

## Elizabeth I and her Circle

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**Author:** Susan Doran

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**Reviewer:** Valerie Schutte

Susan Doran is an established, well-respected Elizabethan historian, and her most recent book confirms that she can successfully analyze Elizabeth in ways accessible and interesting to both an academic audience and a popular one. *Elizabeth I and Her Circle* approaches Elizabethan history from a new perspective, her interactions with those close to her, including family, courtiers, and councillors. Studies have existed for individuals connected to Elizabeth, but this is the first monograph on her actual relationships with those around her. To question the impact these relationships had on Elizabeth personally is also a new methodology for interpreting Elizabeth as a woman and a monarch. While Doran's book is refreshing in both scope and methodology, it is available to and readable by academics, armchair Elizabethan historians, and those unfamiliar with the courtiers and councilors covered in her study. Doran offers extensive endnotes, while at the same time offering a three-page chronology highlighting key events from every year of Elizabeth's reign.

Elizabeth's relationships, including her jealousy of her ladies and supposed sexual relationships with several of her courtiers, have been frequently depicted for modern viewers and readers, and this book does much to correct popular perceptions and cinematic representations. Doran sets out to debunk popular images of Elizabeth and her circle and to offer a more nuanced image of the queen, her interactions, and her closest associates. Doran argues that 16th-century monarchy was one of personal politics, thereby making understanding Elizabeth's relationships crucial to understanding her reign. Other studies on Elizabeth's relationships exist, but they tend to focus on biography and chronology. Doran's is different because she approaches Elizabeth's relationships thematically, with each chapter covering a relationship with a specific person or group of individuals.

The book is divided into three sections: kin, courtiers, and councillors. The first section is comprised of four chapters, one on Elizabeth's parents and siblings, another on her Suffolk cousins, and two on individual paternal cousins because they threatened her politically. In the chapter on Elizabeth's parents and siblings, Doran begins by noting that as a female, Elizabeth was not welcome by her mother or her father. She suggests that as a result, Elizabeth did not have great filial love for her father, but did much to establish herself as his progeny to find favor during his lifetime and establish legitimacy during her reign. She also suggests that Elizabeth promoted several Boleyn relatives when she became queen, indicative that she 'had

no wish to distance herself from the memory of her mother' (p. 20). If her relationship with her parents was 'dysfunctional' (p. 20), then her relationships with her half-siblings can only be understood as 'perilous' (p. 40), as they informed her own decision to never name an heir because that heir could become threatening. It was under her siblings that she also learned the value of self-representation.

While the first chapter suggests that Elizabeth's Boleyn cousins offer her 'comfort and support,' the second chapter argues that she had a very troubled relationship with her paternal relatives because the succession was never settled and they were all claimants to the throne (p. 43). Doran spends much of this chapter focusing on Katherine Grey's clandestine marriage to Edward Seymour and how the match angered Elizabeth, as it made the issue of Elizabeth's heir more complicated while Elizabeth pondered her own marriage. Here, Doran suggests that while previous accounts of the Suffolk cousins focused on Elizabeth's unease of their place in the succession, they should be understood through the lens of how their clandestine marriages were not approved by the queen and sparked more debate on her heir that she was hoping to avoid.

Chapters three and four focus on Elizabeth's most well-known and threatening cousins, Mary, Queen of Scots and James VI of Scotland. As for Mary, Doran's chapter is meant to correct popular portrayals of the relationship between Elizabeth and Mary. They never actually met in person (despite the claims of various films) and their relationship was not solely defined by antagonism, but was more complex, with Elizabeth frequently playing the role of Mary's protector. Doran defines their relationship as a 'bad marriage,' as both were victims of one another, with Elizabeth threatened by Mary, while Mary was betrayed by Elizabeth when she was made her captive for her own safety (p. 89). Doran suggests that the two women were not rivals, as portrayed in pop culture. She also notes that Elizabeth had to deal with threats from both the Scottish and French for 18 years before ultimately making the execution decision. As for James, Doran does not have to fight against post-modern views of his relationship with Elizabeth because it is not as commonly portrayed. Instead, Doran offers a straight-forward account of how their communications showed their intimacy, yet also how they were often cold with one another, because of their close proximity and mutual suspicions.

Section two, on courtiers, does not consider all 2,000-plus men and women who attended court sporadically, but those who were intimates of Elizabeth and had rooms in her palaces. Specifically, Doran concentrates on Robert Dudley, earl of Leicester, Christopher Hatton and Robert Devereux, second earl of Essex, who are usually the focus in popular novels, films, and histories. This is so that she can correct misconceptions of them. Doran suggests that these men were not sexual partners with Elizabeth, and though they were good-looking, they were kept around more for their abilities. Also, they were not monopolizing favorites, but served the queen equally with others. Robert Dudley, earl of Leicester, was mistrusted by Catholics because his father was the duke of Northumberland who tried to put Lady Jane Grey on the throne. Doran does not judge if Leicester and Elizabeth had a physical relationship, but acknowledges that they had a well-known romantic one. She debunks the notion that Leicester monopolized Elizabeth's time, affection, and influence, citing examples of Elizabeth becoming close with Thomas Butler, tenth earl of Ormond, and a relation to her mother. Leicester and Elizabeth had a 'unique relationship' because they were probably in love, but could do nothing about it; she rewarded him politically and in turn he dispensed much patronage (p. 141). Since his death, Leicester has had a reputation for being devious and self-interested, but recent historiography has attempted to restore his reputation and focus on his abilities as a statesman. Unlike Leicester, Christopher Hatton has been dismissed as unimportant. Yet Hatton had prominence at court and an intimate relationship with the queen, though probably not as close as that of Leicester. He proved to be capable, which is why she kept him around, along with the fact she and Hatton were very much aligned on religious thought, especially in their anti-Puritan views.

The third courtier who Doran examines is Robert Devereux, second earl of Essex, step-son of Leicester. Unlike his step-father, Essex was never Elizabeth's sole male companion, and as a result, became jealous of other men at court. This chapter particularly takes up historical claims against Essex to put forth a new interpretation. In drama, Elizabeth and Essex are often represented as an elderly queen in love with an immature boy, yet this would mean that both were emotional and irrational. Rather, Doran suggests that

Elizabeth favored Essex, but was never in love with him, like Leicester. Elizabeth was never able to fully trust Essex, and their relationship should be seen more as a power struggle, in which he often worked against her councillors. Since he did not work within the established system, Elizabeth did not hesitate to have him executed.

Doran concludes this section with a chapter on Elizabeth's women and how they were used by her and for her at court. This chapter is meant to address who were the ladies in her service, gauge if they had any political influence, and discover if Elizabeth was sexually jealous of them, as often portrayed in film. Mostly, Elizabeth's women were noble, somehow related to her male courtiers, and educated. Several were also Boleyn relatives or were with Elizabeth in her princess-era household. Interestingly, in her 44-year reign, Elizabeth only had 28 women in paid positions and 55 women who were unpaid, making competition stiff among females at court for Elizabeth's affection and friendship. Elizabeth did not want her women involved in politics, but allowed court gossip so she could learn opinions of those at court, especially when it came to her marriage prospects. These women were also thought to be useful petitioners with the ear of the queen. Doran debunks the idea that Elizabeth was sexually jealous of her maids and blocked their marriages, as she kept many married women in her service and only had a problem with those who married without her permission or wanted to marry below their rank. Elizabeth did however harshly punish those engaged in illicit sex because it caused social disorder and reflected badly on her as a queen.

The third section focuses on privy councillors, specifically three men who acted as her principal secretary, William Cecil, Francis Walsingham, and Robert Cecil. William Cecil, Lord Burghley, was made Elizabeth's secretary at her first privy council meeting, just three days after her accession. Burghley was well-educated and had served in a political capacity under Edward VI, Princess Elizabeth, and even briefly under Mary I. Not only was Burghley Elizabeth's principle secretary from 1558 to mid-1572, he was her chief councillor and directed the day-to-day governance of England. In mid-1572, he retired as secretary to become lord high treasurer, being responsible for all royal finances, and still remained very influential in policy making. Because of his staying power, he was the subject of much jealousy and dislike. Doran debunks the idea that he hated Leicester, instead arguing that their correspondence shows they often agreed. This chapter is meant to show that the relationship between Elizabeth and Burghley was more complicated than previously acknowledged.

Chapter ten more directly takes on Francis Walsingham's depiction in film, especially *Elizabeth* (1998) and *Elizabeth: The Golden Years* (2007), his depiction in which is described as absurd. Much of his reputation has come from Catholic critics attempting to deride him, while the rest was creative license. It is hard to know the real man, but surviving evidence suggests he was intellectual, political, and fitted in at court. Walsingham was made secretary after Burghley, but he was not as adept at the job. Unlike Burghley, he and Elizabeth did not share the same view on international relations, with Walsingham being more proactive. Doran suggests Elizabeth kept him so long as a councillor because he told her what she needed to hear, not what she wanted to hear, a testament to her queenship.

The final chapter explores Robert Cecil, the younger son of Lord Burghley. Doran suggests Cecil did not rule Elizabeth or the privy council, but worked in tandem with them. Cecil showed an ability to be a loyal and good servant, but unlike his father he never commanded Elizabeth's personal affections.

Doran's book is clearly geared toward a popular audience, as she defines terms and carefully lays out the workings of the Elizabethan court in the introduction, but could also be used by scholars simply for its extensive footnotes. It would also be very appropriate as part of an undergraduate history course, to introduce students to Elizabeth, the court, and even how to write history. Doran uses a variety of sources, including official records, private correspondence, commissioned masques, poetry, and portraits. She also frequently cites the Elizabethan New Year's gift rolls to show how gift-giving was indicative of political standing and could be used politically. Image-making of Elizabeth happened immediately after her death, and many of the early 17th-century opinions of the queen and her circle still largely inform their characterizations today. Doran's book will help readers discover more about the real Elizabeth, rather than

the mythical Gloriana or sexualized, moody, vain queen.

The author would like to thank the reviewer for reading the book so carefully.

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