

Shakespeare and Succession Crisis:
Shakespeare's Retelling of the Legacy of Elizabeth I

Lauren Elizabeth Hoaglund

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Primary Reader: Dr. Holly Pickett
Secondary Reader: Dr. Genelle Gertz
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Table of Contents

Introduction: “An Age of Anxiety: Succession Crises in Tudor England” **3**

Chapter One: “Dangerous Sexuality: Shakespeare’s Erasure of the Virgin Queen” **14**

Chapter two: “The Elizabethan *Macbeth*: Gender Politics and A Barren Queen” **45**

Chapter Three: “An Aging, Foolish Monarch: The Destruction of Mythic Cordelia and the Creation of an Elizabethan Lear” **70**

Conclusion..... **93**

**An Age of Anxiety:
Succession Crises in Tudor England**

Early modern England was a society consumed with the question of female royalty and right to power. Ever since the birth of Mary, Henry VIII's only surviving child from his first marriage to Catherine of Aragon, there had been debates circling around whether or not the throne of England could be left in the hands of a woman. Just one generation after the bloodshed of the Wars of the Roses, the English people were keen to search out stability in their monarchy at every turn. A sole female heir, or perhaps, even worse, a brood of illegitimate sons posed the threat of an unstable succession that reminded the English people far too much of the years of turmoil less than sixty years before (Ryrie 102).

In pursuit of a true male heir, Henry VIII took the drastic measure of breaking with Rome and declaring his marriage to Catherine invalid. In the wake of this scandal and over the next five years, he would marry two different women, beheading one for failing to give him a male heir and enshrining the other as a saint for providing him with his beloved son at last. The stability that Henry so longed for, however, would not come from the son for whom he had moved heaven and earth. Instead, his real legacy would be carried on by the daughters from his first two marriages. Indeed, Henry's constant fear about the instability of female heirs gives way to the later irony that his daughters and niece are eventually the reason that the British empire comes to exist.

Henry's own fear and, indeed, British attitudes at large towards the princesses Mary and Elizabeth's claims on the throne have less to do with a larger belief that women themselves were unfit to rule any throne in the world, but more specifically, that a woman was unfit to rule in their own country. At the same time, this aversion to a

perceived unstable monarchy within Britain makes a great deal of sense considering the events of the previous century and the great uncertainty as to whether or not the victory on Bosworth field may have truly ended years of bloodshed (Lander 270). Henry VIII was the first English monarch to inherit the throne after thirty years of civil war and without contention. The previous years of the Wars of the Roses had taken their toll on the British Isles, making the entire country a bit nervous about even rumblings of instability and though Henry VII had won the throne, he was not the contender with the most legitimate claim.

For the better part of a century, England had been thrown into chaos by the claims of much more legitimate male heirs to the throne. The houses of York and Lancaster continued to offer up their sons as the next “rightful” king of England, constantly attempting to undermine the others’ claim to royal authority (Lander 241). Henry VII’s own claim was in itself much weaker than those of his rivals, but he did what they could not—he survived the wars. Henry VII won his throne on Bosworth field, solidifying it with his marriage to Elizabeth of York, but even his rule was not impervious to questions of legitimacy (Evans 6). His marriage to Elizabeth certainly strengthened his claim, but he needed to do almost everything else perfectly to retain the throne and overcome the murmurings of bastard that followed the mention of his bloodline on both the Tudor and Beaufort sides.

This is the England that Henry was born into in the summer of 1491—a world absolutely obsessed with the question of legitimacy and the right to a throne in general. Henry VII did his utmost to stabilize his own reign and provide his children with the best opportunities to secure the Tudor dynasty. After tending to matters and rebellions in his own country, Henry began to obsess over the marriages of his children

(Cunningham 40). Knowing the importance of a strong political marriage, Henry VII began to matchmake with some of the most powerful nations and families in the world. His plans, however, would not turn out the way he had hoped or expected.

When Henry VIII took his father's throne in 1509 as a young, handsome, athletic seventeen-year-old, he had already brushed up against the ever-present undercurrent of right to royal authority. Though there was no question of his blood legitimacy, Henry faced two immediate obstacles in the early years of his reign that would continue to haunt him and fuel his obsession with his right to the English throne. To begin, Henry was the first English King in nearly ninety years to inherit the throne based solely on the right of primogeniture and without contention. Though this may seem like, and in many ways is, a strong claim to the throne, the previous four kings, excluding the thirteen-year-old Edward V, who reigned in name only for just over two months, had all fought for their crown, winning their right to rule through strength on the battlefield. Henry was immediately aware that he had fought and won nothing. He would not be known as a glorious warrior who had come to the throne through God's will as his father was. The second issue that would go on plaguing Henry was the fact that he had only been the heir apparent for the last few years of his father's reign after the untimely death of his older brother. He was the second son who took on the throne as the "spare" prince. More than this, Henry had fallen in love with his brother's widow the Spanish Princess Catherine of Aragon. Against his late father's wishes and with a reluctant dispensation from the Pope, Henry married her less than two months into his reign (Tremlett 132). So, Henry, though he inherited an England that was more stable than it had been in nearly a century, was already primed to experience these anxieties of illegitimacy in his role as king.

The years that follow Henry's ascension to the throne are, for the most part, filled with a great number of ups and downs. He and Catherine had a son within the first two years of their marriage in January of 1511, but he died just over a month later in February (Tremlett 158). Henry spent a great deal of the money that his father had painstakingly saved on parties and the hope of glorious war with France, slipping back into a bit of instability that is much more reminiscent of his maternal grandfather Edward IV. Henry had very little of his father's calculated patience and shrewdness in him which became all the more apparent when Catherine continued to struggle to conceive a male heir. Their only surviving child was a daughter born in the winter of 1516. The couple rejoiced at the birth, but still felt the pain of Mary's sex acutely. Henry had fathered a son with his mistress Elizabeth Blount just three years after Mary was born, making him almost certain that the fault was Catherine's and not in any part his own (Tremlett 218). Henry Fitzroy, as he was called, spent the first part of his life away from court until about 1525 when almost everyone was certain that a forty-year-old Catherine was completely past child-bearing age. Still, though Henry showered his illegitimate son with treasures and titles, he knew better than anyone that he could never declare him the heir apparent. Henry found himself at a bit of a loss between his illegitimate son and his legitimate daughter. In the next few years, he would convince himself that he was not only leaving his country to chance without a male heir but also that he himself had been cursed by God in his marriage with his brother's wife.

In the summer of 1527, Henry began to see a new way forward through his problem of succession and legitimacy. For the past few months, Henry had found himself completely lost in passion for a new woman of the court: Anne Boleyn. The daughter of a lower-ranking nobleman and a lady-in-waiting to the queen, Anne was an

obvious choice for Henry's next mistress. She was young, bright, well-educated and traveled, having spent much of her life at the court of the Hapsburgs and then Mary Tudor's court during her time as Queen of France (Ives 46). She had returned from France in 1521 with an immense knowledge of philosophy, politics, and the new religion spreading through much of mainland Europe. Most courtiers did not bat an eye when the king turned his attentions to the young Boleyn, but Henry was not just collecting another mistress who could give him an illegitimate son. Instead, he and Anne began planning their future and the children they could have together who would one day become the legitimate rulers of England.

Henry's fear of illegitimacy is his defining trait over the next years in his life. The arguments he made against Catherine during his attempts to annul their marriage centered around one main claim: that she had consummated her marriage with his brother Prince Arthur before his death. In other words, Henry's fear was that he was not Catherine's true husband and therefore any children they had must themselves be declared illegitimate. Catherine made every attempt to convince Henry that he was her one and only true husband and that she had been a "true maid" when he had married her, but it was no use (Tremlett 236). Henry had already determined that his marriage to Catherine was cursed by God. In a desperate attempt to save her marriage, her title as queen, and her daughter's eventual claim to the throne, Catherine appealed to Rome and the pope. She knew that Henry and his advisors would rule against her in England and decided instead to wait for Rome to save her.

Henry's anxieties in his own legitimacy and those that he projected upon his daughter Mary would lead to a time in England just as bloody as the civil war they had just escaped. In 1534, after seven years of trying to divorce Catherine, Henry made his

decision to break with Rome and declare himself Supreme Head of the Church of England. Henry had become consumed with the fear that leaving his daughter as the sole heir to the throne would lead England into another season of bloodshed and violence.

Despite his goals to secure his line of succession and the drastic steps he had taken, the next years with Anne only produced the opposite effect. In September of 1533, Anne gave birth to a girl, giving Henry another princess but no prince. Over the next two years, Anne would conceive two more times but never carried to term. At least one of the pregnancies was confirmed to be a son after she miscarried (Ives 343). Her last miscarriage in 1536, just three years after her marriage to Henry, seemed to some the final straw in a doomed marriage. Just four months later, Henry had Anne arrested on charges of adultery and incest. Only two weeks after her arrest, Anne was executed on May 19, 1536, leaving her daughter Elizabeth with a father who declared her a bastard almost immediately (Ives 384-390). Less than a week later, Henry married Jane Seymour in yet another attempt to secure a male heir for his line of succession.

There could be no real objection to Henry's marriage to Jane mostly because both of his previous wives were dead before their marriage. His marriage to Jane was, at least in his mind, his only real marriage, considering Catherine's previous relationship with his brother and Anne's adultery and incest. He was now, finally, married to the right woman. His efforts were repaid when, a little over a year later, she gave birth to a living son, Henry's long-awaited heir. Edward was the prince that Henry had worked tirelessly to father. He was the answer to all of Henry's prayers for a stable succession. Though we consider Henry's actions unthinkable and label him a tyrannical, almost mad, ill-tempered brute, in light of the extreme anxiety of the production and stability of an

heir, his actions make more sense. Henry was raised in a world just beyond the utter chaos of the Wars of the Roses. He was constantly plagued by the fear of civil war caused directly from a failure to provide a clear and undisputed heir.

The irony of all this anxiety and fear is, of course, that Henry's long-awaited son, for whom he had moved heaven and earth, would only rule for five years, dying at the age of fifteen. In the end, it was his daughter with Anne Bolyen who would fulfill all of his hopes for a golden age in England. Elizabeth became the heir that Henry had always hoped for, but because of his actions to secure a male heir and cast Elizabeth aside, she would always struggle with the same fears of legitimacy as her father. Instead of marrying six times, however, Elizabeth tried to employ different strategies to establish herself as the true ruler of England and the sole heir of the Tudor throne.

Soon into her reign, Elizabeth began enacting three unique strategies that she would use throughout her entire reign to reinforce her legitimacy. She began crafting her image as the Virgin Queen, a queen who needed not one husband but a cult, a kingdom of many worshippers; as a woman with the responsibilities and even gender of a king; and as the sole heir to the throne, a queen in a country with no contenders for her crown and therefore no named successor.

Throughout her reign, she used these political strategies to side step the many pitfalls and disadvantages of being the female ruler of an early modern kingdom. She needed to inhabit the space of a king in order to quell the anxieties of her subjects and courtiers, but this was going to require some extreme political maneuvers that were never certain to succeed. We as modern historians and readers forget that Elizabeth's success was never certain. Her epitaph that lives on today as one of the greatest monarchs in the history of time was merely a passing dream of her own time. In fact, the

very strategies that we applaud her for now as brilliant maneuvers to outwit those around her and protect her reign were also some of the most criticized.

In the last years of her reign, Elizabeth's masterful political strategies began to lose their shine. After nearly forty years on the throne of England, the last decade of Elizabeth's reign proved to be some of the most difficult years that she had ever faced. Under the pressures of the last decade, old anxieties of legitimacy began to seep through the Elizabethan court. The fears that their now almost seventy-year-old queen would die and leave their country to an uncertain and therefore unstable succession began to rub away the shine of the Elizabethan strategies that had kept her on the throne and England on the center of the world stage.

It is in this England and the last decade of Elizabeth's reign that Shakespeare first begins to write his plays. The anxieties of the Succession Crisis of the 1590s act as the stage for his earliest works. He would have watched the fracturing of Elizabeth's very identity that she had crafted over the course of her forty-five years on the throne of England and the return of the anxieties that preceded her reign. So, it is no wonder, then, that in some of his most famous ill-fated monarchs, we can point out the attributes of Elizabethan political strategies. Shakespeare expressly undermines all of Elizabeth's most famous and unique strategies and uses them as central characterization for some of his most infamous rulers that lead their countries into chaos and utter ruin.

The clearest examples of Shakespeare's use of Elizabethan political strategies for his ill-fated monarchs come to us through Cleopatra, Lady Macbeth, and King Lear. Shakespeare draws parallels between all of these monarchs and Elizabeth's crumbling political strategy in the last decade of her reign. In Cleopatra, he creates an aging queen who has relied too much on her sexuality to carry her through the political world. His

Cleopatra eventually fails her in her attempt to realize ultimate authority because she is too caught up in her love for one man. She gives into her desires, ignoring her wiser political strategy, eventually ensuring her own downfall. In the last years of her reign, Elizabeth found herself in a similar situation. Despite her identity as the Virgin Queen, Elizabeth's last years were colored by the Essex rebellion and the overwhelming rumors that she had allowed her affection for Essex to blind her judgment. Though the rebellion failed and Elizabeth eventually executed Essex and those involved in the plot, Elizabeth's identity as the Virgin Queen, chaste and immune to any distraction of desires, was rocked to its very core. Shakespeare's choice to place Elizabethan strategies in the hands of a notorious historical figure like Cleopatra only further propels the demise of Elizabeth's carefully crafted and painstakingly enacted political strategy.

In *Lady Macbeth*, Shakespeare creates a woman who longs to rid herself of the burden of her own gender. In *Lady Macbeth's* speech at the beginning of the play, she begs to be unsexed in order to lose her feminine weakness and gain the masculine strength necessary to win and hold onto the throne. Elizabeth made it a point early on in her reign to make her gender an ambiguous one. She certainly could not hide the fact that she was a woman, but she did not advertise the fact either. She was much more concerned with calling herself a king and allowing her gender to be a confusing and ambiguous piece of her identity. She knew that queens like her sister who wanted to be seen and identified with classically female roles like wives and mothers rarely succeeded in maintaining full control over themselves and their countries. Mary I married Philip II just over a year into her reign, effectively losing her status as the sole ruler of England and master over her own body. Elizabeth, instead chooses to never marry and therefore never produce an heir who can shore up the line of succession. She chose to live as *Lady*

Macbeth does, with the body of a woman, but the disposition, courage, and abilities of a man. In doing so, she believes that she can overcome the limits of her own gender in the early modern period and become a great ruler despite being a woman. However, in the end, though Lady Macbeth adopts this Elizabethan strategy, she fails to seize ultimate power. Her longings and choices do not allow her to overcome her femininity.

Finally, in *King Lear*, perhaps Shakespeare's most famous tragic monarch, Shakespeare creates an foolish and aging king whose refusal to secure a clear succession leads his kingdom into utter ruin. Though he chooses to leave his kingdom to his three daughters instead of never naming a successor at all, Lear still leaves his country in a state of disarray and chaos because of his shortsighted decision. Shakespeare's retelling of the Lear myth, which had existed for centuries and was even made into a play during the 1590s, is far different than the original. Instead of ending his play with a clear succession and a happy ending, Shakespeare leaves his audience with even more uncertainty at the end of the play than he does at the beginning. He leaves his audience with their own succession crisis to bring into the rest of their lives. When he writes this play in 1606, Shakespeare calls back to the chaos of the last ten years, giving us a clear picture into the extreme anxiety surrounding the advancing age of Elizabeth, her choices in the last years of her reign, and, most importantly, her refusal to name a successor. She never named James as her successor and therefore never set her country at ease. She left them on the edge of their seats, hoping that her death and refusal to name an heir would not send them into another civil war.

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Chapter One:

Dangerous Sexuality:

Shakespeare's Erasure of the Virgin Queen

In one of the most famous scenes in all of Shakespeare's works, the brilliant, cunning, and jealous Cleopatra questions a messenger who brings news of her lover Antony's marriage to another woman. Cleopatra storms into the room and demands to know every detail of Octavia's physical appearance. She interrogates the messenger asking,

Is she as tall as me? Is she shrill-tongued or low?...

What majesty is in her gate?... Guess at her years, I prithee...

Bear'st thou her face in mind? Is't long or round?... Her hair what color?

(Shakespeare 3.3.18-48).

The messenger gives her all of the answers that she wants, eventually assuring her in some way that Antony's new wife could never hold a candle to her. Cleopatra's jealousy is, of course, in keeping with the historical characterization of Cleopatra VII, lover to first her brother Ptolemy, then Julius Caesar and later Mark Antony. She was a notoriously clever and stunningly beautiful queen whose cunning and political scheming eventually led to her downfall in the Battle of Actium in 31 BC. In one of history's most tragic love stories, she and Mark Antony famously took their own lives when it became clear that they would lose the battle and never see each other again. Their story seems like a natural one for a dramatic tragedy, but Shakespeare's characterization of Cleopatra only vaguely disguises his references to his own queen who died just months before the release of the play.

In Cleopatra's interrogating rhetoric, we can clearly see references to Elizabeth's own vanity when the Scottish courtier and ambassador James Melville visited the English court in 1564. By his own account, Elizabeth was very interested in Mary's appearance and asked him,

which of the two [Queens] was fairest. [He] answered, The fairness of them both was not their worst faults. But she was earnest with me to declare which of them I judged fairest. I said, She was the fairest Queen in England, and mine the fairest Queen in Scotland. Yet she appeared earnest. I answered, They were both the fairest ladies in their countries; that her Majesty was whiter, but my Queen was very lovely. She in- quired which of them was of highest stature. I said, My Queen. Then, saith she, she is too high; for I myself am neither too high nor too low. (qtd. Rinehart 82)

Elizabeth was notoriously vain as Melville shows here in his account of his time at English court. Mary Queen of Scots certainly provided her with ample reason to be jealous of the attention of her court. She was another young, beautiful queen whose country was just a short trip from Elizabeth's. When Shakespeare recounts Cleopatra's reaction to the news of Antony's marriage he is drawing upon Plutarch's account of the *Life of Antony*, but by adding in these specific questions, he is drawing our attention to the similarities between Elizabeth and Cleopatra, begging us to compare them. We are supposed to read Elizabeth's notorious jealousy for the men in her circle of favorites onto the character of Cleopatra in this scene.

While she was queen, Elizabeth, though she herself never married, was deeply invested in the marriages of her senior nobles. She had the power to control the marriages of senior nobles in her court. In fact, senior courtiers had to have their

marriages approved by the queen in their engagement phases and gain her permission to carry on with their plans. Part of this is because the marriages between some of England's most powerful families would necessarily mean the changing of titles, goods, lands, and resources, but there was something else that drew Elizabeth to the control over the marriages of her nobles. Elizabeth, a woman in a world surrounded and dominated by men, showed obvious devotion to a few of her favorites at court. It became clear that she would not give up her grasp on these men easily and her desire to control their relationships with other women became a real problem at court.

Elizabeth, the Virgin Queen, crafted her image very carefully, ensuring that she would be remembered as a woman who chose her country over her own personal life, but this came with its own set of challenges as Elizabeth was a woman with obvious flirtatious and jealous relationships with men. Shakespeare's portrayal of Cleopatra can give us an insight into the way that Elizabeth's portrayal of herself as the Virgin Queen eventually fails in its goals to paint her as the woman who put her country over her jealousies and desires. Instead, Shakespeare shows us that a woman on the throne only ever succeeds in ruling with and by her desires. Cleopatra's reign both before the play and during it is the perfect example of a queen whose politics are governed by her basest desires. She is unable to escape her feminine wiles that eventually bring her down.

It may seem strange to us to think of Elizabeth as a woman with the kind of dangerous sexuality of Cleopatra. In our social memory, Cleopatra has survived as the conniving queen, who used her body and sexuality to manipulate empires, while Elizabeth lives as an eternal virgin, who succeeded in escaping her sexuality in order to rule. Cleopatra was known most notably for her relationships with men throughout her life. The early modern world would have been very familiar with the story of Antony and

Cleopatra, so understanding Cleopatra's historical background is essential to understanding the background of the play itself and the characterization of Egypt's famous queen. Before she was twenty-five, she had already married two of her brothers. Though she had no children in the marriages even though incest was extremely common in the Ptolemaic line, she carried the stain of incest throughout her whole life and legacy. Soon after she defeated her brother for sole control of the kingdom, she began a relationship with Julius Caesar with whom she had a son. After his death, she began her long-time love affair with Mark Antony that resulted in three children. Though we may not think of Cleopatra and Elizabeth as queens with many similarities, especially in the way that history has remembered them, we can trace the similarities that Shakespeare is pointing out by understanding the similarities in the detail of their stories if not in the larger narrative that survives.

In Plutarch's works the *Life of Caesar* and the *Life of Antony*, he describes Cleopatra as an almost irresistible figure. In one passage, he explains Antony's love for her saying that it was not so much her beauty that captured him but "but converse with her had an irresistible charm, and her presence, combined with the persuasiveness of her discourse and the character, which was somehow diffused about her behaviour towards others, had something stimulating about it" (Plutarch 197). He goes on throughout his account of the battle of Actium and then the final days of Cleopatra to describe the immense connection between the two figures. Cleopatra is mentioned in Plutarch's *Life of Caesar*, but really only to display Caesar's own triumph in quelling the civil war in Egypt and to essentially catalog the son that Cleopatra and Caesar had together. Cleopatra is never described in a bewitching manner with Caesar. Plutarch takes care to note her presence and the part she momentarily plays in his life, but the

way he describes her with Antony is entirely different. From the first mention of their love affair, it is clear that Plutarch wants his audience to understand that they were inseparable. He even describes a moment where Antony “rubbed her feet” during a banquet and how when he saw “Cleopatra was carried through the forum on a litter, [he] sprang up from his tribunal and forsook the trial, and hanging on to Cleopatra’s litter escorted her on her way” (Plutarch 271). He paints Antony as a smitten puppet, willing to follow Cleopatra anywhere she leads. He is completely controlled by her “irresistible charm,” unable to control himself around her. So, again, we are left with a bit of disparity between the sexualized manipulator Cleopatra and England’s most famous eternal Virgin Queen.

Almost as soon as she took the throne in November of 1558, Elizabeth decided to dismiss any suggestions of marriage. In her first speech to Parliament in January 1559, she responded to their suggestion by claiming that for her, “In the end this shall be sufficient: that a marble stone shall declare that a queen, having reigned such a time, lived and died a virgin” (Elizabeth 58). Despite the immediate urging from counselors and subjects, Elizabeth wanted to avoid any talk of marriage especially so soon in her reign. Her sister Mary had married King Philip II of Spain within the first year of her reign as Queen of England, immediately tying her reign and England’s interests to that of Spain’s. Elizabeth had no desire to tie her reign to anyone else’s or to marry anyone who would try to control her and her kingdom. To make matters more difficult, there was no clear contender who emerged as a frontrunner for Elizabeth’s hand. Whether she chose a Frenchman, a Spaniard, a German, a Swede or even one of her own Englishmen, she was never going to make everyone content and secure. The world of political marriages was fraught with peril as Elizabeth’s cousin Mary Queen of Scots would soon

prove. However, Elizabeth needed no lesson on the dangers of political marriages. As the daughter of the ill-fated Anne Boleyn and witness to her father's last four marriages, she had seen some of the most disastrous unions in England. In fact, Elizabeth herself had not quite escaped the stain of sexual scandal and learned early in life of the dangers that a political affair could bring with it.

If we turn back to some of the earliest days of Elizabeth's life, her sexuality is not only extremely present but dangerously so. Elizabeth had already inherited the shame of adultery through her mother's fallen reputation and the title that she carried with her at all times: bastard. From the time that she was two years old, Elizabeth carried her mother's fall from grace with her. When Anne was executed for adultery and incest, Elizabeth's very existence was called into question. She was not only declared a bastard officially, but there was a sense that she inherited Anne's sexual immorality—that she would inherit Anne's sexual danger which she used to seduce Henry VIII. So, Elizabeth was never exempt and removed from the conversation of sexual politics in the way that we think of her today. She was almost immediately associated with identities of sexual immorality and adultery.

Aside from her immediate associations with sexual immorality, some of the first public opinions of Elizabeth were formed around an adulterous, sexual scandal when she was no more than thirteen years old. To fully understand how Elizabeth first thought about her sexuality in the political world that she would eventually immerse herself in, we need to understand her first encounter with sexual scandal. This affair would go on to influence not only Elizabeth's own relationship towards her own sexuality but also England's first opinion of Elizabeth as a girl of marriageable age and

eventually, Shakespeare's own evaluation of Elizabeth as a woman who possessed a very active and dangerous sexuality.

When Elizabeth came to the throne as a young twenty-five-year-old in 1558, there was never any doubt that she would eventually marry, produce an heir, and stabilize her country. Though she protested most talk of marriage right away, her advisors, particularly Lord Burghley, were eager to see her safely married. The issue of Elizabeth's marriage had been a question since she was born. When her mother was alive and queen, her future marriage was a question of extreme political importance. After she was declared a bastard, her mother's execution, and eventually her father's death, her marriage posed more problems than opportunities for England. As the sister of the king and later as the sister of the queen, any heirs she produced would be in line for the throne, especially while Edward remained too young to marry, so both Edward and Mary found themselves with a significant amount of anxiety around Elizabeth, her flirtations, her suitors, and marriage prospects. In these early years, Elizabeth already had to somehow overcome the idea that she was inherently sexually immoral because of her mother and her official position as a bastard. Her reputation as a teenager and her time in the household of her stepmother would only add fuel to this narrative and this affair would teach Elizabeth the dangers of political marriage as well as shape the way that she would later craft her image as a woman and a ruler.

The Seymour family boasted a large amount of control over England during the later reign of King Henry VIII. The birth of Edward, England's long-awaited male heir and the son of Henry VIII and Jane Seymour, virtually guaranteed the future strength and prominence of the Seymour family as a whole. (Norton *Temptation* 2). After Henry VIII died, Edward Seymour, Duke of Somerset, took control of the young King Edward,

his nephew, as the Lord Protector. Somerset granted his brother Thomas Seymour with the position of Lord Admiral, but essentially took control of the country all on his own. Outraged at his brother's monopoly of power over their nephew, Thomas began to make plans to increase his power by marrying the much younger and naïve Princess Elizabeth, who was then just thirteen years old. He always had a way with women and was confident that he could charm Elizabeth into marrying him. The ambitious Seymour made visits to Catherine Parr in order "to catch glimpses at the princess... He approved" (Norton *The Temptation of Elizabeth Tudor* 17). Seymour was determined to gain power over his brother and was willing to use the young princess to get what he wanted. A marriage to the young princess would make Seymour the spouse of an heir to the throne. All Seymour needed to do to continue on his path to power was convince a fifteen-year-old of his love and affection.

In 1547, shortly after the king's death and without the consent of his brother or the Council, Thomas Seymour wrote to Elizabeth proposing marriage. He told her of his affection and desire saying, "I dare not tell you of the fire which consumes me, and the impatience with which I yearn to show you my devotion" and that he would "adore [Elizabeth] till death" (Norton *Catherine Parr* 171). Seymour was Elizabeth's first real suitor. She had never thought about a serious marriage before. Now at thirteen, she received a letter proposing love and marriage from a much older and charming man. However, her first experience in the adult, romantic world did not end with marriage or even a courtship. Elizabeth, knowing of the dangers and political implications of a marriage with Seymour, decided to reject protesting that she was too young and grief-stricken by her father's death to entertain his suit at the time.

Rejected and still grasping for a chance to rival his brother's power, Seymour revisited his previous flirtation with Catherine Parr. He still wanted a royal marriage that could challenge his brother's claim to power and had courted Catherine shortly before her marriage to Henry VIII. If he could not have a princess, Seymour would settle for the dowager queen. So, in 1547, just thirty-seven days after the death of Henry VIII, Seymour secretly married Catherine Parr without the king's, the council's or his brother's consent (Porter 290). After they made their marriage public, Seymour moved into Catherine's household which included Princess Elizabeth. The man who had just a few weeks earlier proposed marriage to the thirteen-year-old girl now assumed the role of her stepfather and protector. Those words of his letter must have constantly been at the forefront of her mind. Her new stepfather confessed to have a "fire" and "impatience... to show [Elizabeth] [his] devotion" (Norton *Catherine Parr* 171). Elizabeth's first romantic interest became her stepfather. This odd dynamic and the following scandals changed forever Elizabeth's responses to proposals of marriage even from men for whom she held genuine affection.

Seymour never seemed capable of leaving his flirtations with Elizabeth in the past. In fact, "the origins of Seymour's increasingly dangerous flirtation with Elizabeth seem to go back to the very beginning of his marriage, or, at least the time when he and the queen were officially living as man and wife" (Porter 308). Seymour did not desist from showing his affectionate attentions towards Elizabeth because he married Catherine. In fact, because of his new proximity to the princess, Seymour gained the chance to make physical advances towards Elizabeth. The news of the affection between Seymour and Elizabeth spread to the court and began to make others question the princess' virginity and morality. She had barely entered the age for a possible marriage

and already her virtue was called into question because of Seymour. However, Elizabeth's affections for Seymour seemed to grow despite the rumors about her virginity. However, Elizabeth would soon learn the dangers of her involvement and thoughts of a possible marriage with Seymour.

The now fourteen-year-old princess, constantly in contact with the man who tried to marry her, needed to balance her growing affections towards Seymour with her love for her stepmother. The easiest solution was to forget about his marriage proposal and interact with him as only a stepdaughter. However, Seymour, notorious for his ability to charm women and make them fall in love with him, wanted to keep Elizabeth close to him in case the changing tides of politics moved in her favor. Kat Ashley, Elizabeth's closest lady-in-waiting described Seymour's interactions with the princess claiming that "[Seymour] would come many mornings into the said Lady Elizabeth's chambers... strike her upon the back or on the buttocks familiarly... and if she were in bed, he would put open the curtains... as though he would come at her." (Porter 309). Though these advances made Elizabeth and the rest of her household uncomfortable, most brushed off the encounters. Even Catherine seemed to play along at least for a little while even holding Elizabeth during the famous encounter where Seymour cut off Elizabeth's black mourning dress (James *Catherine Parr* 282). Catherine's leniency, however, would soon fade, and the rumors of Elizabeth and Seymour would grow into more than just court gossip.

In the early months of 1548, Catherine realized she was pregnant and grew increasingly uncomfortable with the relationship between Elizabeth and Seymour (James *Catherine Parr* 284). The newly married couple began to fight, and all their issues came to a head later in the summer of 1548 when "the Queen, suspecting the

often access of the Admiral to the Lady Elizabeth, came suddenly upon them, where they were all alone [he having her in his arms]” (Porter 313). With her suspicions that Elizabeth had fallen prey to Seymour’s flirtatious advances confirmed, Catherine thought it best for Elizabeth to move households. So, at the end of the summer of 1548, Elizabeth left the household of her beloved and kind stepmother. This departure was the last time Elizabeth would see Catherine alive. Seymour drove Elizabeth from Catherine by playing with both of their emotions. The young princess had never experienced the flirtation and advances which Seymour continuously displayed towards her. The fourteen-year-old, barely entering a marriageable age, already experienced the difficulties of a serious romantic relationship.

Elizabeth was clearly disturbed by her removal from her stepmother’s household. She wrote Catherine a letter conveying her love and regrets for making Catherine question her morals (Elizabeth 10). Catherine accepted her letters graciously and continued to show Elizabeth favor and affection despite their contending affections for Seymour. Shortly after their reconciliation and Elizabeth departure from her stepparents, Catherine died after giving birth to her daughter (Porter 315). Her death left Elizabeth with memories tainted with the Seymour scandal. The disastrous end to Catherine and Elizabeth’s relationship resulted directly from their relationships with Seymour. He had manipulated both women in an attempt to gain more political power. Elizabeth, however, still unable to recognize Seymour’s blatant political strategies, would again fall prey to his manipulations.

In the few months after Catherine Parr’s death, Seymour tirelessly strove to increase his standing at court. All the while Seymour kept his sights set on the key piece to his power: Elizabeth. As he did almost a year and a half earlier, Seymour resumed his

quiet courtship of Elizabeth through correspondence with her servants (Norton *The Temptation* 109). Seymour knew that it would not take much to persuade the young princess to resume her affections for him and agree to be his wife. His ultimate plan was to seduce Elizabeth and convince her to elope after he kidnapped King Edward and severed any connections his brother had to the throne of England. Elizabeth, unaware of the rest of Seymour's plot, responded favorably to his courtship and made it clear that she would be willing to marry Seymour if the Council gave their consent (Norton *Catherine Parr* 131). The young princess had no idea the danger her receptiveness and correspondence with Seymour placed her in. She agreed not only to a romance, but a marriage to a man with many political enemies. Elizabeth would soon discover agreeing to marry anyone, let alone someone with Seymour's reputation and political enemies, would put her in significant danger.

By January of 1549, Seymour's plans had grown too outrageous for the Council and his brother to ignore. So, on the seventeenth of January, guards led Thomas Seymour away to the Tower of London at the order of his brother and the council. Charged with treason, Seymour now needed to answer for his actions of the past year and a half since Henry VIII's death. Somerset was still outraged by Seymour's marriage to Catherine and suspected that his brother had also resumed his courtship with Princess Elizabeth (Porter 329). Because their reputations were so closely connected, Elizabeth also faced immediate scrutiny and questioning upon Seymour's arrest. "Elizabeth's reputation as a chaste, obedient, and pious princess was shattered. Gossip and innuendo now portrayed her as a shameless hussy, no better than her mother" (Doran 27). The court buzzed with rumors that Elizabeth, pregnant with Seymour's child, already agreed to marry and reign with him after they kidnapped King Edward. To

quell these rumors, “whatever her feelings for Seymour, Elizabeth entirely dissociated herself from him” (Doran 27). She had no choice but to abandon her feelings for Seymour and play the role of a chaste and obedient princess with nothing but love and affection for her brother the king.

On March 20, 1549, Thomas Seymour was executed for his plots against the crown. Elizabeth, on the other hand, managed to escape the months following Seymour’s arrest and execution without being thrown in the Tower. However, her reputation took a heavy blow. Her maid servant Kat Ashley confessed Seymour’s illicit behavior to her interrogators, the news of which quickly found its way to the circles of nobles at court. Whispers of Elizabeth’s compromised virginity followed her wherever she went. Her behavior with Seymour called her very morality into question and caused serious dissension between Elizabeth and her brother and his advisors (Norton *Catherine Parr* 142).

To try and salvage what was left of her reputation “when she did attend court, Elizabeth... presented herself as a serious-minded, godly, princess, by dressing as simply and modestly as possible” (Doran 28). Elizabeth knew the danger her relationship with Seymour had caused and immediately attempted to distance herself from anything which would remind those around her of that scandal. She dressed modestly and focused on her religion and her studies. When another suit of marriage came her way in September of 1549, Elizabeth wrote immediately to members of the council to ask their opinions on the matter (Norton *The Temptation* 146). Elizabeth learned from Seymour that political marriages had little to do with real affection. If she was going to marry anyone, she would have to find someone who would benefit her country and not manipulate and use her to gain power.

The effects of the Seymour scandal continued to follow Elizabeth even into issues of the line of succession. When Edward began to fall ill a few years into his reign, the Council needed to make plans for a new monarch. Elizabeth was not named Edward's successor because "the Seymour episode possibly led him to doubt her judgment and bolster his fear that she might take an unsuitable husband... thereby putting the independence of the realm at risk" (Doran 30). The scandal with Seymour and Elizabeth's poor judgment as a young princess prevented her from ascending to the throne immediately following her brother. Elizabeth's reputation was tainted with the memory of Seymour. She would forever be remembered as the princess who foolishly almost went to her death because she was seduced by an overly charming, but ultimately scheming and shortsighted man. To change this image, Elizabeth needed to display a disposition of solemnity and wisdom far beyond her years. She sent portraits of herself displaying her piety and devotion to her religion to her brother to try to erase his view of the lustful and rash Elizabeth. She needed him to see her as a calm, reserved, and level-headed girl who was no risk to his rule in any way. She had lost her ability to act as a rash and naïve girl when she entertained the idea of a marriage to a traitor of England.

The Seymour scandal ultimately affected Elizabeth's perspective on marriage in general. She had learned the dangers of a political marriage firsthand and was very reluctant to pursue any marriage that could put her or her country in a precarious situation. Just a year or so into her reign, Elizabeth received letters that attempted to initiate an offer of marriage from Erik of Sweden. These letters contained vehement declarations of love, even though Erik never actually met Elizabeth (Karlsson 85). This letter is strangely reminiscent of the one Elizabeth received from Seymour. Both contain declarations of love from men who knew almost nothing about Elizabeth but attempted

to use her for political gain. Though an alliance with Sweden, another protestant country, could have proven beneficial to England, Elizabeth denied Erik's request on the grounds that his declarations of love seemed odd considering he had never actually met her (*The Letters of Queen Elizabeth Erik*). She did not want her romantic endeavors to in any way put her country in the hands of some foreign power regardless of how charming a king seemed in a love letter. She learned from her experience with Seymour that a man can feign love in a letter in order to use a woman for their own gain. Elizabeth was not as easily fooled into a marriage proposal this time.

Her refusal of Erik and other suitors, however, did not stop her advisors from pushing her towards marriage to other foreign powers. In 1566, facing persistent suggestions of marriage, Elizabeth addressed her Parliament again. Addressing the people of her own country, the queen alludes openly to the apparent danger she sees in a marriage of any kind. She concedes that she will marry "as soon as there may be a convenient time and that it may be done with least peril unto you, although never without great danger unto me" (Elizabeth 97). Elizabeth, reluctant to entertain the idea of marriage at all, promises in this speech to marry only if her country remains safe from any peril. However, she also notes that a marriage, though it may be beneficial for the country, will always be a great risk for her. This comment is Seymour's effect on the young queen yet again. Seymour, Elizabeth's first recorded love interest, turned Elizabeth's feelings of attraction and desire and used them for his own gain. Elizabeth, now in her older years, understood that marriages, especially political marriages, were dangerous for everyone involved.

The impact of the Seymour scandal, however, did not deter Elizabeth from pursuing romantic relationships of any kind. Elizabeth's relationship with Robert

Dudley, the most famous of her romantic interests throughout her rule, serves as evidence that she allowed herself to pursue romantic relationships that did not carry with them the dangerous political implication of marriage. For years, rumors circled through the English and foreign courts about the relationship between the Queen of England and Dudley. These rumors, however, did not cause Elizabeth to alter her behavior. "Knowing she was still a virgin, she would allow no criticism of her behavior nor take any advice to cool her affection for Dudley and marry elsewhere" (Doran 121). Elizabeth saw little danger in the relationship with Dudley because without a real marriage, he could not hold any real power over Elizabeth or her country. Elizabeth continued to hold her power and control as queen in this relationship. She did not feel threatened, manipulated or used by Dudley in the way that she had by Seymour. The relationship was, in Elizabeth's mind, harmless until the prospect of marriage became possible.

Once Dudley's wife died, he pursued a more serious relationship with Elizabeth. He thought that because of their apparent affection for each other, Elizabeth would accept his proposal of marriage regardless of the political dangers. Despite her obvious affection towards Dudley, however, the queen knew it was impossible to marry him because of the political implications. "The major arguments against his marriage to Elizabeth had always been that he was not descended from an ancient noble lineage, that his father and grandfather had been traitors, and that he was her subject, not a prince" (Doran 127). No amount of affection the queen felt for Dudley could overcome these enormous political obstacles. Elizabeth learned from her scandal with Seymour that marriage to a controversial political figure was not only unwise, but dangerous. She had been accused of treason for her previous attempt of marriage to a man she loved.

She would not face this same kind of temptation until over forty-five years later with Robert Devereux, the Earl of Essex, and his rebellion in the last years of her reign.

Robert Devereux was in many ways the last love of Elizabeth I. After Dudley's marriage and fall from grace, Elizabeth was in need of a new favorite at court. Devereux was handsome, charming, and just so happened to be the stepson of Robert Dudley. Throughout the 1580s and before Dudley's death, Devereux began to make a name for himself among the favorites at court. Elizabeth shamelessly flirted with him and him with her, even spending time with her late into the night. After Dudley's death in 1588 many of the titles and privileges that she had given her previous favorite found their way to Devereux. He took on the duties of her master of horse and even inherited Dudley's sweet wine monopoly. Essex began climbing the ladder of the favorites at court faster than he could even keep up with. Elizabeth had officially refused her last suitor in 1581, shortly before Devereux found his way to the English court, meaning she could focus her full attention on men at home instead of those proposing marriage from across the sea. Devereux played the courting game very well and managed to add to his wealth and prestige throughout the 1590s. But some thought that Elizabeth was becoming indulgent in her later years and falling into old patterns of losing control in romantic entanglements.

Like Cleopatra with Antony, Elizabeth found herself wrapped up in Essex's affairs to an extent that she may have never intended. Essex seemed determined to push his relationship with Elizabeth and test her patience as much as possible even going as far to marry without her permission. But, surprisingly, this affront to her authority did not remove him from her good graces for very long. Some of her courtiers conjectured that, "His recovery was no doubt helped by his decision to leave the countess 'very retired' in

her mother's house in London 'for her majestie's better satisfayon" (Doran 171).

Though they did not engage in sexual activity, Elizabeth and Essex's relationship was certainly one that calls to mind the sexual politics of Antony and Cleopatra. Essex left his wife home alone, abandoning her for the company and favor of his queen. When Shakespeare retells the Antony and Cleopatra narrative, including the part of the story where Antoyne leaves Octavia for Cleopatra, we should be thinking about how a uniquely Elizabethan audience would think about this retelling. Moreover, we, like the people who lived under her reign, should examine Elizabeth's maneuvers very carefully in her dealings with Essex because they stray from her calculated ones that define her relationships and flirtations with other men.

In the late 1590s, Elizabeth sent Devereux to Ireland to make a name for himself and quell some of the rebellions, hoping that he would win more glory for himself to solidify his place as one of her favorites. Unfortunately, Essex's charms did not extend to the unruly island of Ireland. His military campaign was such a humiliating failure that the Queen ordered him not to come home until he had mended the mess he had made. Expressly denying her request, Essex sailed home for England and surprised Elizabeth in her own bedchamber before she had dressed (a story strangely reminiscent of her time at her stepfather's house). Essex was put on trial for his disobedience and stripped of his claim to the sweet wine monopoly as punishment. His place as a favorite of Elizabeth also began to fall in the coming months. Elizabeth's flirtations with Essex had made him certain that he was too important to be cast to the side. He would not be leaving the favor of the court or Elizabeth without a fight. So, in early 1601, Essex alongside a few other nobles that he had recruited marched through the streets of London demanding an audience with Elizabeth, attempting to break through the

defenses around the city. Though the rebellion did not pose a serious threat to Elizabeth's person, Essex had led a revolt reminiscent of civil war. Some of the nobles he brought with him against Elizabeth would later be involved in the Gunpowder Plot against her successor, proving that the rebellion was about much more than Essex's broken relationship with the queen.

Not since Seymour had Elizabeth found herself in such dire straits because of an intimate relationship. In the last few years of her reign, she had unexpectedly found herself back at her first obstacle: sexual politics. Though she never considered marrying Essex, she allowed the relationship with him to move past what she could control. She allowed him the liberties that she had first allowed Seymour all those years ago when she was barely of marriageable age. She had forgotten the lesson she had learned. It is easy to imagine then that the Essex rebellion and relationship conjured up old feelings of danger associated with Elizabeth's sexual desires and impulses. The old narrative and characterization of Elizabeth as the daughter of a temptress and adulteress re-emerge in these last few years of her reign right before Shakespeare writes *Antony and Cleopatra*, a story about a woman who loses control of her desires and pays the ultimate price: her kingdom and her life.

After considering the sexual politics constantly at play during Elizabeth's reign despite her self-fashioning as the Virgin Queen, we can easily see how the torrid affairs of Cleopatra can allude to the sexual missteps in Elizabeth's own life. When Shakespeare dramatized Plutarch's account of the two famous lovers, he chose a story that would inadvertently comment upon the political missteps of Elizabeth's newly ended reign. In telling a story with Cleopatra as the central figure, Shakespeare almost completely tramples Elizabeth's reputation as a Virgin Queen who was able to rise above her own

desires to rule her people. In Shakespeare's own version of the famous love story, Cleopatra, like Elizabeth in the last years of her reign, is grasping at straws to maintain her power and control over the men in her life to maintain political control. She eventually fails at this because she is incapable of curbing her desires and ruling without emotions. We see in the last two acts of his play, especially Cleopatra's interactions with Octavian after Antony's death, a mirror to the end of Elizabeth's reign and her fading skills in sexual politics.

In the beginning of the play, Cleopatra exercises complete control over Antony and her own political strategy. The play begins with a few lines of commentary from Philo, one of Antony's soldiers, about Antony's all-consuming obsession with his Egyptian queen. Within the first few seconds of the play, he describes Antony's love for Cleopatra saying,

His captain's heart,
Which in the scuffles of great fights hath burst
The buckles on his breast, reneges all temper
And is become the bellows and the fan
To cool a gypsy's lust. (Shakespeare 1.1.6-10)

In these first lines of the play, we are immediately situated to the primary conflict of the play. Antony has lost himself to Cleopatra. He is so besotted with her that he has become nothing without her. Philo chooses his words carefully in order to convey that Antony is not just in love with Cleopatra. Instead, he is a tool that Cleopatra uses to satisfy her own lust. He might as well be an inanimate object used for Cleopatra's sexual pleasure in Philo's description. He is the fan that will cool her lust. Shakespeare is immediately letting his audience know that Antony has no control in this relationship.

Cleopatra is the ultimate authority while Antony is cast in the role of her concubine. It is an immediate role reversal that emphasizes her higher position as queen and his position as her captain but not her king. We are supposed to bring Philo's commentary and bias into the next scene where we catch our first glimpse of Antony and Cleopatra together at the Egyptian court.

When we do see them in the next scene, Philo's words begin to find their footing in some truth. The two lovers muse back and forth about their love for each other but are interrupted by Antony's messenger who brings news from Rome. Instead of raving or losing her temper, Cleopatra, fully in control of this situation and poised to continue her manipulation of Antony, responds coyly that he has spent too long in Egypt and must return home to his wife and country. Completely taken aback by her lack of jealousy and eager to prove his devotion, Antony responds that he would,

Let Rome in Tiber melt and the wide arch

Of the ranged empire fall. Here is my space.

Kingdoms are clay. (1.1.36-38)

He proves Philo's point almost immediately. Cleopatra has completely consumed his thoughts and overcome his duty to his wife and to his country. Instead of thinking about his political strategy clearly or considering how he and Cleopatra can gain more power for themselves, he is content to stay with her in Egypt and allow the rest of the world to crumble. He has completely lost his identity as a general and as a Roman. He only exists next to Cleopatra now. Shakespeare is giving us a picture of a woman who has all-consuming control over the men in her life. Cleopatra controls Antony and his entire identity without losing any of herself at the beginning of the play. As long as he is there in Egypt with her, she can manipulate him however she wants to. However, her control

over Antony will not last when she allows her jealousy and desires to creep into her political strategy. When Antony leaves her for Rome, she begins to feel the hint of desperation that will eventually lead her to utter ruin.

As he has shown in the first few scenes of the play, Antony does not care about anything or anyone because he is in love with Cleopatra. However, when duty takes him to a woman who can be his real wife, he begins to recognize the disparity when he comes back to Cleopatra. She is a queen who wants to be treated with the devotion of a wife, but this is not possible. She is simply a queen and when she oversteps and wants Antony's affection as his wife, she finds herself in a difficult position. She is jealous and vain as if she is competing with another woman. She is not thinking clearly as a queen would. She is too focused on the sexual politics and cannot find a way to operate politically without drawing upon her desires and her emotions. Because she is unable to separate her duty as a queen from her desire to be valued as the primary woman in Antony's life, she is also unable to achieve her eventual goal.

In the last two acts of the play, after Antony returns to Cleopatra married to Octavia, we begin to see complete desperation from Cleopatra that erases the confident, independent, and empowered woman who controlled Antony in the beginning of the play. He has just returned from Rome and his marriage to Octavia, making Cleopatra certain that she is and only will be second best. Like Elizabeth and her relationships with the men in her circle of favorites, Cleopatra can never be Antony's lawful wife. She is, at best, his mistress. This causes a massive amount of insecurity, jealousy, and anxiety in their relationship because Cleopatra is nervous if she is enough for Antony. She can never be certain that they are fully committed to one another.

In the same way, Elizabeth's circle of men allows her a certain amount of flexibility in her relationships. She is able to carry on personal relationships with many of the men in her circle because she is not ruled by one man nor. However, this flexibility brings with it no security. She can never be certain that the men in her circle are loyal to only her. As evidenced by her obsession with control over their marriages, Elizabeth always felt as Cleopatra does. They both knew that their power over the men in their lives was limited to how close they could get to them without the title of wife. Elizabeth was never anyone's wife so she has to make herself the first woman in the lives of many men. Though it is not the title of mistress that Cleopatra carried with her, the idea that Elizabeth would be a kind of "first woman" in the lives of the men of court brought with it its own connotation of sexual immorality. Even the idea that Elizabeth had a circle of men that she existed within the world of men was a dangerous one for her to navigate. The jealousy and vanity that she felt for those men and the desperation that she felt to control their lives is perfectly emulated by Shakespeare's Cleopatra in these final acts of his play.

It is in this context of uncertainty and jealousy that Cleopatra and Antony must defend themselves from Rome's attack. Once again, Antony shows himself incapable of relying on his own political strategy, instead relying on Cleopatra's suggestions. In this case, he decides to fight Rome on the sea with Cleopatra's Egyptian fleet to supplement his own. Cleopatra is not her usual confident self in these scenes when Antony returns home, however. Though she spurts commands and opinions, she does seem to be confident in her control of him in the way that she did in the beginning. She insists on accompanying Antony into battle, despite Enobarus's cautioning. He asserts that her presence will distract him from battle, but she cannot let him out of her sight again. She

is determined to control him by proximity because she feels that she has lost her grasp on him.

Antony, despite his obedience to her battle plans, begins to pull away from her and her control over him. He can feel their doom coming nearer and nearer most especially after Cleopatra flees from the Roman ships during the battle. Unlike his praises for Cleopatra in the beginning of the play, now when he describes their relationship, he emphasizes her control and his lack thereof saying,

You did know

How much you were my conqueror; and that

My sword, made weak by my affection, would

Obey it on all cause. (Shakespeare 3.11.70-74)

He cannot understand how Cleopatra would not expect him to follow her to the ends of the earth, let alone from a battle when he has shown her such extreme devotion in the past. She thought that he would follow his duty as a general and captain, but he is trying to explain that he has completely lost the ability to do that because of her. She turns and runs in battle, hoping that Antony will protect her, but she is entirely mistaken. It is in these next few scenes that her real love for Antony completely blocks her ability to do what she needs to survive.

Antony's rage against Cleopatra after she abandons him in battle leads him to condemn her and any love they ever shared with one another. In an absolute rage, he urges her to go and join Octavian and become his mistress. He is certain that she never felt any real affection for him and that she has only been manipulating him. We as the audience have been led to believe something similar since the beginning of the play.

With Philo's words always ringing in the back of our heads, it is easy to see how Antony

would believe that he was just another pawn for Cleopatra to move on her board, but Cleopatra's next actions show us that she has also found herself too deep in affection for Antony to escape. In an effort to endear Antony to herself after his condemnation, Cleopatra decides to send word that she has locked herself in her monument and killed herself. She herself is distracted by her hope to make Antony love her to understand the deeply flawed political strategy behind her plan. Unsurprisingly, her plan ends in complete failure when Antony commits suicide because he believes that she is dead. Though she has certainly been in enough relationships throughout her life to maneuver in a savvy way, she allows her desire for Antony to love her to cloud her judgment.

After Antony's death, Cleopatra is once again left to fend for herself against a new Roman leader. She knows that she must either make peace with Octavian and live or fight him and meet her end with Antony. She attempts to use her usual charms in her meeting with him that have worked so well in the past, but finds her strategies have lost their effectiveness. She even calls him "My master and my lord" to which he replies simply "Not so" (Shakespeare 5.2.174). She tries to once again charm a Roman leader, but her heart is not in this seduction. If Plutarch's assertion is correct and it is her conversation that so bewitched Antony, the Cleopatra in this final act is a completely different queen after his death. She is a mere shadow of her confident and powerful self from the beginning of the play. She emphasizes her meekness and helplessness even saying,

I cannot project mine own cause so well
 To make it clear, but do confess I have
 Been laden with like frailties which before
 Have often shamed our sex. (Shakespeare 5.2.150-153)

There is no hint that this Cleopatra is the same one who bewitched Antony at the beginning of the play. She is a shell of the powerful woman who wove savvy political webs for Antony. It is her affection for him and her fear of losing him that has led her to this place. She cannot make herself adapt to her new circumstances and protect herself because she is still in love with Antony. She leaves the conversation with Octavian, who has promised to protect her, with immense despair. She has lost the ability to weave those famous webs and rid a man of his sword.

Her last thoughts and words are of Antony, the man she allowed to affect her too much. She dies with his name on her lips and the pang of sorrow in her heart. If she had been able to put aside her feelings for him, like she did with his predecessor Caesar, she could have found a place for herself in the new world under Octavian's reign. However, she underestimates her affection for him, thus securing her own downfall. She cannot fight her desire to be with him or deny her grief for his passing, leaving her to follow him to death. She is betrayed by her own love and emotions.

When Shakespeare paints the picture of the aging Cleopatra who has lost the shine of her manipulative and bewitching beauty, he is showing us a mirror to the aging Elizabeth who has essentially been manipulated herself in her final years. Sexual politics underscored Elizabeth's entire reign even when she was actively denying that they played any part by assuming the identity of the Virgin Queen, but in these last few years all of her hard work and perfectly crafted identity came crashing down around her with the flirtations and indulgences that stemmed from her blind spot for Essex.

Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra is a reflection of early modern England's final ruling on Elizabeth's attempts to supersede and conquer sexual politics: she did not succeed.

Her relationship with Essex is a perfect example of how Elizabeth began to lose control and respect amongst her circle in those last years. Essex and other young men, who only knew the queen in her old age, saw her as a means to an end: that end being political power for themselves. Essex is the last love of Elizabeth I and he leads her down a path of destruction. He used her favor and her attraction to him to grasp at political power. She was blamed in the end because she allowed him too much freedom, which brings back to mind the dangers of her sexuality that underscores her first appearance on the political stage. Though she worked for nearly fifty years to erase the stain of the Seymour affair that brought her so near political disaster, this last flirtation with dangerous sexual politics relates her immediately with the young thirteen-year-old girl who was removed from her stepmother's house.

In a similar way, Cleopatra, despite all of her relationships with men, ends her life alone and with no one but her ladies. She takes her own life because of her love for Antony and her fear that she has no way forward. She has lost the ability to control the men in her life as evidenced by Octavian's reactions to her flirtations and advances. She is a shadow of the powerful woman who ruled Antony's heart and inspired him to leave his wife and duty to Rome. She is a woman feeling the effect of her emotions and desires. She allowed herself to become too attached to Antony in a way that she had not with Caesar or any of her other lovers, leaving her with no way forward after his death.

In the end, we are left remembering the sexual immorality and the dangers of a woman who wields her sexuality as a weapon. Cleopatra masterfully manipulates Antony in the beginning of the play because she does not fear losing his affection or love. However, as soon as he is out of her grasp and endeared to another woman, she begins

to feel desperate, giving into her jealousy and fear instead of remaining calm and composed. Elizabeth's flirtations with Essex and the liberties she allows him led her into a dangerous political mess that eventually reminded her subjects of her own dangerous sexual politics that almost led her into ruin in the first few years of her life. The connection that Shakespeare draws for us is one that emphasizes Elizabeth's mortality more than anything else. She is subject to the same desires, lusts, and emotions as the rest of the world just as Cleopatra, the seemingly cold hearted seductress, is ensnared by the same trap that she laid so many times. Elizabeth, then, is no virgin queen or at least that is not the impression we are left with. Instead, Shakespeare scrubs away at that cult of the virgin and instead leans into the different relationships that Elizabeth has with different men by relating her to Cleopatra who is one of the most notoriously sexualized queens.

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Chapter Two

Gender Politics and A Barren Queen:

The Elizabethan *Macbeth*

Traditionally, Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the story of Scottish rebellion, regicide, and eventual disaster, is interpreted as a commentary upon the new Stuart regime in England at the time of James I's ascendance to the throne. As Sharon Alker and Holly Nelson argue in their article on *Macbeth* and Jacobean rule, sometimes the play is interpreted as one that "supports the mythology crafted and promoted by the king... designed to reflect James' own carefully fashioned public image: that of an English 'Duncan' or Scottish 'Edward' whose coronation augured healing paternalism and peaceful expansion" (Alker and Nelson 381). James had already carefully crafted his own image as the King of Scotland for the previous thirty-six years. When he became the King of England in 1603, the English people had a general idea of both the kind of ruler James was and his interests as a person. Generally, the advent of James' reign and the Gunpowder plot in the first year of his reign have contributed to the idea that *Macbeth* was written as a response to the new climate of James' reign, but this interpretation entirely overlooks and abandons the implications and cultural themes from the end of Elizabeth's reign just two years before. Shakespeare's creation of Lady Macbeth, an unsexed, infertile, and politically savvy co-conspirator, mirrors the anxieties of the end of Elizabeth's reign and the ultimate failure of her gender performance when she is both incapable and unwilling to provide a clear, undisputed heir to the English throne, closely relating the themes within *Macbeth* to the Succession Crisis of the 1590s as opposed to the events of the previous year under James.

The idea that Shakespeare wrote the play with James in mind has been in circulation since at least the eighteenth century, when Samuel Johnson claimed that Shakespeare based the play's engagement with witchcraft upon James' "infatuation" with the subject, demonstrated by the King's treatise *Daemonologie*: "Upon this general infatuation Shakespeare might be easily allowed to found a play, especially since he has followed with great exactness such histories as were then thought true" (Johnson 6). So, the theory that *Macbeth* is a true Jacobean play has circulated almost as long as the play itself. Some of the parallels are almost too good to resist. The setting of Scotland itself immediately draws us to the comparisons between England's new Scottish king and the play. Moreover, the play was performed and published in the year following the failed Gunpowder plot of 1605, which has led many Shakespeareans over the centuries to connect the play to a wave of royal support that followed what could have been a near apocalyptic event. Holderness and Loughrey go as far as to assert that "Macbeth is himself the Gunpowder Plot," meaning that his play for the throne and the chaos that ensues is a picture of a country in the grips of apocalyptic and morally destitute leadership (Holderness and Loughrey 43).

Yet to read *Macbeth* as a purely Jacobean play, responding only to the immediate climate of England and its newest king, actually discounts some of the more nuanced references to the English traditions and mindsets that long precede the Gunpowder plot and James' first few years on the English throne. Shakespeare is also giving us a mirror of the Succession Crisis of the late 1590s and the anxieties at the end of Elizabeth's reign, caused by her failure to produce an undisputed heir to the English throne. A solely Jacobean view of *Macbeth* paints over Lady Macbeth's attempt to use Elizabeth I's tactics of gender performance to hold royal authority, an attempt that is eventually

doomed to fail, because, like Elizabeth, she is unable to produce an heir. Although there are certainly references within the play to James I as the hero of the new Jacobean realm, Shakespeare also reminds his audience of the anxieties of the period that immediately preceded it, the end of the forty-five-year reign of England's greatest queen, when her attempts to distract her subjects from the problem and insecurities of her gender ultimately failed, because she could not produce a legitimate and undisputed heir. His characterization of Lady Macbeth as a power-hungry and calculated, but ultimately doomed queen is a reflection of the failures of Elizabethan political strategies in the years following the Succession Crisis of the 1590s and the end of Elizabeth's reign.

“I am assured that God has revealed to some in this our age, that it is more than a monster in nature that a woman shall reign and have empire above man”. John Knox wrote these words in his 1558 treatise *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regime of Women*, railing against Mary I of England and her Catholic government. She was the perfect representation of everything that the Protestant cause in Scotland feared: a staunchly Catholic woman with a throne. He and his other Protestant supporters in England and Scotland used Mary's gender as a way of undermining her royal authority by claiming that she had no right to rule in the first place. Just a few months later, in November of the same year, Mary I died, ending Catholic reign in England. However, Knox and other like minded individuals who had so protested the reign of women as well as the reign of Catholicism in general were about to face an even more complicated figure. When Elizabeth I rose to the throne, she posed a difficult conundrum for Protestants and those who wished to see lasting peace in Britain at large. She was a Protestant ruler who planned on maintaining a fairly tolerant rule, but she was a woman. Knox's words perfectly capture the attitudes towards a woman's

claim to royal power and authority, but he and others like him had to accept that Elizabeth was a better candidate than a Catholic queen.

Elizabeth and her new government understood that the opinions of Knox echoed the opinions of many throughout Britain, perhaps most especially those who valued the strongest ruler possible to keep them from civil war. So, almost as soon as she took the throne, Elizabeth and her government had to go about proving her legitimacy to rule despite her gender. Even those outside of her government who still supported her Protestant cause or simply sought stability in her reign began to try to find ways to justify the perceived difficulties of her gender. Nicholas Heath, the Archbishop of York when Elizabeth ascended to the throne, began to posit that she was something in between a king and a queen. She was, “sovararaigne lord and ladie, our kinge and quene, our emperor and emperesse” (Levin 121). She was neither a man nor a woman but both. So, instead of trying to prove that a woman had the right to rule, which would have been a near herculean effort, Elizabeth, her government, and those who supported her reign had to suggest that she was not exactly a woman at all. She needed to embody both genders in order to claim the throne for herself. No one could have proven her right to rule solely on the basis of her identity as a woman with royal blood because her gender inherently negated her ability to rule in the first place. So, Elizabeth began to become something other than either a man or a woman.

Elizabeth herself made complicated claims about her own gender, at times intentionally abandoning her femininity as the office of ruler required. Thirty years into her reign, she delivered her famous speech to the English troops at Tilbury before they boarded ships to chase the Spanish from their coast. In the version of the speech circulated after the defeat of the Spanish Armada Elizabeth, hoping to inspire her

soldiers with ideals of English strength, declared, “I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too... I myself will take up arms, I myself will be your general, judge, and rewarder of every one of your virtues in the field” (Elizabeth 326). Elizabeth acknowledges her own feeble nature while separating herself from it at the same time. She chooses to inhabit the space between a man and a woman in order to lead her troops to victory. This speech is one of the only examples we have of Elizabeth in the context of battle or wartime. She cannot be the defender of her country, a ruler who will protect her subjects and remain a woman. Instead, she denounces her body as a whole in favor of her heart and stomach—her masculine fervor and courage. In moments like this, Elizabeth knows that she must leave her gender behind—she must be something else. Though she can never be rid of her gender, because she still retains the body of a “weak and feeble woman,” she can lean into her masculine qualities, becoming something in between a man and a woman.

Elizabeth would continue to play with the idea of her gender identity throughout her entire reign, refusing to settle on one identity for too long. Scholars have long debated how and when she decided to present herself as “kinge” or “quene” and how far she could take the concept of two genders in one. Constance Jordan argues that “politically she [was] a man” and that other than her political persona, there was no other reason for the dual portrayal. Carole Levin connects Elizabeth’s duality as king and queen to “the medieval concept of the king’s two bodies” which centered around “the difficulty of separating the body politic from the person of the monarch” (Levin 122). In a sense, Levin argues that Elizabeth and her advisors, in an effort to legitimize her claim to the throne and right to royal authority, chose to recycle the concept that

there was a king in the flesh and a large, more abstract, identity of a “king” that would live long after a specific king died. Despite these complicated and technical arguments made by members of Elizabeth’s political advisors, Levin states clearly that we should be careful not to assume that these were in any way accepted as “fact” or even widely believed by many in general (Levin 122). However, these arguments had forty-five years to soak into the early modern English culture itself. Though, perhaps, not every person in London could explain the political duality of Elizabeth’s gender, the sense that a woman needed to be something other than her own gender to have that power and authority was one that made its way into at least some of the most impactful literature of the time period.

In the beginning of her reign as a young twenty-six-year-old, Elizabeth had to sidestep the question of her future marriage almost constantly. Protestants were keen to erase the connections to Catholic European nations that had sprung from Mary’s marriage to Philip II of Spain, but there was no clear choice from the beginning. Elizabeth used this uncertain political minefield to her advantage in the early years of her reign to avoid seriously addressing the topic of marriage for as long as she could.

In her very first speech to Parliament in February of 1559 just weeks after her coronation, Elizabeth responded to Parliament’s almost immediate petition for her to immediately begin the process of finding a suitable match. She begins very carefully by thanking Parliament for their polite petition and their understanding, but as the speech continues, she makes no indication that she is going to begin the search. Instead, she concerns herself with the question of an heir rather than a husband assuring Parliament that “the realm shall not remain destitute of an heir that may be a fit governor and peradventure more beneficial to the realm than such offspring as may come of me”

(Elizabeth 58). Essentially, she is skipping over the question of a husband entirely and priming her Parliament for the possibility that she might never produce an heir. She is already denying her identity as a woman in this speech as she hints at the possibility that she will not fulfill the role and duty of an early modern woman: to marry and produce heirs. She is pushing against the proscribed roles for an early modern woman already in an effort to carve out a new space for herself as a female king.

Of course, the anxieties surrounding her gender begin to come to a head nearer to the end of her reign. Despite the 1570 bull of excommunication from the Pope, the Ridolfi and Babington plots, the coup staged by the Earl of Essex, and war with Spain amongst other crises, Elizabeth had managed to keep a strong hold on her country, even catapulting it into a global prominence that her father could have only dreamed of. On the other hand, she was nearing sixty years old, well past childbearing age with no husband and no heir. Though she closely corresponded with James VI of Scotland, the child of her second cousin, and even called him her “dear brother” in many of her letters, she never publicly declared him her heir (Elizabeth 289). Instead, she allowed for a kind of ambiguity at the end of her reign which began to call up the anxieties of legitimacy and succession that Elizabeth had so desperately tried to avoid at the beginning of her reign.

The last decade of her reign and the uncertainty of the succession led staunch English Catholics, bent on dismantling Elizabeth’s reign in order to place a Catholic, to publish texts that questioned Elizabeth’s current legitimacy and prompted discussion that anticipated her death like the *Conference About the Next Succession to the Crown of Inghland* and *A Discourse Concerning a Successor to Queen Elizabeth*. Elizabeth’s own parliament began to feel the pressure of the absence of a recognized heir and in

tracts like *A Pithie Exhortation on to Her Majestie for Establishing her Successor to the Crowne* penned by a member of her own Parliament Peter Wentworth. His desperate attempts and pleas for a named successor demonstrate the rising levels of unrest and almost panic at the thought of an unstable succession when he addresses Elizabeth herself writing, “you do not think it is especiall dutie that Princes owe unto God and their people to doe what may be done to preserve them and their posterities from all evils and mischief?” (Mayer 115). Wentworth, a staunch member of the new Puritan sect of English Protestantism, along with Elizabeth’s other Protestant supporters began to feel the mounting pressure that arose from Elizabeth’s refusal to name a Protestant heir. The 1559 Act of Uniformity had provided Tudor England with a precarious, but stable solution to the religious turmoil of the last thirty or so years, but the uncertainty of the next heir threatened the course of the religious change in England for both Protestants and Catholics.

In short, Elizabeth’s attempts to remain silent and situate herself between the lines of woman, man, king, queen, mother, and virgin all began to lose their effectiveness. In the end, though she had succeeded in securing her own right to royal authority by casting her gender aside at convenient times, she was still dealing with the question of her first parliament: how could she provide an heir? This anxiety of an unstable succession begins to break down the brilliance of Elizabeth’s complex portrayal of her own identity, leaving early modern England to question what good it did for Elizabeth to consider herself something other than a woman if she still could not provide her country with an heir. It becomes painfully obvious in the last years of her reign that she is simply a woman who refused to do her duty as the early modern world would have seen it. In this last decade of her reign, her mythic creation of her gender

identity ceases to be something miraculous. Instead she is just a sixty-year-old woman, leaving her throne to the waves of uncertainty.

After the constant inconsistencies and precarious politics of the 1590s into the first few years of the 1600s, the anxieties of the succession crisis began to make their way into some of the most famous literature of the time period. *Macbeth* inherits the fear of the fruitless crown and a woman imbued with a desire for genderless power. Sometime around 1606 when Shakespeare pens this famous play, he has Scotland, succession, and female royalty all swimming around in his mind. James VI of Scotland had just been named James I of England, uniting the Kingdoms for the first time. Though James was not a direct descendant of Elizabeth and perhaps more troubling, a Scot, he was a man, and his gender identity made his ascension a great deal less complicated than that of his predecessor. Despite the seemingly straightforward succession, early modern England had not forgotten their former queen's complicated claims to legitimacy and royal authority.

Almost immediately, Shakespeare gives one of his most famous female characters a speech extremely reminiscent of Elizabethan political theory. In her first appearance on stage she cries out, "Come you spirits/ That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,/ And fill me from crown to the toe top-full/ Of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood,/ Stop up the passage to remorse/ That no compunctious visitings of nature/ Shake my fell purpose nor keep peace between/ Th'effect and it" (Shakespeare 1.6.39-45). As Lady Macbeth's cries of denouncing her gender and pleas for the strength of a man fell on the ears of early modern audiences, they no doubt would have connected her speech to the one given by Elizabeth around twenty-five years earlier at Tilbury where Elizabeth claims to have "the heart and stomach of a king" that will allow

her to be England's general and judge" as they march into battle with the Spanish. She knows that she cannot be the leader that her men need and be a woman at the same time. So, she emphasizes her royal gender—her identity as a ruler and not as a physical woman. Though she acknowledges her own feeble nature, she separates herself from it at the same time and chooses to inhabit the space between a man and a woman in order to lead her troops to victory.

When Shakespeare writes the speech for Lady Macbeth, he gives her Elizabeth's shrewd and calculated logic. She is faced with the same dilemma as Elizabeth: she cannot hope to hold the power of the crown with her female "remorse" or even the nature of femininity itself. She must become something, like Elizabeth, different from a woman in order to win the throne for herself and her husband. Her legitimacy and claim to royal authority are not valid if she retains her gender, so she asks that the spirits "unsex" her. Elizabeth and Lady Macbeth express the same idea—that a woman who hopes to hold the power of kingship and royalty must become something other than a woman entirely.

Shakespeare introduces another wrinkle to Lady Macbeth's nature when she places herself in another liminal space for her gender by advising that they should, "Look like th'innocent flower/ But be the serpent under't" (Shakespeare 1.6.63-64). She tells Macbeth that they must assume the strategy that will make them look like a flower with its unassuming, femininity and beauty while actually lying-in wait as the serpent beneath it. Shakespeare gives us the image of a snake lying in wait, not unlike the deceiver in Genesis who tempts Eve and curses mankind. References to the devil and his association, even sometimes his partnership with women flooded the early modern world. Women were even more commonly accused of witchcraft because of their

historical connection with the devil as the serpent. James VI's treatise *Daemonologie* touched upon this very subject, claiming "that sexe is frailer then man is, so is it easier to be intrapped in these grosse snares of the Deuill, as was ouer well proued to be true, by the Serpents deceiuing of *Eua* at the beginning, which makes him the homelier with that sexe sensine" (James I 35-36). Though scripture itself never claims that the serpent is Satan, early modern people began to equate the devil with the serpent, as James does here, when he says that Eve's connection to the serpent during her own deception makes Satan more at home with the female gender. So, though the serpent is not assigned a gender in scripture, the association with the devil himself gives the serpent a gendered identity that Lady Macbeth then suggests that she and her husband adopt. James published his treatise in 1597 before coming to the English throne, giving us a good idea of how Shakespeare and the early modern world would have closely associated the female gender with witchcraft and the devil himself as a serpent.

It is no coincidence that Shakespeare takes his inspiration for Lady Macbeth from the complicated political gymnastics of Elizabethan advisors who tried to ensure Elizabeth's perceived legitimacy and right to authority. *Macbeth* is a play entirely about the question of royal power and authority. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth arise to the station of king and queen by killing Duncan. They steal their claim to royal authority and then spend the rest of the play determined to keep it. Although they achieve their initial goal of winning the throne, they do not believe that they can continue to legitimately rule without eliminating any contenders to the throne. They are acting out in some ways the worst fears of the English people—that although they have won the throne, they have just "scorched the snake not killed it" (Shakespeare 3.2.13). To create the tension that the play requires, Shakespeare draws upon the fears that have haunted

early modern England for two generations and allows them to plague Macbeth until he goes mad with guilt.

While Shakespeare makes it clear that Macbeth is mad with guilt, convincing himself that it is “better [to] be with the dead/ Whom we, to gain our peace have sent to peace/Than on the torture of the mind to lie/ In restless ecstasy”, he chooses to do something a bit more complicated with Lady Macbeth (Shakespeare 3.2.19). It is not the action that haunts her because she did not kill Duncan herself. Instead, Lady Macbeth is a victim of her own plea to the “spirits”. She begs to be “unsexed” in order to have the lack of feminine remorse and the ability to hold royal authority and then acts on the assumption that her plea has been answered. But Shakespeare then proceeds to create a story where Lady Macbeth can never escape her gender and the limitations that she feels it places on her. He then chooses to relentlessly pursue both Lady Macbeth and Macbeth with their greatest fears, guilt and the female gender, by using the blood of their victims.

Often the imagery of blood is interpreted as a reference to the Macbeths’ shared guilt in the murders they committed, but blood has to mean something very different for Macbeth and the men in the play than it does for Lady Macbeth. To understand the way that Shakespeare is using blood as a different tool with Lady Macbeth, we must first understand that blood meant very different things to men and women of the early modern period in general. For men, blood was the symbol of war and triumph, which is why Shakespeare can use the image of a victorious Macbeth at the beginning of the play covered in the blood of the enemy he has just defeated. When Duncan sees him for the first time and calls him a “bloody man”, the blood here shows that Macbeth has fought for king and country and therefore wears blood as a kind of prize and symbol of his loyalty. Shakespeare then uses the inverse of this idea throughout the play, slowly

turning Macbeth's victorious association with blood gained in war to one stolen from the men who should have had his loyalty.

The first example of this transition comes when Lady Macbeth wants her husband to "smear/ The sleepy grooms with blood... For it must seem their guilt" (Shakespeare 2.2.52-53). She is acknowledging that the blood on the guards will signify their "guilt", equating Duncan's blood with the guilt and sin of murder itself. She perfectly articulates the way that blood affects the men in this play—it is a symbol of their guilt. Macbeth is then haunted by this guilt and therefore blood as well. When Banquo appears to him in the banquet hall, he sees (or perhaps imagines) the guilt of his deed in Banquo's ghost and says that "Blood hath been shed ere now" and that Banquo's "blood is cold" (Shakespeare 3.4.77, 3.4.96). When he can speak in private to his wife, he even goes as far to say that "blood will have blood... augurs and understood relations have... brought forth the secret'st man of blood" (Shakespeare 3.4. 124-128). In other words, Macbeth sees blood as proof of the guilt of murder. Blood, as it was to the guards at the beginning, is a signifier of his guilt to the world. He feels as though he is covered in the physical representation and manifestation of the murders he has committed.

So, Shakespeare lays out a clearly masculine need for, and then anxiety about, blood as he details Macbeth's rise to the station of king and then his swift fall after his guilt has been discovered. Lady Macbeth's association with blood, however, cannot be read the same way. In the early modern world, a woman's life was always tied in some way to the imagery of blood. Unlike the men of the early modern world who had to search out ways to interact with blood by going to war, blood was treated as a part of everyday life for women. In her book *The Female Body and Menstruation in Early Modern England*, Sarah Read gives us an idea of how women interacted with, talked

about, and conceptualized their menstruation cycles and their constant association with blood. Essentially, the life and fertility of an early modern woman can be tied to the act of losing blood. The pervading idea in the early modern period was that a girl began to lose blood when she became a maid (a woman of marriageable age because of her fertility) and then continued to lose blood until she had no more to lose (after menopause). She was useful to society as long as she still retained blood inside of her. Once all that blood was lost and she entered menopause, she became almost something new entirely. Though “menopause signaled the reassimilation of the female body to the male (and hence more tractable) body”, it did not erase all of her femininity (La Belle 107). She was no longer a woman in the early modern sense because she did not have the ability to bear children, but this lack of feminine fertility obviously could not make her a man.

Lady Macbeth’s plea at the beginning of the play “unsex me here” and “Make thick my blood and stop up the access and passage to remorse” takes on new meaning, then, when we consider an early modern woman’s association with blood. Lady Macbeth is not only asking for a hardened heart and the gall to do what must be done. She is, in some very literal ways, asking to have no more blood to lose. Women who no longer menstruated already inhabited a liminal space for early modern people because they defied the express role for women in society, namely producing children. Jenijoy La Belle argues that what Lady Macbeth is literally begging for when she cries “unsex me here” and then “make thick my blood” is for infertility, “for the periodic flow to cease, the genital tract to be blocked” (La Belle 382). She does not want to be able to menstruate anymore, because that is what makes her a woman. La Belle makes the argument that Lady Macbeth’s plea for infertility is tied directly to the connection

between the psychological and physiological nature of early modern medical science but does not delve into the implications for the imagery of blood in the rest of the play. If Lady Macbeth is begging to be something else entirely and asks the "spirits" to take away that which makes her a woman, she needs to be free from not only her own physical menstruation but also a feminine association with blood entirely. She wants to inhabit the unsexed space of a woman who no longer menstruates, and this requires a distance from blood itself. She must change her association with blood from a female one to a masculine and therefore inherently violent one. We can imagine then, that when they murder Duncan, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are afraid of the same thing, blood, but for very different reasons.

What Lady Macbeth fails to take into account when she begs the spirits to unsex her are the implications of a barren throne. The witches have already declared that though Macbeth will be king of Scotland, Banquo "shalt get kings though [he] be none" (Shakespeare 1.3.68). So, there is no hope that Lady Macbeth will ever produce children. She does not know of this part of the prophecy when she cries to the spirits to unsex her and begs for infertility without knowing the consequences of ruling without heirs to pass the throne to. She wants to inhabit the space of an unsexed woman because she knows, like Elizabeth, that is her way to hold royal authority, but she does not take into account as Macbeth later laments that "on my head [the witches] placed a fruitless crown and put a barren scepter in my grip" (Shakespeare 3.1.61-61). In the end, she does not know that the lengths to which she must go to hold royal authority eventually doom her to a failed gender performance. Her infertility is the means to her demise, and Shakespeare does not allow her to escape the haunting reminder of her gender, using the image of blood to constantly remind her of her inescapable femininity.

The question, then, of Lady Macbeth's motherhood before the play begins becomes aligned with the discussion of her new hope for an ungendered and infertile nature. Critics have long been puzzled by how to reconcile several seemingly inconsistent references to the Macbeths' children in the text, from Lady Macbeth's reference to "hav[ing] given suck" in Act 1 to Macduff's bitter rejoinder that Macbeth "has no children" in Act 4. While audience members and critics can speculate about why Lady Macbeth says she has nursed a child but has no living heirs, her rhetoric clearly aspires to align herself with the masculine association of violence. To truly take power in Scotland and possess the authority to retain it, she must be able to remove herself from the feminine associations with blood which includes that of the blood of childbirth itself as well as menstruation. Read explores the nature of childbirth bleeding in her book saying that "the blood lost after a birth signified the completion of this transition to womanhood in its most full sense" (Read 145). The early modern conception of femininity, then, is completely defined by both the loss of blood and its relation to children. So, when Lady Macbeth attempts to convict her husband by comparing her devotion to their cause to his, she says,

I have given suck, and know
 How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:
 I would, while it was smiling in my face,
 Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,
 And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn as you
 Have done to this. (Shakespeare 1.7.54-59)

This statement captures the essence of Lady Macbeth's goal to assume a new relationship with blood because of her desire to rid herself of her gender. The mention

of her “tender” love for “the babe” and breastfeeding orients us to her previous femininity. Then, she ends the scenario with extreme violence and a desertion of her own femininity. She “pluck’[s] [her] nipple” from the child’s mouth in a sense removing herself from the child and her role as its mother. Then, she takes it one step farther to “dash” the child’s “brains out” in order to keep a promise therefore assuming a masculine association with blood: violence and death for the sake of loyalty and honor.

Despite all her promises and speeches, Lady Macbeth is not able to assume a masculine association with violence and blood when she needs to because she cannot truly escape the specter of her gender that haunts her in the form of blood. In the moments after Duncan’s murder the Macbeths showcase their fear of the blood, as well as Lady Macbeth’s certainty that “a little water clears [them] of this deed” (Shakespeare 2.2.70). Although she did not kill Duncan herself, she still finds herself covered in the blood from the daggers that Macbeth brought with him from the scene. When she returns from spreading the blood on the guards of Duncan’s bed chamber, she tells her husband that they must return to their chambers, wash their hands so that Macbeth “be not lost so poorly in [his] thoughts” (Shakespeare 2.2.75). She believes that she will be able to wash away the blood as she did with her own sex and then take the throne as a being beyond guilt, remorse, and even her own gender because the spirits have unsexed her, releasing her from the blood that pronounces her gender. She wants to be able to relate to blood and violence now as Macbeth does. She wants her connection to blood to be one that intersects with the ideals of violence for the sake of a greater good and thinks because she has asked to be “unsexed” that this door has opened for her. But, as in most Shakespearean tragedies, the path is never as straightforward as the characters would wish. Shakespeare proceeds to haunt Lady Macbeth throughout the play with images of

blood, but not in the form of her murder victims (perhaps because she has not murdered anyone). Instead, he puts the blood all over her. He connects it to her physical person in order to denote that there is no way for her to sever herself from the female connection to blood. It is on her body, and she cannot seem to escape it.

Lady Macbeth first begins to understand the implications of her unsexing as well as the fact that her connection to blood and therefore her connection to her gender and performance of the gender that she wishes to embody are different than Macbeth during the banquet scene. At this point she still does not know that Macbeth has ordered the death of Banquo. She is still under the impression that she and Macbeth have completely succeeded in their attempt to take the Scottish crown. She is ready to welcome the Scottish lords into their home because she knows that they all believe that she and Macbeth are the rightful heirs to the throne and never suspect their guilt in Duncan's death. She does not know that Macbeth has been so plagued by the idea that they will leave their kingdom to Banquo's heirs that he has decided to continue to commit murders, placing he and Lady Macbeth in grave danger and at the mercy of the lords of Scotland. She tries to keep up appearances and attempts to calm her husband, but she does not know that he has ordered Banquo's murder or even why he has continued to be so disturbed. She assumes that is about Duncan and the first murder that he committed to take the throne, but he does not share his full concerns about their bloodline with her. Instead, all he hints at his discomfort that "Banquo and his Fleance liv[e]" (Shakespeare 3.2.36). She cannot understand his perturbation and begs him to "leave this", assuming that he will, and they can rule without fear of the Scottish lords rising up and questioning the legitimacy of their rule (Shakespeare 3.2.34).

In her most famous sleep-walking scene, she shows her yearning for the absence of blood. She tries continuously to wash it from her hands all while crying the infamous words “Out damned spot!” (Shakespeare 5.1.30). If we read her fear of this blood as an indication of her guilt in the same way as Macbeth, we are missing the heart of her plea and then her assumptions throughout the play. She did not murder anyone and therefore does not have the same connection to guilt that Macbeth does when he sees the bloody evidence of his crimes. Instead, her fear of the blood on her hands is the fear that her remorse, her own blood, her gender still remains—that her pleas were not answered. She is not afraid to face the guilt of her deeds. She is afraid that she has not fully escaped her gender and therefore cannot hold the right to power. As she implies in her cries at the beginning, she cannot hope to win and maintain authority if she retains her gender and so this fear of blood is more about the fear that she has not lost her gender. When she reacts to the blood on her hands, she has to continuously convince herself that she need not feel any remorse because “what’s done/ cannot be undone” (Shakespeare 5.1.60-61) or fear that someone will usurp them because “none can call [their]/ power to account” (Shakespeare 5.1.34). But all the while, she knows that the blood she sees on her hands is evidence that she has not escaped her femininity and therefore will never be able to hold onto the power that she has grasped.

In the end, the only one that Lady Macbeth does any explicit violence towards is herself. We only have a brief account of her suicide when it is reported by Malcom, but in this last mention on Lady Macbeth, we see that she has perhaps finally achieved a masculine connection to violence. When she kills herself, she connects to the violent connotations of blood that she has avoided thus far. Driven mad by the haunting image of blood that reminds her that she will never be able to lose her gender entirely, and now

certain that she has perhaps doomed herself and her husband by unsexing herself, she knows the only way to rid herself of the marks of femininity is by realigning herself with the masculine relationship to blood. So, she used her bloodstained “violent hands” and “took off her life” (Shakespeare 5.7.100-101). She has reached the connection to blood that Macbeth had at the beginning of the play. She is associated with blood not because she is a woman but because she is violent. It is worth asking, then, would the Lady Macbeth, who was finally able to connect to the masculine violence of blood, have been able to overcome her gender and rule Scotland? Is the very act that ends her life the one that would have been able to allow her to transcend gender and rule without fear of her own legitimacy?

If Lady Macbeth’s first plea is technically answered and the spirits do unsex her, then Shakespeare’s representation of Lady Macbeth really gives us an example of a woman who was doomed to fail in her performance of gender from the beginning, just like Elizabeth I. We must always be careful not to read the end of the Tudor period onto the beginning. To those who lived at the time of Elizabeth’s ascension to the throne, it was almost assured that Elizabeth would marry within the next few years. Her first speech to Parliament is completely consumed with the question of marriage despite the fact that she now famously to us never did. However, Shakespeare was also living in an age that knew the ending. He began writing just as Elizabeth reached the age when she would have been unable to bear children. So, we can assume that Shakespeare is reading back the end of her story onto the beginning. We can assume that he looked at the beginning of her reign, knowing that she would never marry or produce an heir. This new context gives us the ability to understand that when Shakespeare allows Lady Macbeth to unsex herself and become infertile, he is dooming her to the same ending as

Elizabeth. He is allowing her to choose, in the way that Elizabeth did, royal authority and power by abandoning her gender over the eventual ability to provide a stable succession for their rule.

When she cries for the spirits to unsex her, Lady Macbeth believes that she has the chance of both abandoning her gender in order to hold royal authority and eventually succeeding because of the abandonment, but Shakespeare never gives us any indication that this abandonment was ever possible. So, in the years following Elizabeth I's death Shakespeare creates a character that chooses to forego her own gender in order to hold royal authority, following an Elizabethan example, but she never has any chance of success. She has ultimately failed at her performance of gender because she has not escaped what it means to be a woman: to be defined by her ability to produce an heir.

She is unable to finally achieve success because her husband is so concerned with the fact that they will leave their throne to the line of Banquo that he cannot be satisfied with the murder of Duncan. He feels as though he has no choice but to kill Banquo because he cannot reign while knowing that he is keeping the throne warm for "the seeds of Banquo" (Shakespeare 3.1.70). He then proceeds without Lady Macbeth's knowledge to try and secure the throne for their line without knowing that Lady Macbeth has actually already begged to be unable to bear children. She has chosen to prioritize their current reign success over that of their future children. Macbeth cannot separate the success of their reign from the eventual question of succession. He is obsessed with leaving the throne to their legitimate children when Lady Macbeth has all but made that impossible.

The story of *Macbeth* is one that makes us question everything about the right to royal authority and legitimacy. The Scotland that Shakespeare portrays is torn asunder

by the constant battles for the throne, not unlike the recent history of England during the Wars of the Roses. Shakespeare could have easily created a story that focused on a masculine battle for legitimacy as most of histories do and in a way that would paint James as the victorious king who wins the final claim to the throne, connecting him to his not-so-distant ancestor Henry VII. Instead, he adds Lady Macbeth, her ambitions, and her complicated relationship to her own gender into his story. She is the reason that the plots escalate. Her desire to be unsex and her lack of forethought about a line of succession are the reason that Macbeth cannot hold onto the power that they have fought to hold. She is unable to predict what her plea to be infertile will cause, and so dooms them to a fruitless reign fraught with the question of succession and legitimacy.

Much like the Tudor kings, specifically King Henry VIII, Macbeth finds himself consumed with the question of his legacy and successor almost more than his own reign and the current political turmoil of the realm. Macbeth finds himself willing to jeopardize his own rule in order to have the opportunity to have legitimate heirs and assure their succession to the throne. Shakespeare gives us a mirror then not only to the politics of Elizabethan England but also a reflection of her father's readiness to abandon Catholicism, jeopardizing the stability of his own reign, England's place on the European stage, and even his possible eternal salvation just in order to marry Anne Boleyn and have the chance at producing a legitimate male heir. When we consider the precedence of the anxiety of legitimacy in Tudor England, Macbeth's actions and eventual downfall can be interpreted in a uniquely early modern context. Macbeth's reign fails because of his attempts to secure an eventually succession just as Henry's attempts to secure a male heir eventually lead to bloody rebellions in the wake of the English Reformation. Macbeth, then, is a play that focuses on the anxiety of succession

and legitimacy and the apocalyptic implications of a kingdom left without a legitimate and uncontested heir.

All her work to unsex herself in order to hold royal authority and power amounts to nothing because the Macbeths have no one to pass their legacy to. So, a Jacobean reading of the play that eliminates the implications from the end of Elizabeth's reign and the succession crisis also erases the performance of gender from the play. In tandem, a reading which only considers the unsexing of Lady Macbeth as a way for her to live without remorse eliminates the way the play mirrors Elizabeth's own attempts to remove herself from her gender throughout her reign. Lady Macbeth does not just want to be unsexed to remove her remorse and guilt. She wants to make herself able to hold royal authority and power at whatever cost. A Jacobean reading focuses too much on Macbeth and his associations with the insecurity of the time immediately following the Gunpowder plot without recognizing the connection to Elizabeth and her constant desire to be viewed as something outside and above her own gender. If Shakespeare had intended to write a play solely about the apocalyptic nature of the time immediately following the Gunpowder plot and the new English identity with a Scottish king, he would have written Macbeth without Lady Macbeth at all. Instead, he provides us with a mirror to Elizabethan constructions of a gender performance that ultimately fails because both Lady Macbeth and Elizabeth could not provide an heir for their kingdom.

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Chapter Three:

An Aging, Foolish Monarch:

The Destruction of Mythic Cordelia and the Creation an Elizabethan Lear

Shakespeare's *King Lear* is often considered one of his most heartbreaking tragedies. Unlike *Macbeth* or *Antony and Cleopatra*, the title character does not plot for more power or scheme for total control. Lear is, instead, an aging king who only wishes to live out the remainder of his life unburdened and without care for the nuances of running his kingdom. The immense tragedy in the play comes, then, from Lear's refusal to take up the mantle of kingship. In *Lear*, Shakespeare paints for his audience a picture of a King who abandons his duties, leaving his kingdom to the throngs of uncertainty. Lear pays the price for his folly, living to see everything he ever loved crumble before his eyes. In the final scene, Lear exhibits his pain and sorrow to the audience as he carries the body of his youngest daughter.

“Re-enter KING LEAR, with CORDELIA dead in his arms; EDGAR, Captain, and others following

Howl, howl, howl, howl! O, you are men of stones:
 Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them so
 That heaven's vault should crack. She's gone for ever!
 I know when one is dead, and when one lives;
 She's dead as earth. Lend me a looking-glass;
 If that her breath will mist or stain the stone,
 Why, then she lives.” (Lear 5.3.255-264)

Lear's words ring out as some of the most heartbreaking in all of Shakespeare's works.

As he stumbles and carries the body of his youngest daughter on stage and presents it to

the audience and the others on stage, he cries out these gut-wrenching lines before obsessively checking for signs of life. Throughout the play, Cordelia stands as a symbol of familial loyalty and moral obligation to her father. She is the only one of his daughters who does not try to grasp for his power, but she is rewarded with a gruesome and heartbreaking death. Though she has become the Queen of France and committed to attempting to rescue her father's land from her wicked sisters, her life ends in tragedy. Much like the rest of Shakespeare's tragedies, the play ends with bodies littered all across the stage—Regan, Goneril, Lear, and his fool just to name a few. So why should Cordelia's tragic ending stand out to us? The answer lies in a much older creation of Cordelia that dates back to the stories of King Arthur and his round table. Geoffrey of Monmouth writes of a Cordelia whose life, legacy, and accomplishments far surpass those of Shakespeare's Cordelia, who becomes but a shadow of her mythic figure's towering presence.

Shakespeare changes his Cordelia's story from one of military success and epic rule to one of failure and tragedy in the few years after the death of England's most successful queen. He is interested in bringing a mythic queen like Cordelia to her knees, even showing her as a crumpled body in the middle of the stage and erasing her accomplishments and legacy as Lear drags her from offstage. By erasing any trace of Cordelia the legendary queen, Lear also erases our ability to find any connection between Elizabeth I and the mythic Cordelia, leaving us to draw similarities between the foolish, aging Lear and the last years of Elizabeth's reign.

In Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, the story of Leir and his daughters begins exactly like Shakespeare's retelling. Leir asks his daughters how much they love him and then divides his kingdom amongst them. While her older sisters Regan and

Goneril flatter their father with odes to their love for him, Cordelia refuses to flatter her father and play along with his game. Though Leir is very clear that he wants to give Cordelia the largest and best portion of his kingdom, she continues to refuse to flatter him until he eventually banishes her, stripping her of her family ties, her home, and her dowry. Shakespeare's story does not begin to stray until Leir's response to his mistreatment from his older daughters. In Monmouth's telling, he claims that an exiled Lier flees to his youngest daughter who has married the King of the Franks (despite her lack of dowry) where she welcomes him with open arms and agrees to launch a military campaign against her sisters. He allows Cordelia the chance to not only reconcile with her father but also to show her father how much she loves him by fighting for his crown and their home. Unlike Shakespeare's version, Cordelia succeeds in her invasion of Britain and reinstalls her father as king for the rest of his life.

Shakespeare's own retelling leaves Cordelia with none of the success of the original myth. Though Cordelia maintains her mythic strength in some ways, she is limited by Shakespeare's choices for her character. He chooses time and time again to change her story into one of failure when the mythic story is one that champions her strength, military success, loyalty to her family, and ability to rule. She does not really even have the chance for a reconciliation with her father. The last time they see each other, he barely recognizes her. Unlike the myth which gives Lear the chance to ask for his daughter's forgiveness and gives them the opportunity to launch a campaign together, Shakespeare's play gives us a heartbreaking story of a daughter striving to reconcile with her father who barely remembers who he is. They never get the chance to move forward in their relationship past the initial fracture. Then, to erase Cordelia's successful legacy even more, her campaign to invade Britain, defeat her sisters, and

reinstall her father as his rightful heir fails miserably. Shakespeare takes her military victory away from her entirely, leaving her with nothing but the tragedy and consequences of her failure.

Shakespeare is not just straying from the mythic conception of King Lear and Cordelia but also the contemporary use of the tale as an homage to successful queenship. In 1594 nearly ten years before Elizabeth's death, another telling of the British myth was staged for Elizabeth and her court by the Queen's Men. The play was called *The True Chronicle History of King Leir and his three daughters* and adhered though it has not survived the waves of time and criticism as the tales later creation it relies, "heavily on [its] sources for the genre and plot, which preserve the fairy-tale like conclusion of a rescued and triumphant Lear, whose daughter Cordelia will live to inherit his kingdom" (Ioppolo 165). Though we do not know the author of this play, its performances throughout the 1590s by multiple troops lets us know that the story itself was an appealing one for the Elizabethan crowd. The tale of a mythic female queen restoring the legacy of her family and her father is one that would have rung true for avid supporters of Elizabeth (especially those who would cast Mary into the role of either Regan or Goneril). The comparison to Cordelia is a particularly attractive one for Elizabeth because of its themes of restoration, a return to a golden age that is tied to a connection with her father.

When we examine the final ending scene of Shakespeare's retelling of Lear against the earlier version from the 1590s, Cordelia's tragic end becomes even more heart wrenching. In the earlier version, the play ends with the lines:

Ah, my *Cordella*, now I call to mind,

The modest answer, which I tooke vnkind:

But now I see, I am no whit beguild,
 Thou louedst me dearely, and as ought a child (*The true Chronical*).

Leir ends the play with an apology to Cordelia, mending his relationship with her and paving the way for them to move forward together. The play ends with a parallel to the opening scene when Leir asks Cordelia to prove her love to him. Now, in the last moments he ends with the answer to the question that he asked. He is able to understand why she could not give him the answer that he wanted. He is able to understand her in a new way after their battles, journeys, and growth together. His words admit his own wrongdoing while acknowledging all that Cordelia has done for him. This moment of reconciliation restores their relationship and allows Cordelia to become the undisputed heir of Leir's entire kingdom.

A plague upon you, murderers, traitors all!
 I might have saved her; now she's gone for ever!
 Cordelia, Cordelia! stay a little. Ha!
 What is't thou say'st? Her voice was ever soft,
 Gentle, and low, an excellent thing in woman.

I kill'd the slave that was a-hanging thee (Lear 5.3.?)

In the last moments of Shakespeare's rendition of the famous British tale, he plays with Lear's broken and babbling verse to create a troubled, sobbing, last farewell to his youngest daughter. Where the version from the 1590s allows for a true reconciliation, Shakespeare takes all hope of redemption away from his audience. Instead, Lear carries the body of his youngest daughter back onto the stage, howling in grief as he does. This stage direction "*Re-enter KING LEAR, with CORDELIA dead in his arms*" has become one of the most upsetting and powerful in all of Shakespeare's works. The broken, bent,

lost, and feeble Lear stumbles back on stage holding the dead body of the daughter that he cast aside. He screams in unimaginable pain, becoming almost animal-like in his cries. Though Lear draws most of the focus in this scene, what does Cordelia's limp and lifeless body bring to the final image that we have of the once mythic queen?

The image of Cordelia that Shakespeare leaves us with is heartbreakingly tragic, but also an insult to the legacy of the mythic Cordelia. The warrior queen who led an army against her sisters, defeated them in battle, restored her father, and then ruled after him is reduced to a crumpled corpse in the mass of bodies. She is just one of the casualties of the war caused by Lear's shortsightedness and trust in his daughters. Shakespeare's story with its lack of redemption rings true more as a story about the dangers of uncertain inheritance. Cordelia is first offered the largest and most valuable part of the country "more opulent than her sisters" (Shakespeare 1.1.84).

Elizabeth fights her entire reign to legitimize herself by drawing parallels with her father. The fear of illegitimacy underpins her entire reign from the moment that she comes to the throne. With the Pope's bull of excommunication, the war with Spain, Mary Queen of Scot's marriage to Lord Darnely, claim to the English throne, and subsequent plots to overthrow Elizabeth, the Essex rebellion and the religious unrest, Elizabeth's biggest challenge proved time and time again to be convincing the English people that she was meant to sit on the throne of England. The Leir myth in its original form which emphasizes Cordelia's victorious war and her undisputed connection with her father, then, gave the English people another figure with which to associate Elizabeth. Cordelia is the ideal queen who reinstates her father's power and legitimacy and then takes over for him when he dies of old age. But the Cordelia that Shakespeare writes for his audience is one that has no sure and firm connection to her father. She has

no claim to the English throne because she has not won it from her sisters and has not reclaimed her status as an heir to her father. So, when Shakespeare denies her a reconciliation with her father and victory over her sisters, he also denies her the chance at gaining back her own legitimacy and her place in the line of succession.

Elizabeth, as the third child of Henry VIII to sit on the English throne had to find her own unique way of relating and reinstating the memory of her father in order to reemphasize her legitimacy. Some of the earliest years of her life were spent in exile from court, from her father, and from her ties to the Tudor family in general. She was declared a bastard and cut off from her right to the throne and to a relationship with Henry. A story like Cordelia's immediately draws upon those themes of abandonment and exile. Cordelia, though the favorite of her father, is cast aside because of their mutual stubbornness (a trait that Elizabeth always attributed to her father). In the end, Cordelia reconciles with her father by winning back his throne for him. She reinstates him as ruler, prying it back from the hands of her sisters who have torn their own country asunder. Though Elizabeth never has the chance to win her father's throne back for him, she does have the chance to restore his way of ruling. After Mary's return to the Catholic church and Protestantism, the England that Henry built in the latter half of his reign had vanished. England's independence from the church in Rome was gone. So, in the year following Elizabeth's coronation in 1559, "the new Elizabethan regime proclaimed religious injunctions that were intended to undo the policies of the preceding Marian regime and to resume the interrupted work of reformation" (Montrose 110). Elizabeth was able to immediately seize her chance to align herself with her father and his legacy by restoring his system of religion. Though Henry could not be restored by Elizabeth in actuality as Leir was by Cordelia in the original myth, Elizabeth

truly believed that she was bringing back his vision for their country and therefore restoring him to power in her own way.

When Shakespeare denies his Cordelia a true reconciliation with her father and the chance to work alongside him, he is undermining Cordelia's claim to her father's legacy. She is not his clear heir in the way that she is in the myth. She does not have his blessing and claim to his throne because he is not in the mind to endorse her campaign and fight alongside her. More than this, Cordelia is never formally restored to her place as Lear's daughter. In the beginning of the play, Lear disinherits her even going as far to say,

Here I disclaim all my paternal care
Propinquity and property of blood
And as a stranger to my heart and me

Hold thee from this forever (Shakespeare 1.1.111-114).

He denies even his blood connection to her, effectively removing her from the line of succession, refusing to pay her dowry, banishing her from the kingdom, and severing any bond between them in one line. Though Lear and Cordelia do reunite later on, he barely recognizes her. When he does finally grasp who she is, he immediately asks if she has "poison for" him, fearing that she will abuse him like her sisters (Shakespeare 5.1.74). He knows that he has done wrong to her and mistreated her, but he does not exactly give her an apology and he certainly makes no claims that she is his one and only heir. So, Cordelia dies, still disinherited and removed from the line of succession.

When Shakespeare then allows Cordelia's military campaign to end in failure and capture, he places the blame of Lear's death on Cordelia's failure to succeed in a military venture. In the end, both Lear and Cordelia die because of her invasion of Britain. Had

Cordelia taken Lear back to France with her, they both could have lived, but her desire to win back her country without the express support of her father leaves her with only a tragic ending. Shakespeare's retelling of the Lear story and his recharacterization of Cordelia only severs her ties with her father's legacy, her military victory, and her claims to the throne.

The parallels between Cordelia of Britain and Elizabeth I emerge from the traits that Shakespeare seeks to erase in his retelling. Because the story of Cordelia of Britain is one that loomed large in the British imagination, her story and legacy would have been well-known. As one of England's only mythic queens, her victory in battle and role as the successor of her father would have been well-known. The Leir play that originated in the 1590s gives us the opportunity to understand the way that Elizabeth wanted to present herself as the successor, undisputed heir, and legitimate ruler of England following her two siblings. The Cordelia character carved out mythic space for Elizabeth to inhabit once she had taken the throne. She was a mythic warrior queen who was able to reinforce her father's reign while still maintaining her own right to rule. Elizabeth is the perfect example of a woman who needed to draw a connection to her legitimacy in order to justify her own reign to her people.

Henry VIII rose to the throne as the only legitimate living heir of his father Henry VII. After years of uncertainty, war, bloodshed, and battles over legitimacy, Henry VIII emerged as the only legitimate heir to the throne of England. He would never struggle in the way that his father had, scraping to grasp even the smallest bit of legitimacy and power, but he faced his own anxieties of legitimacy as he struggled to produce a male heir, tried to enforce a new religion in England, and even fought a war with France. Like Lear, Henry leaves his kingdom to three children, though it was certainly never his

intention that all three of them would somehow inherit it. Despite the odds, Elizabeth eventually claims her father's throne, but she must fight to retain a connection with his legacy. When Lear erases the connections that Cordelia builds with her father at the end of the play, he is erasing a story of a daughter's reconciliation and reinstatement of her father. He is erasing a version of Elizabeth's story.

Shakespeare's rendition of the Lear myth and his choices to erase a mythic Cordelia and her chance to reconcile with Lear are situated in their own unique category that resist both the Elizabethan period that immediately precedes them and the Restoration period that follows later. In Nahum Tate's rendition of the play in the 1660s, he harkens back to the original source material, ending his play with the restoration of Lear and a reconciliation for Cordelia and her father. Though there are many reasons that a Restoration audience would have better received a play that ended in a restoration of the monarchy itself, Tate's later version makes the distinctions that Shakespeare chooses to create even more pronounced. Shakespeare's erasure of Cordelia as a possible mythic warrior queen takes with it the possibility of a connection between Elizabeth and Cordelia that would remind the audience of the early Jacobean period of Elizabeth's successes in the military, colonization, and even religious toleration. So, Shakespeare, if he is expressly trying to avoid the characterization of Elizabeth as the mythic Cordelia, is also trying to create a different narrative and draw different parallels to the recently deceased queen and her political strategies.

This erasure of the mythic Cordelia allows Shakespeare to draw upon other Elizabethan themes that highlight the anxiety and fear that came to a boiling point in the last years of her reign. Like he does with Lady Macbeth and Cleopatra, Shakespeare yet again allows his ill-fated monarch to adopt Elizabethan political strategies that will

lead him to eventual ruin. The Lear story is one rooted primarily in the chaos of an uncertain succession. Our first glimpse of Lear and his plans for succession should immediately grab our attention and stir inside us fears and doubts about the security of the state that Lear is set to leave behind.

Know that we have divided
In three our kingdom: and 'tis our fast intent
To shake all cares and business from our age;
Conferring them on younger strengths, while we
Unburthen'd crawl toward death (Shakespeare 1.1.35-39)

These few lines, the first we hear Lear utter in the play, are ones that would not seem controversial, nerve-wracking, or anxiety-inducing to a modern-day audience. We see an old man bequeathing his kingdom to his daughters so that he can essentially retire from life as king of England. He is choosing to abdicate his throne in the hopes of living the remainder of his life in relative peace. However, to an early modern audience, most especially an early modern English audience, these few lines and Lear's choice to divide his kingdom would have been unimaginable. In a land where primogeniture was the primary way to ensure the peaceful transition of power to the next generation, Lear's choice to divide his kingdom amongst not one but three of his children all of whom are women, would have immediately induced an enormous amount of anxiety amongst the audience. They would have sensed the doom that the rest of the play held because there is an immediate uncertainty in the future of the realm.

For an early Jacobean audience specifically, this opening scene would have stirred very recent anxieties of uncertainty that had only just been quelled. Just three years before the first performance of Lear, Elizabeth, who was nearing the age of

seventy, still refused to name a sole heir to the throne. In March of 1603 after nearly forty-five years on the English throne, Elizabeth died in her palace in Richmond without an heir, fulfilling the worst fears of her subjects and leaving her country in the throngs of uncertainty. Their failure to convince Elizabeth to spare them this fate, however, was not for lack of effort. Since her first day in parliament after her coronation, Elizabeth had been hounded by her ministers, advisors, and counselors to marry and produce an heir to sure up the line of succession as quickly as possible. Just five years after her coronation, the Commons yet again petitioned Elizabeth to marry. Unlike the other petitions before, this one includes clear examples of the dire consequences of Elizabeth's choice to remain unmarried with no heir. They beg her to consider:

what ensued the death of great Alexander, when for want of certain heirs by him begotten or appointed, the varieties of titles... destroyed the dividers of his dominions and wasted their posterity with mutual wars and slaughters. In what miserable case also... between two royal houses of Lancaster and York, till your most noble progenitors King Henry VII and the Lady Elizabeth his wife restored it to settled unity and left the crown in certain course of succession... so we your most humble subjects... have most carefully considered how the want of heirs of your body, and of certain limitation of succession after you, is most perilous to your highness. (Elizabeth 74)

This petition comes when Elizabeth is not yet thirty years old and still of very marriageable age. None of her advisors or subjects dreamed that she would never marry, but their pleas had become more desperate. This plea contains references to the absolute chaos that followed both a notable historic succession crisis and then one in recent English history. Her subjects employ two very interesting tactics to attempt to

convince Elizabeth that a secure succession is of the utmost importance. First, they relate her to Alexander the Great, one of the most successful rulers in all of history who inherited his throne from his father at about twenty, almost the same age as Elizabeth was at the time of her coronation. He went on to build the most successful empire that had ever existed up until that point, but he died suddenly at the age of just thirty-three, leaving his empire to a handful of generals who divided up his kingdom amongst themselves. By comparing Elizabeth to Alexander, they are complementing her skills as a ruler and the certainty of her future success but still alluding to the inevitability of her death and its dire consequences. The sudden and unexpected death of Alexander led to immediate war and centuries of unrest amongst the descendants of his Diadochi. By invoking this allusion to classical history, one that Elizabeth certainly would have been familiar with, they are flattering her while urging her to become even greater than the greatest ruler of all time by avoiding his last and greatest mistake.

In invoking the memory of her grandparents, they are settling her with the responsibility and the legacy of security. They refer to Henry VII and Elizabeth of York as her “most noble progenitors” and go on to say that they left their crown to a “certain course of succession” that would include Elizabeth. They are gifting Elizabeth both with the reassurance that she carries a legacy of security with her in her blood while still urging her to fulfill her duty and follow in her grandparents’ footsteps. They go on to add King Alexander of Scotland to their list of monarchs who have left their country to the uncertainty of an unsteady succession. We could very well add Leir to this list as well, comparing his actions to Alexander’s and adding him to the list of cautionary tales for Elizabeth to learn from. At the end of this speech, we are left with the certainty that Elizabeth will be counted among some of the greatest rulers, including her own

grandparents, only if she is able to avoid the mistake of leaving her country to the throngs of uncertainty.

Though her refusal to name an heir explicitly may seem like an obvious error to a modern audience who knows the unrest and discomfort that it caused in her country, Elizabeth was well acquainted with the dangers that even an unnamed successor could pose to the security of a current rule. Soon into her reign, rumors began to circulate that perhaps her cousin Mary Queen of Scots might make a better queen of England especially for those who wanted to prolong the restoration of the Catholic faith in England after the reign of Mary I. Aside from solely religious claims, “Elizabeth I disputable legitimacy always raised the possibility that Mary’s precedence in blood made her true heir to the English crown rather than heir in waiting” (McLaren 946). Mary had inherited her own throne when she was just six days old as the only living child of her recently deceased father, meaning that her legitimacy had never been in question. Even more than this, she had almost exclusively carried the title of queen and not princess or worse bastard as Elizabeth had. As sole heir to her own throne, Mary’s hand in marriage was a coveted commodity and was eventually won by France when she agreed to marry Francis the Dauphin of France.

Mary’s claim to the English throne was of the greatest interest to her father-in-law Henri II, who was lobbying to have her named as Mary Tudor’s successor, effectively uniting England, Scotland, and France under Francis’ and Mary’s marriage. His plans would ultimately fail when Mary Tudor died and left her throne to Elizabeth. Despite the loss of succession, Henri, Francis, and Mary still claimed England for their own. Mary and Francis even “began to quarter the English royal arms with those of France” (Plowden 40). Over the next two years, Henri II died, leaving the throne to

Mary and Francis, who had every intention of attempting to claim the English throne for themselves. However, almost as quickly as she had become Queen of France, Mary lost the title when her husband Francis died after ruling for a little more than a year. Though she was now the dowager queen of France, Mary had no intentions of staying away from her mother country and the throne that was now hers to claim as sole ruler. She returned a widow from France back to Scotland to take her place as ruling Queen of Scotland in 1561. For the next two decades, Mary would become a thorn in Elizabeth's side and a constant threat to her legitimacy and security as queen of England.

Elizabeth tried desperately to come to agreements of peace with her cousin and fellow queen, but Mary wanted assurances as well. She believed that, next to Elizabeth, her claim was the strongest to the English throne and that this reality should have made her Elizabeth's heir since she showed no signs of marrying and producing one of her own. Elizabeth, knowing the dangers of acknowledging a living heir who was Catholic and already a queen in her own right of a neighboring country, refused Mary's requests. Eventually, after several disastrous marriages and political and religious unrest in her country, Mary fled to England in 1567 after abdicating her throne to her infant son, seeking Elizabeth's protection. Mary spent the next eighteen years under house arrest in England, removed from politics altogether. Elizabeth, still aware of the dangers that even her very existence posed for the legitimacy of her own reign in England, never allowed Mary or her correspondences to go unchecked (Plowden 161). In 1586, Elizabeth's constant surveillance and vigilance was rewarded when her agents discovered a plot to assassinate Elizabeth and install Mary as Queen, plotted by her countrymen but supported wholeheartedly by Mary.

To some, the discovery of the Babington plot and the execution of Mary was an eye-opening event that lent credibility to Elizabeth's reluctance to name an heir. One anonymous Elizabethan subject writes in favor of Elizabeth's political strategy to avoid public naming an heir saying,

The Queen of England has the most serious motives for not declaring who will be her successor, and it is for this reason that she does not let competitors confront each other; indeed, had she declared Mary—who has just been sentenced to death—as her next heir, she would soon have created a great number of enemies ready to threaten her life, and she would have given them even more cause to plot against her, and she would have stirred their hatred against her even more... she would have provided her subjects with a reason for daily conspiracies and aspirations. (Mayer 34)

This supporter writes in favor of Elizabeth's caution, giving us an entirely different perspective to that of the Commons. Here he uses Mary's treachery to show that if Elizabeth named her as the next in line, she would have only hastened Mary's plots against her. Written around the year of Mary's execution, this vote of support for Elizabeth gives modern day historians a glimpse into the two sides of the succession debate that Elizabeth faced. On the one hand, a successor like Mary with a strong claim to the throne could very easily stir up unrest and plots against Elizabeth. On the other, a scare like the Babington plot reinforced the desire for a clearly recognized successor. If a plot to assassinate Elizabeth were to succeed and she died with no recognized heir, the kingdom would fall immediately into civil war, fulfilling the prophecy and worst fears of the Commons. So, Elizabeth has no clear path forward. She is trapped in an impossible

riddle of succession where every decision carries the possibility of rebellion, assassinations, and plots.

Mary's execution and the Babington Plot in 1587 mark a shift into the extreme unrest of the last decade of Elizabeth's reign. The outright discovery of Mary's treachery and the willingness of Englishmen to aid in assassinating their queen and placing Mary on the throne places Elizabeth in an almost impossible position. She must either name an heir and prepare herself for assassination plots or remain silent on the subject of succession, sowing unrest and anxiety about the chaos her death would cause. In the end, the strategy that Elizabeth chose was to shore up her own reign by never naming a successor. She continued to rule as she had for the past thirty-five years as the sole heir to the throne with no mention of the inevitable day when she would no longer be Queen of England.

When *Lear* was first performed, James I had only been on the throne for about two and a half years. Despite his fairly quick succession to the throne, Elizabeth had never designated Mary Queen of Scots's son as her own heir. Shakespeare's retelling of *Lear*, with its lack of redemption, rings true as a story about the dangers of uncertain inheritance that the English people could certainly understand. *Lear* leaves his kingdom to chance by abandoning the law of primogeniture, dividing his kingdom into parts for his three daughters instead of deciding on one heir. In this way, the fear of illegitimacy and civil war rears its head again. *Lear's* mistakes and the uncertainty at the end of his reign gives us a new lens with which to view the end of Elizabeth's. *Lear* then is the new stand-in for Elizabeth in the play.

Instead of seeing Elizabeth in Cordelia's strength, youth, potential, honor for her elders and clear path to the throne, we see her in *Lear's* withered aging, his poor

decision making, his refusal to name a singular heir. By making *King Lear* a story focused solely on a succession crisis, Shakespeare also draws our attention to the characterization of his monarch who is the cause of all this turmoil. Throughout the play, Lear is haunted and eventually driven mad by his poor choices. He is not a reasoned, calculating monarch who has the best interest of his country in mind. Instead, we see a crumpled shell of a man who can barely speak coherently by the end of the play. Shakespeare changes the Lear story once again by making Lear a king who is crushed under the weight of his own decisions and his age. He even refers to himself as “foolish, fond old man,/ four score and upward” and admits that he fears he is “not in [his] perfect mind” (Shakespeare 5.1.61-65). He directly relates his age to his mental status and loss of coherence. The earlier version from the 1590s does not cast Lear as an aging monarch who has lost the ability to make sound decisions. Those around him do not question his judgments as much as they question his cruelty towards Cordelia in disowning her for seemingly no reason. They all lament her plight after his decision commenting on Lear’s behavior saying, “but God release her grief,/And send her father in a better mind,/Than to continue always so unkind” (*The True Chronical* 32). They do not question his sanity but his bad humor and blatant overreaction. So, Shakespeare’s choices yet again stray from the earlier version and emphasize another aspect of anxieties from the last years of Elizabeth’s reign.

Elizabeth died in 1603 at the age of sixty-nine as one of the oldest reigning English monarchs to date. Five of the six previous monarchs had all died of sickness before reaching their mid-fifties (with the exception being Richard III who was defeated and killed at Bosworth field at the age of thirty-two), making Elizabeth the oldest reigning monarch in recent history by almost fifteen years. It is no wonder, then, that

the last decade of her reign was filled with so much fear that focused on the inevitability of her death. As she continued to age into her sixties, the English people would have grown more and more sure that even the slightest sickness could potentially throw their kingdom into utter chaos. There was no monarch in recent history with whom they could compare Elizabeth as she grew older and older. So, when Shakespeare emphasizes Lear's age and his declining mental capacity, he gives us a reason for his poor choices and directly places him in the space of an aging, therefore foolish monarch. He is commenting on the way that Lear's age inhibits him from making the choices that are necessary for his country.

In his retelling of Lear, Shakespeare makes choices that transform the story of Lear from one of the triumph, restoration, and mythic legacy of the warrior Queen Cordelia into one of fragility, and foolishness of the aging Lear. In doing so, he erases our ability to draw connections between Cordelia and Elizabeth, leaving us, instead, with a new Elizabethan Lear who leads his country into utter ruin and uncertainty. He is crippled by his age and his initial choice to shirk his responsibility, leaving the succession to chance.

Shakespeare does not even allow us the relief of an eventual resolution to the succession problem. In the end, we are not quite sure who will inherit Lear's kingdom or, rather, the pieces of the kingdom that Lear, Regan, and Goneril have left behind. Shakespeare's retelling ends with these lines:

The weight of this sad time we must obey,

Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.

The oldest have borne most; we that are young

Shall never see so much, nor live so long (Shakespeare 5.3.325-328).

In the quarto version of the play, Albany says these last lines and therefore leaves us with the impression that he will inherit Lear's throne after simply outliving all of the better options. In the folio, the lines are assigned to Edgar, leaving us to assume that he and not Albany will inherit. This discrepancy, though it may in fact be just an editorial error, points us to an interesting conclusion: that we are left in a bit of a succession crisis at the end of the Lear story ourselves. We have no clear idea who should sit on the throne at the end of the play. Even if the two versions were the same, it is clear from our confusion about the endings that neither Albany nor Edgar make a compelling and irreplaceable successor. Even the last lines themselves do not point us towards a definite answer. They do not claim some heroic victory or a renewed legitimacy and authority. Whoever says them is not trying to immediately distinguish themselves as the new and undisputed heir

This ending feels very different from *Macbeth*, another tragedy whose end leaves the country in a power vacuum. Malcom's last words in the play are quite literally,

This and what needfull else

That call's upon us, by the Grace of Grace

We will perform in measure, time, and place

So thanks to all at once, and to each one

Whom we invite to see us Crown'd at Scone (Macbeth 5.7.396-400)

Malcom makes references both to his impending coronation and the duties that he will take on as the new king. In Shakespeare's *Lear*, there is no Malcom to claim power after the dust has cleared nor is there an obvious heir like Octavian in *Antony and Cleopatra*. In other words, there is no clear victor in this fight. This war was one born of a monarch's poor choices for his kingdom and his refusal to name a clear successor and it

ends in the same manner. Shakespeare is giving us a clear picture that a war fought because of the uncertainty of succession is never one that has a solid and undisputed victor. In the end, we are just as uncertain of who should fill the void of power. We are just as unsure about who should inherit as Lear was, perhaps, himself at the beginning of the play.

Considering the uncertainty, fear, and unsettling ending of the play, Shakespeare's creation of his new Lear might be his most tragic portrayal of Elizabethan political strategy. To draw the heartbreaking parallels between Lear and Elizabethan political strategies, Shakespeare must first erase any chance that we could find redeeming qualities of Elizabethan strategy and politics within Cordelia. To accomplish this, he slowly and painfully breaks down any hope Cordelia has of reconciling with her father, restoring him to the throne, earning back her inheritance, and eventually coming to the throne herself. The image of Cordelia that Shakespeare leaves us with instead of the triumphant one from the earlier versions is heartbreakingly tragic, but also an insult to the legacy of the mythic Cordelia. The warrior queen who led an army against her sisters, defeated them in battle, restored her father, and then ruled after him is reduced to a crumpled corpse that Lear must drag into the final scene in the mass of bodies.

When Shakespeare writes a version of the King Lear story that effectively destroys any chance for Cordelia to transform into her mythic self, we are left to only focus on Lear's mistakes, their consequences, and their parallels to the end of Elizabeth's reign. When we do, Shakespeare gives us a picture of a withered, foolish monarch who cannot make the right choices for his country and is left to the consequences of his own folly. Lear is haunted and plagued by his poor choices and lack of forethought for the future of his country. He dies with the chaos of the tragedy that he has caused all around him, leaving

us, his audience, with the burden of another succession crisis. We are the final inheritors of Lear's folly, and we leave the play with no surety that there will be a stable and final succession of power. Shakespeare's final parting gift to us at the end of Lear is the anxiety that all early modern England felt through the Succession Crisis and the last years of Elizabeth's reign.

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Conclusion

When this project began back in the winter of 2021, I was first set on exploring the ways that Shakespeare's writing demonstrates the anxieties of the early modern period at large. I began writing about the reigns of Mary I, Elizabeth, Mary Queen of Scots, and even Catherine de Medici while trying to draw conclusions about the way that Shakespeare ignores the success of queens in his own lifetime and instead writes queens who fail in their attempt to grasp for power. I was a little blinded myself by the shining light that we have painted onto the memory of Elizabeth's England. I thought about the ideas of a golden age of stability and expansion, Elizabeth's dazzling portraits and rousing speeches to her parliament and even her old soldiers. However, when I began to look more closely at the time that Shakespeare would have first begun to write, I found that the majority of those golden years of Elizabeth's reign had ended. She was aging,

and rapidly at that. I began to read some of her speeches to parliament and theirs back to her. I reconsidered James' place as her successor and the way that the English began to think about the end of Elizabeth's life and reign. As I discovered more and more about Elizabeth's own political strategy and the way that she tirelessly worked to not only keep her political power but also endear her people to her, I found a new direction and life for this project. I then started to look at the ways that Elizabeth strategically and maneuvered herself into the role of something more than a queen. She was fabulously difficult to pin down which made her even more difficult to undermine. She existed in the spaces between definitions for what a woman or a queen should be.

The thesis finally found its footing in the anxiety of legitimacy and succession which so pervaded every inch of the early modern English culture. Even Shakespeare's earliest plays centered around the drama of the Wars of the Roses which led to the most severe succession crisis that England would ever see. Succession and fear of instability was the cornerstone of all politics during this time period and Elizabeth, though she would die an unmarried woman with no biological heir, knew just how dangerous conversations surrounding succession could be. I was struck by the irony of Elizabeth's own place on the throne of England in general as a woman and as a woman who had been, at one point in her life, explicitly declared illegitimate. She was the daughter of a woman who clawed her way to the throne and a man whose hunt for a legitimate heir consumed his entire life and legacy. Elizabeth knew maybe better than anyone else in the world how important legitimacy and the promise of a peaceful succession was to a ruler.

In the end, I set out to examine Shakespeare through the lens of his own time. I feel as though modern audiences are so concerned with taking Shakespeare out of his

context and making his works relevant to us today. This is certainly a noble undertaking that ensures that his works continue to impact, challenge, encourage, comfort, and relate to us, but there is immense value in recognizing the fingerprints of early modern anxieties and fears all over some of our most favorite plays from Shakespeare.

Shakespeare's age was never one that viewed Elizabeth's reign as the certain and golden one that we see it as now. In recent years films, books, miniseries, and other forms of media and entertainment have often sought to cast Elizabeth into the nearly god-like role of a woman who found a way to overcome the tremendous obstacles of her time and earn the respect of her contemporaries. In researching and spending time in the contemporary accounts of her reign and the years immediately following her reign, I have come to understand the extreme anxiety that surrounded her entire forty-five years on the English throne. Her father's decree following her mother's execution that named her a bastard followed her throughout the reign of her brother and her older sister. Her mother's controversial rise and even more disastrous fall cast her into the role of a temptress and whore before she had even reached the age of five. Her gender in and of itself proved to be a near herculean task to defeat and maneuver. Finally, her efforts to protect her own reign from pretenders, Catholic rebels, or heaven forbid a legitimate and recognized successor led to some of the most severe panic since the Wars of the Roses themselves.

In short, Elizabeth posed a difficult problem to her contemporaries because she did not have any man to answer to. She was a queen with no husband and therefore no man to rule her. Moreover, she was a protestant queen who assumed the head of the church of England, meaning that she did not answer to the pope either. There was no man in the whole of England who could possibly overrule her or question her authority.

Though she did a great deal to attempt to ensure that her people saw her as something beyond just a woman, the dangerous anxieties that emerged in the last years of her reign reminded people of her mortality and, therefore, her shortcomings. When Shakespeare writes about ill-fated monarchs, he is really drawing our attention to their humanity and their mortality. He is showing us that despite their larger than life personalities, or ravings, or plans, or schemes, in the end, they were mortal and made mortal mistakes. His plays that show us the ends of ill-fated monarchs mirror the outcome of the Succession Crisis of the 1590s at large. It may not have been an intentional commentary on Elizabeth and her success or failure as a monarch, but Shakespeare's use of Elizabethan political strategies in the characterization of some of his most ill-fated monarchs is most certainly a reflection of the popular opinions of the time.

I hope that by reading this thesis, you have come to see the Elizabethan period in a new and more complicated light. I think that is one of the most powerful tools that I have learned to sharpen throughout the course of this year. In seeing Elizabeth through the lens of some of her most trying political periods and through the harsh lens of the Jacobean period, I have come to appreciate her political strategies even more. She was a brilliant woman and queen, but she was not impervious to controversy or criticism.

If Shakespeare's works can tell us anything, it is that the Elizabethan time was one filled with as much uncertainty as our own. There was no surety that we would all remember Elizabeth as the greatest queen in English history or Shakespeare as one of the greatest writers that the world has ever known. It is this uncertainty and controversy that makes for the best literature because it will always be applicable to every generation. There is something wonderfully terrifying about never knowing how we will be remembered or what will come next. Shakespeare remembers Elizabeth in the years

after her as something entirely different than what we choose to see. His critique of her reign and retelling of her legacy is one that has endured quietly throughout the centuries, hidden in some of his most famous works. While we have remembered her strength and power, he reminds us that security is never guaranteed.