

Hank Dobin

Proposal for ENGL 292: Representing Queen Elizabeth (Winter 2014)

### **Elizabeth Timeline Project**

Dear Digital Humanities Action Heroes:

I am submitting this proposal for an ambitious DH collaborative project for my winter course on representations of Queen Elizabeth I—a project that will involve all students in my class, the DHAT, and myself. I will be describing an idea with which some of you are already familiar from our two meetings, and one which we have brainstormed together to conceptualize the project and to begin identifying the optimal digital tools, as well as their potentials and limitations.

First, here is the course description:

ENGL 292: Topics in British Literature: Representing Queen Elizabeth (3). This course focuses on the figure of Queen Elizabeth I (1533-1603) and the ways in which she has been represented in literature and film. We read works written during her lifetime that address her, or that directly or obliquely represent her, by authors such as Shakespeare and Spenser. However, the majority of the course examines works about the public and private Elizabeth since her death; those works include dramas, poems, fiction, operas, films (starring actors such as Helen Mirren and Bette Davis), children's books, etc. A key component of the course is a large group project to research and collect such representations, organize the data and write commentaries, and ultimately construct a website--employing exciting, new tools of the digital humanities--as both a learning exercise and a resource for interested students and scholars. (HL) Dobin.

The course will have a double structure: a core of texts (which will include everything from poetry to plays to novels to portraits to operas to biographies to film to Youtube mashups) that will we read and study together, and individual or group assignments to read many additional texts. In other words, we may study one play together but each student will choose another play to read on his/her own, or study one film together and then each student will view another. The multiplier effect of this approach will mean that students will do much of the work on their own; by the end of the term (if we have 20 students) we will have collectively examined 20 novels, 20 biographies, 20 plays, 20 works of poetry, 20 films, etc. These many sources will span four centuries and many genres. Thus, we will amass a great deal of material about Elizabeth, and will have analyzed the ways in which she has been represented.

This project has multiple learning outcome objectives for my students: 1) to do genuine textual and historical scholarship and contribute to the production and organization of new knowledge, 2) to be on the frontier of new digital humanities scholarship—learning and innovating with new web-based tools that will enhance their skillset in exciting and marketable ways, and 3) to be part of a large group project that will challenge their talents for collaboration, leadership, and disciplined effort. I will be able to measure success collectively by the thoroughness, usefulness, accuracy, design, and elegance of the final timeline product. In addition, unlike many group projects, I will be able to assess individual student contributions and effort by evaluating each discrete “input” on the project.

In thinking through the best way to deploy digital humanities tools to organize and present this material, I have worked with Alston, Brandon, Yolanda, and Carol to identify the *dynamic timeline* as the most promising implementation. Although the web offers unparalleled opportunities to present and organize material in varied media, I did not want to have students build what would be in essence a static, presentational website. We want something dynamic and user-inviting which would permit full interactivity and drill-down capability to the reader as well as the possibility for moderating commenting and additions to the site.

This capacious, varied, and temporally-expansive dataset best lends itself to the architecture of a dynamic timeline. In our meetings, we have imagined an ideal tool that could do the following:

- Place all the instances of “representations of Elizabeth” on a timeline that would stretch from the year of her birth (1533) until the present.
- Color-code those instances by genre.
- Permit drill-down on any individual instance in the timeline by clicking on it. Up would pop a small box with basic information for that “representation” such as author, location, key metatags, and an embedded additional clickable link to a webpage (or item in an Omeka collection) that would have much more information, including a summary and evaluation of the representation as well as additional links for further pursuit. All of this information will be provided by the class students.
- Filter, from a user-controlled dashboard, the various color-coded genres so that a user could trace only a specific genre of interest.
- Overlay this dynamic timeline on top of other static timelines or images. For example, have, as a muted background image behind the dynamic timeline, a static timeline of British history (or of world history, more detailed Tudor history, literary history, film history, etc....) Such a design permits rapid and flexible contextualization for the discrete items in the timeline.
- Select, from the same dashboard, from this variety of static timelines in the background.

Such potent interactivity would permit a user to do things as varied as seeing all representations of Elizabeth during her lifetime set against a detailed timeline of Tudor historical events, or seeing only films about or with Elizabeth against the background of film milestones and innovations.

This project is ambitious but manageable although we have yet to determine whether all of these features are buildable. This project will feature multiple direct contributions of each student in the class—as well as their collective efforts to design and implement the site. This project will also be developed as a purposefully open-ended tool and resource; future students will be able continue to add information and interested audiences (lay and scholarly) will be able to make comments and suggestions.

We have identified the SIMILE Timeline plug-in for the Omeka platform as the most likely candidate. My thanks to Carol and others who have helped research and experiment with these still-developing and always-innovating digital tools. I look forward to a challenging but pioneering collaboration with the DHAT and my 292 students. DHAT members may also know that this pilot project feeds directly into my own scholarly work on the afterlives of Robert Devereux, Second Earl of Essex. Both in design and content, the Elizabeth timeline will lay the groundwork for key aspects of the ambitious digital implementation of my larger Essex project—which I hope will also be a continuing collaboration with DHAT and future students.

