

Elizabethan Women

Even though there was an unmarried woman on the throne in Elizabethan England, the roles of women in society were very limited. The Elizabethans had very clear expectations of men and women, and in general men were expected to be the breadwinners and women to be housewives and mothers. On average, a woman gave birth to a child every two years, but as a lot of babies and children died from sickness, families were not always large. Childbearing was considered a great honor to women, as children were seen as blessings from God, and Tudor women took great pride in being mothers.

Elizabethan society was patriarchal, meaning that men were considered to be the leaders and women their inferiors. Women were regarded as "the weaker sex", not just in terms of physical strength, but emotionally too. It was believed that women always needed someone to look after them. If they were married, their husband was expected to look after them. If they were single, then their father, brother or another male relative was expected to take care of them.

Many women in this period were highly educated, like the Queen herself, Mildred Cecil (wife of William Cecil) and Mary Herbert, Countess of Pembroke. Women were not allowed to go to school or to university, but they could be educated at home by private tutors. Elizabeth was tutored by the famous Elizabethan scholar Roger Ascham.

Women were not allowed to enter the professions i.e law, medicine, politics, but they could work in domestic service as cooks, maids etc, and a female painter, Levina Teerlinc, was employed by Henry VIII and later by Mary and Elizabeth respectively. Women were also allowed to write works of literature, providing the subject was suitable for women: mainly translations or religious works. Women were not allowed to act on the public stage or write for the public stage. Acting was considered dishonorable for women and women did not appear on the stage in England until the seventeenth century. In Shakespeare's plays, the roles of women were often played by young boys.

Women, regardless of social position, were not allowed to vote (however, only men of a certain social position were allowed to vote). Neither could women inherit their father's titles. All titles would pass from father to son or brother to brother, depending on the circumstances. The only exception was, of course, the crown. The crown could pass to a daughter, and that daughter would be invested with all the power and Majesty of any king. This allowed Mary, and then Elizabeth, to reign. In some cases women could not inherit estates, but women could be heiresses to property, and some women, especially if they were the only child of a great noble man, could be very affluent heiresses indeed. Robert Dudley's first wife, Amy

Robsart, was Sir John Robsart's only child, and inherited two estates he owned in Norfolk. It was not always clear what happened to these estates when the woman married i.e. whether the estates became the property of her husband or not.

The laws of inheritance meant that fathers were anxious to have a son, but that does not mean that daughters were unloved and unwanted. The attitude of Henry VIII to his daughters was unusual, and was probably the result of his obsession with providing the country with a male heir and subsequent ruler. Parents did love their daughters and saw them as precious gifts from God. Of all the children Thomas More had, his daughter Margaret was his favorite, and William Cecil was a devoted father to all his children, male and female. Queen Elizabeth would write letters of condolence on the death of daughters as well as on the death of sons.

A man was considered to be the head of a marriage, and he had the legal right to chastise his wife. However, it is important to understand what this "headship" meant. It did not mean, as is often supposed, that the husband was able to command his wife to do anything he pleased, in other words, be a petty tyrant. He was expected to take care of her, make sure she had everything she needed, and most importantly to love her and be a good father to any children they had. If a husband felt the need to chastise his wife, then he was not allowed to be cruel or inflict bodily harm. If he did abuse his wife, then he could be prosecuted or prevented from living with her. There was no divorce (as we know it) in Elizabethan times. Marriage generally lasted as long as the couple both lived. If a couple did want to separate, then they needed to obtain an annulment, which, if granted, meant that their marriage had never been lawful. Despite having been married six times, Henry VIII only regarded Jane Seymour and Katherine Parr as his legal wives.

It is probably fair to say that, despite the limitations, women had more freedom in the Elizabethan period than they had had previously and would have again for some time. The Renaissance brought with it a new way of thinking. It was thought men and women could do anything and be anything they wanted to be, that their capacity for knowledge was limitless. Thus, noble women, as well as men, were given an impressive education in the classics, mathematics, and all other academic subjects of the day. Elizabeth being on the throne also encouraged noble men to educate their daughters, as they did not want them to look dim in the presence of their very intelligent and highly educated queen.

Women who perhaps suffered most in this period were, ironically, those like the Queen who did not wish to marry. Tudor society did not have many avenues open to single women and, following the Reformation, those avenues were even less. Before, women were able to become nuns and look forward to a rewarding life in convents, perhaps be a Mother Superior one day. But with the Reformation, the convents were closed. Wealthy single women (heiresses of property) could look forward to being mistress of their estates and wield the power in the community this

would bring, but for poor women, the only long-term "career" really open to them was domestic service. It was not surprising, therefore, that most women married. Marriage was seen as the desirable state for both men and women, and single women were sometimes looked upon with suspicion. It was mainly single women who were accused of being witches by their neighbors.