

Chivalry and Nationalism Summary, September 29, 2014

KEYWORDS: IMAGE, IDENTITY, NATIONALISM, PROPAGANDA

This class offered an introduction to Elizabeth I (1533, r. 1558-1603) and her deliberate attempts to craft her image and focus national will, identity, and pride in/ on that image

Elizabeth was the daughter of Henry VIII (1491; r. 1509-1547) of the House of Tudor, and his second wife, Anne Boleyn. Henry was famous, or infamous, for his 6 wives

Henry's desire to divorce his first wife, the Spanish Katherine of Aragon, after she failed to bear a living son, led ultimately to his break from the Church of Rome, thus ushering in the English Reformation

Henry was succeeded by his young son Edward; when Edward died while still a teenager, Mary, Henry's daughter by Katherine, became queen and tried to return England to Roman Catholicism, earning the nickname "Bloody Mary"; when she too died childless, Elizabeth came to the throne

Elizabeth carefully crafted her own image as the Virgin Queen, attracting to herself the kind of devotion which, before the Reformation, might have attached to saints

She skillfully played potential suitors off against each other, never marrying and thus preserving her power

Elizabeth had to deal with cultural prejudices against female rule; I discussed the Scottish reformist John Knox's 1558 diatribe, *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*; here's an excerpt:

To promote a woman to bear rule, superiority, dominion or empire above any realm, nation, or city is repugnant to nature, contumely to God, a thing most contrarious to his revealed will and approved ordinance, and finally it is the subversion of good order, and all equity and justice... .. For who can deny that it repugneth to nature, that the blind shall be appointed to lead and conduct such as do see? That the weak, the sick and the impotent persons shall nourish and keep the whole and the strong, and finally, that the foolish, mad and frenetic shall govern the discreet, and give counsel to such as be sober of mind? And such be all women compared unto man, in bearing of authority. For their sight in civil regiment is but a blindness; their strength weakness; their counsel foolishness; and judgement frenzy...

We read the speech Elizabeth gave to her troops at Tilbury, before the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588; she appeared to concede to beliefs about the weakness of women, but then presented herself as a king

One way Elizabeth's image was reinforced was through literature; we read part of the preface to Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, in which the Faery Queen is said to be Glory generally, and Elizabeth in particular

I also told you about the story, in *The Faerie Queene*, of Britomart, the female knight who represents Chastity

Elizabeth also used the circulation of her image to reinforce her subjects' tendency to imagine their nation as materialized in her person: we looked at a range of famous portraits of Elizabeth, discussing their symbols. A few of these were

- the pelican: believed to feed its children with its own blood, hence a symbol of how the sovereign sacrifices herself for her people (also a popular image in the Middle Ages for Christ)
- the phoenix: believed to rise alive from its own ashes
- the sieve: referring to the story of a vestal virgin who proved her purity by carrying water in a sieve without spilling a drop
- pearls: a symbol of purity
- maps, globes: signs of Britain's imperial power
- serpent: a symbol of wisdom

We finished our exploration of the intersection of crafted literary/artistic representations of rulers with moments of nationalist self-awareness, by looking at William Shakespeare's *Henry V*

The victory of the vastly-outnumbered English over the French at Agincourt in 1415 is presented in Shakespeare's play as a sign of God's favour (I reminded you about the religious colouring of the Arthurian story)

We saw a clip from the 1944 film starring Laurence Olivier, a film that was made explicitly to raise morale in England during World War II

I read Kenneth Branagh's analysis of the cultural significance of Olivier's film (Branagh directed and starred in a 1995 version of the film):

In 1944, after five years of terrible conflict, the character of Henry V represented an heroic, fair-minded leader, glamorous, responsible, and (most important) certain of victory. Lines in the play were cut that did not reflect this wholesome chivalric view of the piece. There were no doubts expressed in this version about the 'righteousness' of Henry's campaign. Why should there be? This 1940s Henry was not really fighting the French but fighting Hitler, whose tyranny rendered the moral considerations simple. The look of the film celebrated a Camelot-like image of England, where knights were honorable and where war was noble and unmessy. The result was a sumptuous film that provided the world with the hero that it needed.