

Tudors: Elizabeth's Political Skills

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Elizabeth I succeeded to the English throne as a result of exceptional political skill. When Henry VIII died, she was by no means destined to rule. Her mother, Anne Boleyn, was Henry's second wife. Elizabeth had an older half-sister, Mary, whose right to the throne was much stronger. More importantly, their half brother Edward, son of Henry by his wife , had a claim much stronger than both women. During Edward's reign (1547-1553), and then that of Mary (1553-1558), Elizabeth found herself several times in danger of imprisonment or execution. It was her great skill in overcoming these dangers that enabled her to outlast both siblings and become Queen. Nowhere is her political skill more evident than in the Seymour affair and the Wyatt affair, where she stood in clear danger of execution. She also showed great skill in manipulating the religious politics of the age, and in overcoming the prejudices aroused by her female gender.

The Seymour affair of 1548 is a clear example of her exceptional political skill. Her half-brother Edward was only ten years old when he came to the throne, following the death of Henry VIII. Edward's mother, Jane Seymour, had died at the time of his birth, so her brother Edward Seymour, Edward's uncle, was appointed as the young king's 'lord protector'. Another uncle, Thomas Seymour, also involved himself in politics by plotting, through marriage to Elizabeth, to overthrow his brother and place himself close to the throne. When, in 1549, Thomas Seymour was arrested and charged with treason, one of the thirty three charges laid against him was: "planning to marry Elizabeth, by secret and crafty means, to the danger of the king's majesty's person." (Source 5) This charge shows the danger in which Elizabeth stood and, although she was not directly implicated in the plot, she was held under house arrest. It was only her steadfast refusal, and that of Thomas Seymour, to admit her involvement that she lived to become Queen. Sir Robert Tyrwhit was sent to investigate her and he reported: "In no way will she confess any practice." (Source 3)

The Wyatt revolt of 1554, which took place during the reign of Mary, was also a situation in which Elizabeth stood in danger of losing her life. Thomas Wyatt planned a number of uprisings, and aimed to place Elizabeth, married to Edward Courtenay, on the throne. His attempt failed, and, although it remains unclear whether Elizabeth was indeed involved, both she and Wyatt were imprisoned. It was again only through her constant refusal to admit any guilt, as well as the refusal of Wyatt and the other conspirators to implicate her, that saved her life. According to John Foxe, a contemporary historian, she penned the following lines during her imprisonment: "much suspected by me, nothing proved can be."(Source 6). Her tactful handling of Mary helped to ease suspicion. John Foxe describes her behaviour when she was finally given an audience with Queen Mary: "at the sight of the Queen, her Grace kneeled down .. and said that she would not find her to the contrary whatever report of otherwise had gone to her." (source 6).

Elizabeth also showed immense political skill in her handling of the religious politics of the time. The conflict between Catholicism and Protestantism was at its height during these centuries. Mary, following the faith of her mother Catherine of Aragon, was a devout Catholic. Elizabeth had been raised as a Protestant. Mary, once Queen, imposed a stringent religious policy of favouring Catholicism, deviation from which

resulted in the execution of over three hundred people. Elizabeth was constantly at risk during this period. However, again, her tactful handling of this issue made it possible for her to survive Mary's reign. Primary sources tell us that she occasionally appeased Mary by attending Catholic church services from time to time, and by refusing to be too closely identified with the Protestant faction.

Elizabeth also overcame considerable prejudice because she was a woman. One of the most famous examples of this prejudice is that of John Knox, who issued a pamphlet entitled "The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women", in which he argued that: "feminine rule was repugnant to nature, contrary to God and the subversion of good order, equity and justice." (Source 4) According to contemporary sources, such attitudes did not bother her, and it was because of her tactful behaviour in not flaunting her femininity that was her key to success as a ruler. Indeed, it has been argued that she became an epitome of the ideal of 'courtly love' among her male courtiers, the unattainable woman on a pedestal, and they gave their loyalty to her in the manner of a medieval knight to his lady. She was never short of men willing to defend her honour.

Elizabeth became Queen of England by overcoming a number of problems. The Seymour and Wyatt affairs posed a serious threat to her safety, and the religious and gender issues a constant hurdle to overcome. It was only because she possessed exceptional political skills that she was able to survive and become Queen.

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