

Elizabeth: An Examination of Machiavellian Politics in the 1998 Film

By Jennifer Manning

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The 1998 film of *Elizabeth* is a biopic that tells the story of Elizabeth I of England and her struggle to keep the throne during the first years of her reign. The visually beautiful film presents interesting political themes that are well incorporated into the plot. In this paper I will explore the political classification of the film, based on the Christensen and Hass “Dimensions of Content and Intent” chart. I will also examine the political theme, along with the film’s story, of the personal costs of Machiavellian politics. Finally, I will review the presentation of the film.

Classification

In the book *Projecting Politics*, Christensen and Haas present a chart in which every film can be politically classified according to its political content and intent. Using their chart as a reference point, one can determine that *Elizabeth* is a film that is politically reflective. *Elizabeth* is politically reflective, because it focuses on a monarch’s reign and it displays several political ideas throughout the storyline.

Political Theme and Story

One of the themes that *Elizabeth* depicts is the personal cost of Machiavellian politics. The character of Sir Francis Walsingham represents Machiavellian ideas. We become first aware of this in the character’s first scene, where he murders a young and inexperienced boy, who was not able to execute Walsingham’s murder. As Queen Elizabeth’s main advisor, Walsingham leads the young and somewhat naïve queen through the path of securing her throne by Machiavellian means. His ways proved to be successful, but the success comes at a great cost – Elizabeth’s personal life and happiness.

The film opens showing Princess Elizabeth living in a country estate, because Queen Mary I had banished the young girl from court. England, under the very Catholic rule of Mary I, is a dangerous place for Protestants like Elizabeth. The childless Queen Mary is dying from cancer of the uterus, when Elizabeth is arrested under false accusations of conspiracy to take her throne. Soon after her arrest, Mary dies, and Elizabeth is released and crowned queen at the age of 25 years old.

When Elizabeth first ascends to the throne, she receives an England on the verge of bankruptcy, with no standing army, and many enemies constantly plotting to take away her crown. At the beginning of her reign she takes advice from the elderly Sir Walter Cecil, who counsels her that the most important thing she should take care of first is to attack Mary of Guise's French army in Scotland and to marry as soon as possible. Cecil believes it is the only way to secure Elizabeth's throne. Elizabeth follows Cecil's advice and assembles and sends an army to Scotland. She also begins to review marriage proposals from both France and Spain. Both of Cecil's suggestions prove to be ill fated. Mary of Guise's army slaughters Elizabeth's and her most promising suitor, the Duke of Anjou, turns out to enjoy cross-dressing and hosting drunken immoral parties. Cecil's failure leads Elizabeth to dismiss him and post Walsingham as her main advisor.

Walsingham immediately begins to walk her through the ways of the Machiavellian Prince. The first sign of this is when Elizabeth presents her Act of Uniformity to parliament. Her Act's goal is to unify the Church of England and establish the Book of Prayer, which meant her intent on reestablishing Protestantism as her realm's religion and turning away from her predecessor's (Mary I) Catholic reign. To ensure the passing of Elizabeth's Act, Walsingham locks up six bishops. Parliament passes Elizabeth's Act

by five votes. Elizabeth and Walsingham's actions reflect the Machiavellian idea of fortune. Machiavelli argued that the way to control fortune and ensure to have it on one's side, one should use opportunism and force.¹ Locking the bishops displayed force and requesting parliament to vote while the bishops, who would have opposed the measure, were absent showed opportunism. These actions guaranteed Elizabeth to have fortune on her side and secure her Act of Uniformity.

Walsingham continues to instruct Elizabeth in Machiavelli's ways in the incident involving a dress. Mary of Guise sends Elizabeth the dress as a gift. The queen's lady in waiting, Isabel Knollys, sees the beautiful dress and decides to wear it, even after Elizabeth's main lady in waiting, Kat Ashley, urges her not to wear the queen's dresses. Isabel strolls late at night through the court's halls and encounters Sir Robert Dudley, her secret husband and the queen's former lover. While Dudley and Isabel are having a heated moment, Isabel begins to scream and falls dead. Walsingham takes the Isabel's body to Elizabeth and informs her that the dress was poisoned. Elizabeth immediately recognizes the garment as one of the gifts from Guise.

Walsingham takes action by acting in accordance to Machiavelli's Fox and the Lion analogy. Machiavelli sustained in his book the *Prince* that the ruler must act like the Lion and the Fox. The combination of both elements ensures the highest favorable outcome for the Prince. Therefore, the ruler must be strong, sudden, and ruthless, like the Lion, and cautious and cunning, like the Fox.² Machiavelli adds that political deception is of the

¹ W.A. Armstrong, "The Influence of Seneca and Machiavelli on the Elizabethan Tyrant," *The Review of English Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 93 (Jan., 1948), 30.

² *Ibid*, 26.

utmost importance when employing the cunning of the Fox.³ Walsingham goes to Guise's residence to have dinner with her, under the pretense of wanting to form an alliance against Elizabeth. Walsingham seduces Guise and spends the night with her. When the morning comes, Guise's servants and nephew (the Duke of Anjou) discover her dead body lying on her bed. Walsingham's clever maneuver on behalf of the queen effectively eliminated France as a threat. Thus, Elizabeth took a step closer towards securing her throne.

Walsingham openly reveals his Machiavellan doctrine when he uncovers a plot against Elizabeth's life. Walsingham informs the queen that a Catholic priest has been arrested carrying letters from the Pope addressed to individuals who mean her harm. Walsingham presses the importance of making the priest talk, through means of torture, to expose the plot's full details. Elizabeth seems hesitant at first of the immoral act, stating that torture is not very effective in getting accurate information. Walsingham reassures her with rhetoric taken from Machiavelli's work, "A prince should never flinch from being blamed for acts of ruthlessness, which are necessary for safeguarding the state and their own person. You must take these things so much to the heart that you do not fear to strike. Even the very nearest that you have, if they be implicated." Elizabeth is convinced by his words and tells him to go ahead with his method.

After Walsingham is done with the priest, he goes to Elizabeth and tells her of his findings. The most powerful man of England, Norfolk, is raising an army along with his allies that outnumbered that of the queen's. Their purpose is to overthrow her. The conspirators turn out to be people who are part of her court – Lord Sussex, bishop

³ Ibid, 27.

Gardiner, Spanish ambassador Arundel, and Lord Dudley (Elizabeth's former lover who she has always been in love with). The conspirators' plan is laid out in a letter from the Pope to Norfolk, which sets forth, "To legitimize your claim to the throne of England, His Holiness proposes that Your Grace should take as your bride Mary, Queen of Scots (Elizabeth's cousin), and overthrow Elizabeth." Walsingham tells the queen that she must act soon before Norfolk does. He adds that if Norfolk signs the letter he would have committed treason. At last, Elizabeth openly embraces Walsingham's ways, when she tells him to let Norfolk sign the letter and eliminate all of those who are part of the conspiracy.

Norfolk falls into Elizabeth's trap and signs the letter. Walsingham carries out Elizabeth's orders and arrests him and all the main conspirators, who are taken to the tower to await execution. All the individuals who are implicated in the conspiracy are assassinated on the spot, wherever they happen to be found – in their house, on the toilet, in the court's corridors, etc. Lord Dudley is the only conspirator who is spared, not because of the queen's kindness, but because as she tells him, "To remind me how close I came to danger." Elizabeth's quick and forceful actions effectively ridded her of her enemies and secured her power.

Elizabeth and Walsingham's actions to destroy her enemies – the pope, Spain, Norfolk, and other members of the court – can be associated with several of Machiavelli's concepts, that can be found on the *Prince*. According to Machiavelli, the prince should embrace both the man and the beast within himself, when laws do not help him attain his objectives.⁴ This means that the ruler should be an expert in making full and equal use of

⁴ Ibid, 26.

reason and force in his actions. Men do not keep their word and loyalty because man is fundamentally wicked. Therefore, the prince should not keep his word to them.⁵

Additionally, Machiavelli reveals that the executions of immoral acts are not punished by “poetic justice.” Machiavelli concludes that the practice of these acts is frequently prized with triumph.⁶ Machiavelli’s prince is someone who makes use of subordinates to carry out his dirty work, while he takes the glory. In closeness to this, the prince should employ duplicity. Machiavelli illustrates these last few concepts with an anecdote from his real life ideal prince, Cesare Borgia. His example tells of a time that Cesare sent out one of his lieutenants to suppress a rebellion in Romagna. His lieutenant was successful by ruthlessly subduing the rebellion. When he came back to Borgia, Cesare got him beheaded. Borgia’s deed gained him immense popularity, because the people perceived him as punishing his lieutenant’s cruel conduct.⁷ Cesare’s clever use of immoral acts, subordinates, and duplicity got him both favor in the people’s eyes and peace of mind by extinguishing the uprising.

Lastly, Machiavelli is an advocate of royal absolutism.⁸ This can be seen in one of Machiavelli’s key principles that states, “The end justifies the means, because, once a state is conquered and secured, men regard the means as honorable, so potent a factor is success in this world.”⁹ In other words, it does not matter what means a ruler uses to attain his goals, because in the end, the estate will be secured, stable, and in peace. Therefore, commonwealth will be achieved.

⁵ Ibid, 27.

⁶ Ibid, 29.

⁷ Ibid, 28.

⁸ Ibid, 27.

⁹ Ibid, 31.

Elizabeth ends with the queen's complete transformation into a Machiavellian prince. In the scene where Elizabeth and Walsingham are observing a statue of the Madonna, they have an important exchange that leads to the emblematic physical transformation of the iconic queen. Elizabeth tells him: "I have rid England of her enemies. What do I do know? Am I to be made of stone? Must I be touched by nothing?" Walsingham remarks: "To reign supreme, all men need something greater than themselves to look up and worship. They must be able to touch the divine here on earth." Elizabeth then asks, while looking at the Madonna: "She had such power over men's hearts. They died for her." Walsingham replies: "They have found nothing to replace her." Inspired by the Madonna, Elizabeth cuts her hair very short, paints her face and hands white, dons red lips and cheeks, and wears an elaborate wig. When the transformation is complete, Elizabeth tells her favorite lady in waiting, Kat, she has become a Virgin. On the final scene, Elizabeth presents herself at court, declaring she is married to England and calling herself the "Virgin Queen." She effectively turns herself into an icon of divinity. Her physical change marks the beginning of England's "Golden Age."

In Susan Doran's chapter, *Virginity, Divinity, and Power: The Portraits of Elizabeth I*, she states that Elizabeth transforms herself into, "The legendary Virgin Queen, formidable, untouchable, and unbeatable."¹⁰ She further attests the director of the film, Kapur, "Conveys brilliantly the most familiar myth surrounding Elizabeth I, namely that she fashioned her own image and created the cult of the Virgin Queen as a political device to inspire awe in her subjects, consolidate her political power, and signal her intention of

¹⁰ Susan Doran, "Virginity, Divinity and Power: The Portraits of Elizabeth I," *The Myth of Elizabeth I*, (Great Britain: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 171.

never to marry.”¹¹ Doran seems to suggest that Elizabeth’s physical transformation was her most important and effective political strategy.

The decision to create the new Queen’s image, which led to a royal “cult,” goes in accordance to the, “Machiavellian understanding of ideological mystifications to keep men in awe.”¹² This brilliant political strategy proved to be highly effective in keeping Elizabeth’s authority, which as the end credits reminds us, she went on to rule 40 more years. The strategy also seems to pull from two other Machiavellian notions. First, the view that men are selfish and materialistic, who, if manipulated properly, the prince can use them to increase his power.¹³ Second, the idea that the prince should appear to be devout, for it gains him public favor.¹⁴ By becoming an icon of divinity, Elizabeth, was able to create a mystical image of her, manipulate her subjects, and appear to be devout. All of these components helped her to strengthen and expand her power.

In the film, one can see that all of Elizabeth’s actions, which as I have argued, can be related to Machiavellian concepts, ultimately show that they brought her great glory and success. The queen comes to power, at the beginning of the story, inheriting a weak and vulnerable England. By the end of the film, Elizabeth had completely turned around the state of her realm. Elizabeth puts into practice Machiavellian princely virtue, by becoming bold, strong, and at times ruthless.¹⁵ She brings stability to England by ordering

¹¹ Ibid, 171.

¹² Louis A. Montrose, “Idols of the Queen: Policy, Gender, and Picturing of Elizabeth I,” *Representations*, No. 68 (Autumn, 1999), 139.

¹³ Armstrong, “Influence of Machiavelli,” 27.

¹⁴ Ibid, 27.

¹⁵ Jamie Pratt, “Machiavelli in England,” *A Curious Miscellany of Items: Philosophical, Historical, and Literary* (Feb., 2011), available from <http://spectacledavenger.blogspot.com/2011/02/machiavelli-in-england-part-1.html>.

the execution of those who are dangerous to her rule. *Elizabeth* seems to show us that Machiavelli does succeed in the complicated world of politics. However, all of the queen's triumphs came at a great cost – her personal life.

Early in the film there is foreshadowing of this consequence. The warning comes from the lips of Sir William Cecil. After learning that the queen is having an affair with Sir Robert Dudley, he reproaches her indiscretion by reminding her that she has no private life. Later, as she begins her education in the Machiavellian ways, she is forced to give up Dudley, because she learns that he is a married man. As England's queen, she cannot be perceived as being used by one of her subjects. To continue in this predicament would only show her as weak ruler. The decision is a hard one for her, due to the fact that she has been in love with Dudley for a long time. Elizabeth finally realizes that she cannot aspire to have a romantic life when she discovers that Dudley is one of the conspirators who are plotting to dethrone her. At the end of film, when she decides to embody an icon of divinity, she fully accepts that in order to secure her power and success, she must renounce her private life and become a public image – the Virgin Queen who is only married to England.

Presentation

Elizabeth was one of the most critically acclaimed films of 1998. Nominated for seven Academy Awards – Best Actress, Best Art Direction, Best Cinematography, Best Costume Design, Best Makeup (winner), Best Original Score, and Best Picture. The film was the winner of two Golden Globes Awards – Best Actress (Cate Blanchett) and Best Drama Motion Picture. Additionally, *Elizabeth* won an impressive six BAFTA Awards –

Best British Film, Film Music, Best Cinematography, Best Makeup & Hair, Best Supporting Actor (Geoffrey Rush), and Best Actress (Cate Blanchett).

The well-chosen group of individuals, who came together to make the film, contributed each in creating an excellent film, where the political themes are depicted superbly. Indian director, Shekhar Kapur, made a visually stunning film by incorporating a warm palette of colors that are a testament to his Indian heritage. Writer, Michael Hirst, created a strong screenplay with great dialogue. Since *Elizabeth*, Hirst has become somewhat of an exclusive period piece collaborator, having been involved in several historical projects – *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (film writer), *The Tudors* (TV series creator and writer), *Camelot* (TV series creator), *The Borgias* (TV series executive producer), and *Mary Queen of Scots* (film writer). Australian actress, Cate Blanchett, being a celebrated theatre performer, gave a powerful and sympathetic portrayal as Queen Elizabeth. Australian actor, Geoffrey Rush, who also has a theatre background, gave an intense performance as Walsingham. Rush brought the character to life and made him credible to the audience.

Opinion

I believe *Elizabeth* does display a clear depiction of Machiavellian politics applied to a historical setting. When one reads Machiavelli, his concepts come across as very cold-hearted. One cannot imagine them working on other environments that do not involve gangster-like settings. The film illustrates Machiavelli's political strategies in practice, during Tudor England. After watching the film, one understands how a monarch, like Elizabeth, during this particular time-period would have had no choice but to become a Machiavellian prince in order to keep his/her status. However, the film does raise the

matter that although following Machiavelli's political tactics are successful in preserving one's power, they leave no choice, but to renounce one's personal identity and private life. The film seems to leave one questioning what would one rather have if one lived in such historical period – power or preserve oneself as an individual? It is a hard question to answer, where I find myself not being able to choose a side.

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Elizabeth is a 1998 film about the early years of the reign of Elizabeth I of England and her difficult task of learning what is necessary to be a monarch. A sequel, Elizabeth: The Golden Age was released on 2007 by Universal Pictures. Directed by Shekhar Kapur. Written by Michael Hirst. Absolute power demands absolute loyalty. Tonight I think I die. I do not like wars. They have uncertain outcomes. I have no desire to make windows into men's souls. "Elizabeth" is a 1998 film loosely based on the early reign of Queen Elizabeth I of England. The film was written by Michael Hirst and directed by Shekhar Kapur. It stars Cate Blanchett, Geoffrey Rush, Joseph Fiennes, Christopher Eccleston, and Richard Attenborough. Elizabeth permanently banishes Dudley from her private presence when she finds out that he is married; as depicted in the sequel, Elizabeth then gives up ever having sex again, feeling that such relations could give a man too much power over her. The 1998 film Elizabeth by Shekhar Kapur depicts the early years in the reign of Queen Elizabeth I known as "The Virgin Queen". This is not some stuffy "Masterpiece Theater" presentation but a rousing piece of entertainment that is colorful and involving. The film is greatly assisted by excellent performances from Cate Blanchett as Elizabeth and Joseph Fiennes as her lover Robert Dudley. Cate Blanchett makes Elizabeth come alive as a real woman facing an uphill battle to establish her rule. Her faithful protector William Cecil (Richard Attenborough) and the cunning Francis Walsingham (Geoffrey Elizabeth relishes the return from exile of her childhood sweetheart, Lord Robert Dudley (Joseph Fiennes). Chief adviser Sir William Cecil (Richard Attenborough) urges the young Queen to forget personal matters and instead address the country's pressing problems. England is bankrupt, has no army, and is under serious threat from abroad. Elizabeth even has enemies within her own court, the most dangerous being the Duke of Norfolk (Christopher Eccleston). Hoping for an heir, Cecil suggests marriage candidates -- King Philip II of Spain or the French Duc d'Anjou (Vincent Cassel) -- to secure the