

Elizabeth I: Political Leader

Actress Helen Mirren, who plays Elizabeth in the HBO FilmsSM production of **Elizabeth I** (Part 1 premieres April 22nd and Part 2 premieres April 24th on HBO), found a strong connection between the issues Elizabeth faced and issues we face today. "Look at the present conflicts between people of different religious persuasions and what they're prepared to do for their religious persuasion," Mirren notes. "There are enormous resonances within the Elizabethan story."



Queen Elizabeth and her subjects

When Elizabeth I took the throne in January of 1559, England was facing a plague, a costly defeat by France, the brink of monetary ruin, and threats from Spain and France to turn England back into a Catholic country. Because Elizabeth refused to marry for the sake of producing an heir, there was no clear successor in line for the throne. She also faced plots against her from foreign nations, her own cousin, Mary, Queen of Scots, and some of her closest advisors.

As you'll learn in the HBO Films production of *Elizabeth I*, by the time of her death in March of 1603, Elizabeth had turned England into a world power. The country was financially sound, militarily powerful, and religiously secure as a Protestant nation, launching an English Renaissance during which important legal and social changes improved the lives of citizens.

How did one woman, operating in a world dominated by men, achieve this? Research the following people and events that played a major part in Elizabeth's realm:

- **Mary, Queen of Scots**—Elizabeth's cousin, a Catholic who desired the throne and who for 20 years plotted against Elizabeth. Elizabeth had her executed in 1587.
- **Attack of the Spanish Armada**—In 1588, the "invincible" Spanish fleet was defeated by the much smaller British Navy. This single event cemented Elizabeth's role as England's savior and protector.
- **Spain's annexing of Portugal**—In 1580, King Philip II of Spain took over Protestant Portugal, making it a Catholic country and threatening to do the same to England.
- **Robert Cecil**—William Cecil's son. He took over his father's role as Elizabeth's closest advisor after the death of his father. He secretly orchestrated the succession to Elizabeth's throne of James VI of Scotland, following Elizabeth's death.

For Discussion

Discuss parallels to the following situations in the world today:

- One of the greatest risks to Elizabeth's rule was the threat of other countries invading Protestant England to impose their religion (Catholicism) on the country.
- Elizabeth dealt with the conflict between Catholics and Protestants. What are some of the similarities and differences in today's world regarding politics and religion?
- Political intrigue and the threat of assassination dominated Elizabeth's reign.
- Not all of Elizabeth's decisions were popular with her advisors, Parliament, and the people of England. She manipulated those closest to her to get what she wanted.



Encouraging soldiers before battle

Discuss how the culture and actions of a nation impact its citizens:

- If your country needs resources that are in short supply (troops, funding) to achieve its objectives, how does that potentially affect you as a citizen?
- Is it ever acceptable to give up some of your rights for the greater good?
- If you rely on laws to help you, and those laws change because of higher national priorities, how do you flex your political power to get what you want?
- Many people decry politicians. Is it possible to be effective without being somewhat manipulative?

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ELIZABETH I PREMIERES APRIL 22ND (PART 1) AND 24TH (PART 2) ON HBO AT 8PM/7C.

Elizabeth I: Powerful Woman

*The issue of marriage was a major theme of Elizabeth's reign. Actress Helen Mirren, who plays Elizabeth in the HBO FilmsSM production of **Elizabeth I**, says, "It was extraordinary how much of her reign actually had to do with whether she got married or not. And once she let go of that, in a way, that liberated her."*

All the great challenges Elizabeth faced were overcome by a woman leading a country in what was clearly a man's world. As you'll see in the HBO Films production of *Elizabeth I*, she had great pressure on her to marry and produce an heir to the throne. But she followed her own path, and retained power despite never marrying or having children.

Elizabeth's personal life was filled with contradictions and paradoxes. She believed that God had put her in power, yet she viewed herself as a woman of the people who instituted the beginnings of social justice. She loved Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, but refused to marry him, at times banishing him from her court. She later loved his stepson, Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, but ordered his execution when she felt that he had betrayed her and the nation.

Research the following in preparation for the discussion topics:

- **Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester**—The man Elizabeth loved most in her life.
- **Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex**—Dudley's stepson, who overstepped the bounds of familiarity with Elizabeth and incurred her wrath.
- **Parliament blocks the Queen's funds**—In 1566, the British Parliament blocked Elizabeth's financial subsidies unless she immediately announced her plans to marry. She didn't follow through—once again skillfully manipulating the men who sought to control her.
- **Betrothed!**—In 1578, at the age of 45, Elizabeth announced her intention to marry 20-year-old Prince François de Valois, the Duc d'Alençon and d'Anjou. Fear of Elizabeth marrying a Catholic spread throughout England. Again she recanted, having met her true goals for the engagement—to gain France's support against Spain in Portugal, and to get back at the Earl of Leicester, whom she discovered was secretly married.



Jeremy Irons as Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, and Hugh Dancy as Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex

For Discussion

Discuss the challenges of being a woman in power:

- What issues did Elizabeth face as the leader of the country simply because she was a woman?
- How did being a woman work to her advantage? To her disadvantage?
- Consider the challenges and achievements of women such as Condoleezza Rice, U.S. Secretary of State; Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, President of the Philippines, and Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany, compared to those of Elizabeth.
- Consider women in power today. What qualities do they share with Elizabeth? How do they differ? Elizabeth was encouraged to marry and bear children to solidify her success. How do marriage and children affect powerful women today?

Consider the impact of the balance of power between men and women:

- Discuss why women have become heads of state in some foreign countries but have yet to achieve that in the U.S. What role does American culture play?
- Elizabeth waged many wars during her reign. Are women in power today expected to use diplomacy rather than force?
- Imagine Elizabeth I's character and qualities being brought to bear as President of the U.S. today. How would political events be influenced?



Helen Mirren as Elizabeth I

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