



*The Heart and Stomach of a
King: Elizabeth I and the
Politics of Sex and Power,*
Carole Levin
(Pennsylvania, University
of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

Review by: Estelle Paranque

Carole Levin. *The Heart and Stomach of a King: Elizabeth I and the Politics of Sex and Power.* Pennsylvania, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013. Reviewer: Estelle Paranque. Pp. 233. ISBN:978-0-8122-2240-1

hen the first edition of *The Heart and Stomach of a King* came out in 1994, it had an incredible impact on the ways in which scholars studied the reign of Elizabeth I of England and on the research which followed. With the publication of a second edition, we realise that this impact is still important and how scholars and historians have been influenced by the first edition and still remain influenced in their ways of thinking and approaching the Tudor queen's representations and self-representations. In her preface, Carole Levin explains how Elizabeth has intrigued people for centuries (p. ix) as well as the role that gender played in the queen's political and religious stakes (p. xi). Furthermore, *The Heart and Stomach of a King* challenges our conceptions of biography writing and Levin somehow reinvents the genre by favouring a thematic approach rather than a chronological one. Through deep analysis of primary sources, the author reveals key moments in the queen's life as well as contemporary issues and the reception and impact of the last Tudor queen's reputation. The book is divided in six body chapters and an introduction. Each chapter responds to one another and studies key and varied primary sources from specific political events that occurred during Elizabeth I's reign.

The main strength of *The Heart and Stomach of a King* is the diversity of the primary sources used and analysed. Levin does not merely look at letters, diplomatic reports, and other official sources, but she goes into depth in her research and sheds light on primary sources such as pamphlets, libels, plays, poems, as well as rumours and gossip. The author is deeply interested in the ways in which the queen's subjects, from the commoners sending report to the council alluding to the queen to her courtiers, responded to the images of Elizabeth infused in the public sphere as well as bringing together cultural and political history. In confronting different kind of sources, Levin offers a study that shows that diverse questions and issues can only be analysed through such a balanced variety of sources.

In the first chapter of her book, Levin argues that Elizabeth developed her representation as a 'Sacred Monarch' mostly through the 'Virgin Mary' and that her subjects were willing to accept this analogy (p. 28). Levin explains that although religious icons were important in shaping Elizabeth's reputation, they were not the only influence to her image-building. The representation of the Tudor queen is indeed based on different layers: including issues of religion, gender, and politics as expressed through the monarch's body politic. In the following chapter, the author is interested in shedding light on the marriageability of Elizabeth and its impact on her self-

representation as the Virgin queen. Carole Levin examines Elizabeth's speeches in this chapter and compares them to other British monarchs', such as Mary Tudor's Guildhall Speech and James I of England's speech in front of the parliament (pp. 41-2). Through ambassadors' letters, speeches and other sources, the author manages to reveal the ambiguity of all the marriage proposals that Elizabeth received, and her role in the negotiations with the image of a chaste queen (p. 45). In the third chapter, the question of sexuality that surrounded Elizabeth's reputation is forefronted. Through rumours and gossip, Carole Levin highlights the tensions, the fears and questions that Elizabeth's subjects might have had regarding the sexuality of their queen (p. 70). Through the rumours about her alleged sexual behaviour with her suitors to the ones of her illegitimate children, the reader understands that the queen's reputation was deeply entrenched in the patriarchal society she was living in (p. 89). In refusing to assume the roles assigned to women by society (being a wife and mother), Elizabeth made clear her desire to be seen and respected as both king and queen of England.

The next two chapters deal with this idea of Elizabeth as a king. Carole Levin studies first the anxiety of the society to have a king and focuses on the rumours of 'male pretenders' to be the rightful heir to the throne (pp. 119-20). She then shifts the focus on Elizabeth as 'King and Queen' and on the queen's manly and kingly political body. For Carole Levin, it was through and thanks to the body politic that Elizabeth could impose her rights to rule alone (p. 123). This idea of Elizabeth as both a king and queen has influenced many works for the past two decades, such as Anne McLaren's chapter 'Elizabeth I as Deborah: Biblical typology, prophecy and political power' published in Jessica Munns' and Penny Richards' *Gender, Power and Privilege in Early Modern Europe* (2003) or Ilona Bell's *Elizabeth I: The Voice of a Monarch* (2010), and has allowed scholars to venture beyond gender when it comes to Elizabeth and to examine her as a ruler – the equal of any European king.

The last and sixth chapter of this book is the most intriguing and the most culturally orientated. It is entitled 'Dreaming the Queen' and certainly is the preliminary work of another Carole Levin's book *Dreaming the Renaissance* published in 2008. Beyond rumours and gossip, Levin is interested in the inner thoughts of Elizabeth's subjects, and believes that it will tell us more about their anxieties, perceptions, and hopes. Through the different political events and uprisings that occurred at the end of the queen's reign, Elizabeth featured the dreams of her subjects, notably Joan Nott's, who was married to a gentleman named John Nott. These dreams seemed to have an impact on their views on the queen and how they perceived her. Levin seems to be interested in the ways dreams were part of people's daily life as well as the cultural dimension of a specific period of time.

Through excellent and thorough research, Carole Levin depicts the reign of a queen, which has influenced and inspired many people, even centuries after her death. With an engaging style and a prose writing style, *The Heart and Stomach of a King* has become a work of reference for understanding the different and sometimes conflicting reputation and representations of the last Tudor queen.

ESTELLE PARANQUE
University College London