



## Elizabeth I and Her Circle

**Susan Doran**

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The dramatic reign (1558-1603) of Queen Elizabeth I, known during her own times as the Virgin Queen, has spawned more than a dozen movies with her being played by the likes of Bette Davis and Cate Blanchett and, in old age, Dame Judi Dench. Even as her life provides a playground for screenwriters, she also figures in an uncountable number of novels, histories, and pseudo histories.

A goal of Susan Doran, a senior research fellow at Jesus College, Oxford, is to go beyond theatrical speculations and assess the personalities and politics of the Elizabethan era, remembered for its comparative stability, artistic achievements (think Shakespeare), and a lessening of religious tensions. She dismisses sexual speculations by noting that while the queen did indeed entertain courtiers, the intimacies were not sexual. "Indeed," she writes, on the basis of exhaustive archival research, "it is highly unlikely that she had a sexual relationship with anyone."

The reign of Elizabeth's father, Henry VIII, was particularly stormy. Most notably, he brought to boil the bitter Catholic-versus-Protestant struggle that dominated British society by getting an annulment to his first marriage and marrying Anne Boleyn, Elizabeth's mother. Henry, a harsh daddy if ever there was one, saw to Anne's execution when Elizabeth was two years old.

Rather than the paranoia of her father, pragmatism held sway with Elizabeth. She largely avoided war and saw to the budget. She rewarded loyalty. She punished disloyalty, but rarely with death unless she felt she had to, as she did in the case of her half sister, Mary Queen of Scots, a challenger for the throne.

One leaves Doran's book thinking that, rather than virginal, Elizabeth might best be characterized as one tough Tudor.

THOMAS BEVIER (Summer 2015)

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