

Elizabeth: The Golden Age (2007)

Rated R. Our ratings: V- 4; L- 1; S/N-5 . Running time: 1 hour 54 min.

*I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart;
I will tell of all your wonderful deeds.
I will be glad and exult in you;
I will sing praise to your name, O Most High.
When my enemies turned back,
they stumbled and perished before you.
For you have maintained my just cause;
you have sat on the throne giving righteous judgment.
Psalm 9:1-4*

Cate Blanchett repeats her Queen Elizabeth meets with her earlier triumph as Queen council.

Elizabeth I in this sumptuous (c) 2007 Universal Pictures film that takes place during the mid to late 1580s. Things seemed anything but golden to the Queen, beset as she was by plots to kill her at home and the threats of Spain's King Philip II (Jordi Molla) to stamp out her religion and make Catholicism again the religion of England. Perhaps drawing a parallel with our own time, the film shows how fear permeates the life of the court. When her privy council advises her not to appear in public amidst the crowds, lest she fall victim to an assassin, the Queen replies,

“Fear creates fear,” a sentiment that has formed the basis of many an op ed piece in the New York TIMES.

There is ample evidence that her advisers’ fears are justified, the camera cutting often to the fanatical King Philip II who orders the chopping down of large tracts of trees in order to build his armada. Shown, too, are the plotting of Englishmen, bent on assassinating their sovereign, whom they consider illegitimate. At the center of their plans is Elizabeth’s own cousin, Mary Stuart (Samantha Morton), under arrest but communicating by secret coded letters with her clandestine supporters. Her chief adviser is Sir Francis Walsingham, Geoffrey Rush repeating his role from the first film that took place almost thirty years earlier.

New to the court is the adventurer—“pirate” in the eyes of the Spanish, whose ships he plunders—Walter Raleigh (Clive Owen). Just returned from the New World. Raleigh catches the eye of the Queen in the famous mud puddle and cloak incident. At court the audacious soldier of fortune presents Elizabeth with golden coins and vessels seized from the Spanish—needless to say the Spanish ambassador who is present is not pleased!—along with tobacco a contingent of gaily feathered Native Americans.

The Queen is drawn to him, but she cannot act on her desires, so to keep him close at hand, she puts forth her chief lady-in-waiting, Bess (Abbie Cornish), to befriend him. Lots of court intrigues, assassination plots and betrayals follow, as well as some cruel prison/torture scenes, culminating in the Spanish Armada sailing toward England in 1588. The script writers are guided more by those old Errol Flynn swashbuckler movies than by history: instead of swinging on ropes while engaging in swordplay and diving into the sea when his fire ship crashes into a Spanish ship, the real Raleigh was actually on shore watching the unfolding of the grand scheme

he had helped plan. (Nor is there much evidence that the historical Queen was romantically involved with her soldier/adventurer, she being in her fifties and he in his thirties by this time—though Blanchett looks more her own age of 38 than the Queen's. Oh well, so much for Hollywood and history.)

So beset by difficulties (I forgot to mention that among her problems her treasury was almost bankrupt.) is the Queen that the film could be called *The Passion of Elizabeth*. This is a fairly good costume drama showing that the Christian faith was but a thin veneer for both Catholics and Protestants of the time, easily stripped aside when the high stakes of national security demanded it. Watch for buzz about the two main stars when the film awards season begins.

For Reflection/Discussion

1) Compare how the two Elizabeth films begin. (The first with the burning of Protestants; this one with an evil-looking King Philip inveighing to his young daughter against the English monarch.)

2) Many Christians believe that Christianity lost more than it gained when Emperor Constantine paved the way for the church to become the official religion of the Roman Empire in the 4th century. How could this story add to their argument? How did both Catholics and Protestants lose the substance of their faith while fighting over its form?

3) Reflect upon/discuss the following exchange: Queen Elizabeth: How many Catholics are there in England, sir?

Cabinet Minister #1: Immense numbers, Majesty
Cabinet Minister #2: Half the nation cling to the old superstitions.

The Queen: What would you have me do? Hang half the people in

England, or just imprison them?

Cabinet Minister #2: We must act, Majesty! Our inaction is perceived as weakness!

The Queen: If my people break the law, they shall be punished. Until that day, they shall be protected.

Cabinet Minister #1: Majesty, we have proven reason to fear every Catholic in the...

The Queen: [cutting in] Fear creates fear. I am not ignorant of the dangers, sir. But I will not punish my people for their beliefs. Only for their deeds.

The Queen: I am assured that the people of England love their queen. My constant endeavour is to earn that love.

What relevance might the Queen's comment about fear have for today? Do you see any irony in the fact that it is a powerful monarch who is concerned to protect the rights of a minority people, some of whom wished her downfall?

4) How is the Queen shown in an almost heavenly or saintly way? (Note how one close up of her against a colorful background looks like an icon of the Virgin Mary' her frequently dressing in white gowns, in at least one scene billowing out like angel's wings; the Pieta-like pose when Raleigh cradles her head in his lap.)

5) To see how a writer slants his story, compare the way Elizabeth and Mary are pictured in this film and in Maxwell Anderson's Mary, Queen of Scots. How do you think our world be different today had Mary and Philip won over Elizabeth?