England, 1976); Amanda Shephard, *Gender and Authority in Sixteenth Century England* (Ryburn Publishing, 1994); Roy Strong, *Glorianna, The Portraits of Queen Elizabeth I* (Thames &Hudson,1987); Tessa Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety* (Cambridge University Press, 1991).

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