



Biographical Briefing on Queen Elizabeth I

Directions: The following information will help your group prepare for the press conference in which one of you has been assigned to play Queen Elizabeth I and the rest of you have other roles to play. To prepare for the press conference, each group member reads a section of the handout and leads a discussion of the questions following that section.

Elizabeth I was born in 1533 to the English King Henry VIII and his second wife, Anne Boleyn. Henry had defied the orders of the Roman Catholic Pope by divorcing his first wife and marrying Anne Boleyn. Because of this, England broke from the Catholic Church and became a Protestant country, with Henry VIII as the first head of the Church of England. While Elizabeth was still a young child, her father accused her mother of adultery (unfaithfulness) and beheaded her. Later, Elizabeth was cared for by her father's sixth wife. Under the instruction of a private tutor, Elizabeth received an excellent education, one similar to what was given to royal sons. She studied history, rhetoric (public speaking), and moral philosophy, and learned to speak Greek, Latin, French, and Italian fluently. After the death of her Catholic half-sister, Mary, in 1558, Elizabeth succeeded to the throne. As the daughter of the head of the Protestant Church of England, Elizabeth's reign ushered in a new era for England.



- Who were Elizabeth's parents?
- What happened because of Henry VIII's divorce?
- What kind of education did Elizabeth receive?

The Tudors, Elizabeth's family, came into royal power in England following the bloody War of the Roses, during which two noble houses competed for the throne. After the war had ended and the House of Tudor had been established as the royal power, the Tudor family developed the so-called *Tudor Myth*. This myth declared that all the events leading to the war and its conclusion had been divinely decided by God, so it was by God's will that the Tudors came to power. Therefore, though Elizabeth did not think that as ruler she should have absolute (complete) power over her subjects, she did believe that she had been chosen by God to be queen. Her view was that society should be structured in a hierarchy (ordered social rankings), with each person in his or her proper place. As a ruler chosen by God, her position in England should be at the very top of the social hierarchy, and she should have the right to make all final decisions about her country. Before and throughout her long reign (1558-1603), Elizabeth refused to share her power by marrying. She declared, "This shall be for me sufficient, that a marble stone shall declare that a Queen, having reigned such a time, lived and died a virgin." Queen Elizabeth considered herself to be both wedded to and the mother of her subjects.

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- What did the *Tudor Myth* declare?
- According to Elizabeth, who granted her power to be queen?
- How did Elizabeth view her role in England?

England had set limitations on the rights of monarchs (kings and queens) a long time before Elizabeth's reign. While Elizabeth was clearly the most powerful person in England, by law she had to accept that the two-house Parliament (lawmaking group) had some political power. The House of Lords (one group of Parliament) made new laws, and Elizabeth had to ask the House of Commons (the other group of Parliament) to approve her spending. Even though she ruled in a limited monarchy, she insisted on watching over Parliament and making final decisions about her subjects and foreign policy. Elizabeth also influenced the Parliament to pass the Act of Supremacy. Under this law, England became a Protestant country again, reversing the policy of the previous queen, her half-sister Mary, to return England to Catholicism. Following in her father's footsteps, Elizabeth became head of the Church of England and was the head of both the church and the government.

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- With whom did Elizabeth have to share some political power?
- What was her attitude towards Parliament?
- What happened under the Act of Supremacy?

While Elizabeth was the queen in a limited monarchy, she saw her role as maternalistic (mothering). She was dedicated to taking care of her subjects (the English people) as a mother is dedicated to her children. In addition to her power as queen, Elizabeth's dynamic personality and caring attitude toward her country made her subjects voluntarily love and obey her. For this reason, Elizabeth's power increased so that she only had to ask for obedience, not enforce it. She would say during her reign that "her state [England] did require her to command what she knew her people would willingly do for their own love of her." Much of the force of Elizabeth's power rested with her powerful appearance and personal qualities. She, more than other monarchs, became a symbol for the grandeur (magnificence) of all of England. She was well-educated, very intelligent, and an excellent orator (speechmaker); she also enjoyed music, dance, and the theatre. Her clothes were beautiful, and she always dressed to give herself a grandiose appearance. In one of her last speeches, Elizabeth said, "For above all earthly treasure I esteem my people's love...I shall be judged by a [God]...to whose Judgment...I do appeal that never a thought was cherished in my heart that tended not to my people's good. And though you have had and may have many princes more mighty and wise sitting in this seat, yet you never had or shall have any that will be more careful and loving."

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- How did Elizabeth view her role as queen?
- How did Elizabeth feel about her subjects?
- How did her subjects feel about her?