

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES

GIVING UP THE GHOST: THE JACOBAN ELIZABETH IN  
*THE REVENGER'S TRAGEDY* AND *HENRY VIII, OR ALL IS TRUE*

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## ABSTRACT

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The Elizabethan era has traditionally been seen as the Golden Age when burgeoning commercial, military, and literary success fostered the beginnings of an English national identity. However, this positive portrayal of the reign of Elizabeth I obscures any negative representations of the virgin queen, particularly after her death and the ascension of James I in 1603. This research project examines the early constructions of the Elizabethan mythos from 1603 to 1613, especially in the realm of drama, performance, and visual representation. *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1606) and *Henry VIII* (1613) represent early shifts in how people remembered the queen as both feature and yet obscure Elizabeth as a character of agency. I assess the absent presence of Elizabeth I in the two plays in order to illuminate what female authority meant in a post-Elizabethan world. Drawing on contemporary historical accounts, portraiture, processions, and other tracts, I attempt to characterize a negative discourse surrounding the queen in the early years after her death, a discourse which *The Revenger's Tragedy* and *Henry VIII* respond to and participate in. Unlike previous scholarship that views Jacobean portrayals of Elizabeth as nostalgic in light of James's corrupt court, I contend that literary representations of the deceased monarch reflect the residual tensions from her final years, which haunt the early cultural memory of the virgin queen. Through this examination of the posthumous Elizabeth on the Jacobean stage, I hope to contribute to our understanding of early modern views on queenship and to complicate notions of Elizabeth as the legendary virgin queen.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

While much of the Elizabethan mythos was evoked by later generations who remembered the glory of the Elizabethan age in contrast with the political turmoil of the Stuart regime and Interregnum, Queen Elizabeth I had also engaged in her own image-making during her lifetime through both her own symbolic actions during procession events and her influence on writers commenting on her regime. From Spenser's iconic *Faerie Queene* to sonnet sequences composed by courtiers, the 16<sup>th</sup> century cult of Elizabeth surrounded the maiden queen with a culture of adoration. Poets eager to curry favor with the queen wrote of Elizabeth's beauty, power, and the glory her reign had brought to England. While no living monarchs could be physically portrayed on the stage, theatrical performances frequently ended with a prayer praising Elizabeth. Such phrases such as the Golden Age and Gloriana reflect the legendary "greater than life" way in which Elizabeth was portrayed. Military successes such as the 1588 defeat of the Spanish Armada and the queen's ability to rule England without a husband all became a part of the legend of the virgin queen and even the title "virgin queen" seems to mythologize Elizabeth as a type of Virgin Mary figure, drawing her power and authority from her perceived innocence and chastity.<sup>1</sup> She is also often described as being politically shrewd, able to navigate tricky situations between competing factions and pesky suitors. In addition, Elizabeth is also famously portrayed as a queen who allowed for great religious freedom in contrast with her radically Catholic sister, Mary. All of these characteristics have become a part of the Elizabethan myth. Unlike any king or queen before her, Elizabeth Tudor was the first (and arguably the only) to be viewed as an object of worship, "someone who had become an unmarried ruler of legendary fame, a visionary figure towering above her realm of England, an

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<sup>1</sup> See Helen Hackett's *Virgin Mother, Maiden Queen: Elizabeth I and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Macmillan, 1995).

image of almost cosmic power. In a span of forty years an individual [had] been transposed into a symbol” (Strong, *Gloriana* 9).

However, such a positive representation of Elizabeth I is not the result of objective study of the Elizabethan Age. The Elizabethan mythos also carries with it the political implications of Elizabethan propaganda machine as the images of the queen that were perpetuated throughout her reign were carefully sculpted to provide the unmarried queen with an aura of authority and right to rule. Such positive imaginations of Elizabeth I unfortunately obscure discussion of any negative presentations of a queen presiding over a generally misogynistic society without a biological heir.

This thesis will employ a more narrow definition of the Elizabethan mythos, focusing only on the early constructions of the Elizabethan image up until 1613, the end of the first decade after her death. Therefore, the Elizabethan mythos will refer more to what was known, written, or praised about Elizabeth from the beginning of her reign to 1613. In addition, while Elizabeth’s reputation was clearly influenced by the sonnet vogue of the 1590s and Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* among other poetic praises of the queen, this paper focuses more on the way in which the Elizabethan mythos manifested itself in drama and performance, particularly in *The Revenger’s Tragedy* (1606) and *Henry VIII* (1613). *Henry VIII*, which dramatizes the Tudor king’s divorce from both Katherine of Aragon and the Catholic Church, concludes with the celebration of the baby Elizabeth’s birth. However, the Archbishop of Canterbury’s prophecies about the queen’s future accomplishments are overshadowed by predictions about the glories of her successor’s reign, shifting the significance of Elizabeth’s reign. *The Revenger’s Tragedy* paints a more obvious, yet problematic picture of contemporary attitudes towards Elizabeth’s legacy. Gloriana’s skull, an object which reinforces and spurs on Vindice’s thirst for revenge, provides a

daring statement about the late queen as the protagonist's poisoned fiancée bears the same name that was often given to Elizabeth during the later half of her reign. The baby Elizabeth in *Henry VIII* and Gloriana in *The Revenger's Tragedy* play a key role in advancing each respective plot and yet never materialize as characters on stage; instead, their images lie in the hands of the men around them. Written within a decade of Elizabeth's death, the plays represent early shifts in how people remembered the queen as well as how Jacobean politics affected her posthumous image.

The primary interest of my study is to look at what happens to representations of Elizabeth I after her death in 1603 and to examine the meaning that such a portrayal held in its social and historical context. With Elizabeth no longer in control of her own image, what becomes of the cult of Elizabeth? How do views about Elizabeth and her reign fluctuate and manifest themselves in the next decade? Do traditional attitudes about women, masculinity, and kingship return or change under her successor, James VI of Scotland? In terms of the two plays examined, how does Elizabeth's portrayal in each contribute or detract from the image of James as a suitable monarch and what does each representation say about the historical significance of her reign?

Scholars such as R.A. Foakes typically write off Jacobean portrayals of female rule, such as Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* and Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy*, as nostalgic, aiming to "momentarily recall the better days of the previous reign, as opposed to the corruption and extravagance that were quickly associated with the court of James I" (Foakes 11). References to Elizabeth in Jacobean literature are often viewed as concealed admonishments for James, who was criticized for selling royal property to pay for his lavish lifestyle. Literary criticism surrounding *The Revenger's Tragedy* are a quintessential example of this predominant view as

scholars such as Steven Mullaney perceive Vindice's poisoned fiancée, Gloriana, as an allegory for the damage that James's rule had done to the body of England, undoing the historical accomplishments of Elizabeth. Mullaney argues that Vindice's usage of Gloriana's skull in *The Revenger's Tragedy* "takes on a potent political meaning in reviving the memory of Elizabeth as a weapon against James" as an artifact of a past life returns to threaten the corrupt present establishment (Hyland 84). Although the skull is often associated with death, Mullaney is one of the few scholars to bring attention to the significance of the name of the dead fiancée and its implications for Elizabeth's legacy. If the poisoned Gloriana is an appropriate proxy for Elizabeth, then the Duke can be seen as a thinly veiled image of the king himself, nefarious and corrupt. The contrast between present and past regimes meant that praise of Elizabeth could serve either to chastise James or to urge him to behave more like the previous monarch. In describing the crystallization of the legendary image of Elizabeth as a popular and successful monarch after her death, John King writes that "Jacobean politics provided a motive for the anachronistic revival of the cult of Elizabeth as a model ruler whose perpetual virginity symbolized political integrity, Protestant ideology, and a militantly interventionist policy against Spain" (King, "Queen Elizabeth I" 67). Curtis Perry summarizes the general critical attitude towards Jacobean nostalgia "as a natural response to Jacobean failures of government. The shared assumption is that justifiable dissatisfaction with the new king forced Englishmen to retroactively re-evaluate their departed queen, seeing her in a more positive light by contrast with her successor" (Perry 153). Current literary scholarship on the posthumous representation of Elizabeth has therefore primarily concluded the depictions of the virgin queen in the two plays to be nostalgic, remembering the glories of the previous reign and speaking out against the corrupt Jacobean court.

However, although nostalgia certainly played a role in the people's memory of James's predecessor, it must be noted that Elizabeth had not always been popular throughout her reign. Queenship and female rule were still contentious issues in the seventeenth century as they were often regarded as anomalies and threats to patriarchal society.<sup>2</sup> Through an examination of the early constructions of the Elizabethan legend from Elizabeth's death in 1603 to 1613, I argue that early posthumous representations of Elizabeth reflect a marked ambivalence towards the death of the old queen. Over the course of the first decade after Elizabeth's death, however, public opinion regarding her legacy began to shift and solidify. *The Revenger's Tragedy* and *Henry VIII* help to represent this transition as nostalgia, misogyny, and deference towards the newly crowned king combine to create a mixed message regarding Elizabeth's legacy. The darker dramatic representations of Elizabeth I in the two plays represent a reversion to traditional perspectives on women and female authority as the concept of "queenship" becomes subverted into an endorsement of traditional kingship. I assess the absent presence of Queen Elizabeth in *The Revenger's Tragedy* and *Henry VIII* in order to illuminate what female authority and queenship signified in the post-Elizabethan world.

## II. THE RISE OF THE ELIZABETHAN MYTHOS

Before we can examine the subversion of the cult of Elizabeth on the Jacobean stage, we must first gain a cursory understanding of how the Elizabethan propaganda machine crafted the Queen's visual representation in the first place, a posturing that took place primarily in the form of portraiture. The production of royal portraits had been around before Elizabeth came into power. Still, Roy Strong points out in his now canonical text on the representation of the Virgin

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<sup>2</sup> See *Queens & Power in Medieval and Early Modern England*, edited by Carole Levin and Robert Bucholz (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2009).

Queen, *Gloriana: The Portraits of Queen Elizabeth I*, “When Elizabeth I succeeded her sister in 1558 she inherited a working tradition, but in her case it was to have one fundamental difference: she was never to have a court painter well paid by the crown and hence be able to sustain government control over her own image” (Strong, *Gloriana* 12). From the beginning, the Elizabethan regime lacked absolute control over the image of its new monarch, an issue especially problematic for a queen whose mother had been executed and had been third in line to inherit the throne. Early portraits of the young princess Elizabeth revealed nothing special about the future monarch; they presented what may be assumed to be a fairly accurate image of what she actually looked like rather than portraying Elizabeth as the embodiment of kingly virtues and power.

The later portraits of Elizabeth, however, show the Queen “advanced from a stiff but still recognizable human being to an icon, the apotheosized ruler of the post-Armada years” (Strong, *Gloriana* 77). In contrast with her predecessors, Elizabeth’s images were not simply artistic depictions of the current monarch, but a work of art meant to be copied and disseminated throughout the homes of her subjects. Noblemen often collected portraits of the female monarch to be displayed in their homes and, in the middle of the 1580s, it became fashionable for noblemen to carry miniatures of Elizabeth around as a sign of loyalty to the crown and to the Queen. The demand for images of the Queen was so high that the Privy Council had to ban hack renditions of known designs, which could endanger the Elizabethan message through its poor quality.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Elizabeth’s profile was placed on coinage and as Julia Walker points out, “the simple image of the queen, the profile on the coin, was recognizable to all, even if distinguished from other such images only by her gender. For the first time in medieval and

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<sup>3</sup> The main source for the miniatures and woodcuts was Nicholas Hilliard, who supplied the designs for Elizabeth’s image. In *Gloriana*, Strong shows how templates of the Queen’s face were replicated in numerous portraits with different clothing switched in.

early-modern Europe, we find an individual image, a non-religious icon, recognized and identified by the majority of the population” (Walker 12).

Images of Elizabeth were widespread and much of the manner of depiction and dissemination of the royal image took on the mariological qualities as the cult of Elizabeth replaced (or rather, filled) the void left by the cult of the Virgin Mary since the Protestant Reformation. Strong argues that, by the 1590s, the portraits of the maiden queen had become “cult images in every sense of the word. An impression of William Rogers’ *Eliza Triumphans* at Exeter is... [presented] much in the same way that an engraving of the Virgin would be adorned in a Catholic country” (Strong, *Gloriana* 32). These portraits, miniatures, and engravings occupied a unique role in Elizabethan England, “a Protestant country which had rejected other forms of holy image as idolatry” (Strong, *Gloriana* 36). Just as the Queen’s Accession Day celebrations was an adaptation of the old Catholic festival (probably the feast of the patron saint, St. Hugh of Lincoln), Elizabeth’s portrait was often treated as an object of worship, possessing the qualities of purity and chastity that had previously been attributed to Mary (Strong, *Cult of Elizabeth*, 118).

Indeed, Elizabeth herself may have encouraged this religious association, which bolstered her authority as a female ruler. During her coronation entry in January 1559, “having received an English Bible presented by the figure of Truth, Elizabeth kissed it, held it up, hugged it to her breast, and offered her thanks to the city” (Perry 173). By accepting the gift, Elizabeth shows her allegiance to the Protestant cause as the English Bible was a symbol of Protestantism as the Catholic Church still required the Bible to be read in Latin.<sup>4</sup> However, by playing along with this

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<sup>4</sup> While Henry VIII and her half-brother Edward had supported the Protestant cause, her predecessor Mary was radically Catholic and had instigated a reign of terror over subjects who refused to convert back to Catholicism. Thus, the English people were very anxious upon Elizabeth’s coronation regarding the new monarch’s religious leanings.

staged allegory of the monarch accepted the results of the Reformation from Truth, Elizabeth allows herself to become allegorized as well, elevating her to the level of the symbolic. From the beginning, Elizabeth was aware of the benefits of using her body to perform a symbolic religious message.

However, the Elizabethan attempts at image promotion could only go so far. The years went by, the Queen aged, and yet newer portraits continued to present the monarch as if she were a young supple girl of sixteen years; “as her country became weary, and a shade cynical about her posturing, the image promotion became more strenuous” (Loades 93). In Elizabeth’s final years, the Elizabethan iconography experienced what Strong terms as the “portrait crisis of the 1590s, namely the reconciliation of idea and reality in portraying a fast-ageing queen” (Strong, *Gloriana* 140).

### III. A CHILDLESS QUEEN: THE TENSIONS OF THE 1590S

Elizabeth was not always perceived (and praised) as the virgin queen.<sup>5</sup> King argues that even the celebration of Elizabeth’s virginity did not take its final form until after 1583. The English people had always assumed that the queen would eventually marry until the 1579-1583 marriage negotiations with her last suitor, François, duc Alençon, had failed<sup>6</sup> (King, “Queen Elizabeth I” 32). In fact, Parliament, both the Lords and the Commons, had repeatedly petitioned the Queen to marry throughout the 1560s and 70s (Loades 40). It was only after Elizabeth became too old to bear children that praise of the queen began to shift to that of Elizabeth as the virgin goddess Diana.

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<sup>5</sup> Although drama is not specifically discussed, the essays in Julia M. Walker’s *Dissing Elizabeth: Negative Representations of Gloriana* may form a useful background for the subversive discourse of discontent and dissent from Elizabeth’s days as a princess through the 1620s.

<sup>6</sup> However, support for François was significantly less than those for her previous two suitors, Charles of Austria and Henri, duc Anjon (incidentally François’s older brother). By the time of this third negotiation, many believed that the Queen was “past childbearing, and would be compromising herself and her realm for nothing” (Loades 54).

In fact, John Guy writes of a “second reign of Elizabeth I,” differentiating the period of 1585 to 1603 as culturally and politically distinct from the first half of the Queen’s reign. Not only was Elizabeth’s visual representation as the Virgin Queen solidified, but the manner in which the Queen ruled and positioned herself as a monarch had changed from that of her early years. Elizabeth was known to often delay in her decision making on important issues (most famously in her dealings with Mary Stuart’s trial and execution). Part of the young Elizabeth’s strategy early on was to simply allow problems to work themselves out without risking her own reputation as a competent ruler; presumably, she also meant to make it known to Parliament and her people that she was a key player in the new government by making them wait for her final word.

However, during her final decade, the nature of Elizabeth’s deliberate dilly-dallying began to seem more and more like the careless inaction of an old lady. While the members of her Privy Council aged and passed away one by one, Elizabeth declined to fill the vacancies or to strengthen the ranks of the nobility (Guy 4). The Queen’s influence gradually waned and “as the 1590s advanced, her inaction led to political marginalization as her mind and body aged. . . .decisions were taken on her behalf, and for the first time she tacitly condoned the fact” (Guy 4). In particular, during her later years, the Queen was susceptible to flattery. Written in the months immediately following Elizabeth’s death, John Clapham wrote of her, implying that “rather than a wise and feared master, the vain prince is the pliant instrument of her dissimulating and self-serving subjects” (Montrose 238). The courtship model of monarch-subject relations suited the Queen’s vanity, but also weakened her authority.

The elevation of Elizabeth’s body in portraiture in its connection to Virgin Mary may reflect the Elizabethan government’s attempts to curtail or mask the decline of the Queen’s

political power as she approached death. Unfortunately, even the realm of glamorous portraiture was not safe from the fragmentation of monarchical authority. The marginalization of the aging monarch manifested itself in the rise in demand for the images of other admired court figures. Strong notes, “By 1600 the royal image was having to share the stage with that of other heroes, Essex, Cumberland, Nottingham and Mountjoy” (Strong, *Gloriana* 32). The old Elizabeth had major competition in the popularity contest of early modern politics and, without an heir, she was afraid of it. In August 1600, the Privy Council reacted to the popularity of engravings made of noblemen and called in all such objects of admiration; in this reactionary order to purge the market of non-royal images, “we are witnessing the breakdown of the cult of Elizabeth” (Strong, *Gloriana* 32).

Elizabeth’s fear of being subjugated by the young noblemen of her court was a legitimate one. The Essex rebellion of February 1601 threatened the image of stability that she had worked so hard to maintain. Although the attempts of the second earl of Essex, Robert Devereux, to raise a revolt against the Queen ultimately failed, the event drew attention to Elizabeth’s carelessness. A king would not have allowed Devereux to overstep, but Elizabeth had allowed Essex to flatter her and play the part of the supplicating suitor. She had indulged her old favorite, tolerating his childish antics without curtailing the earl’s ambition; “the femininity which in many ways had served her so well, in this case had betrayed her” (Loades 100). Despite decades of propaganda, the cult of Elizabeth remained vulnerable and fragile, susceptible to physical and verbal attack.

Aside from the political problems of Elizabeth’s final years, English society also “experienced a number of strains and dislocations between 1585 and 1603: demographic pressures, poverty, bad harvests, plague, the burdens of warfare, all of these contributed to the problems faced by government and the governed alike” (Sharpe 209). The final years of the

Elizabethan era, threatened by rebellion, famine, and plague, began to make cracks in the veneer of the ideal Gloriana.

Finally, as the monarch approached the end of her life, anxiety began to settle in about who would succeed the childless queen. Regardless of who the next ruler would be, many were adamant that the country return to a traditional masculine model of kingship. In a 1602 *Tract on the Succession to the Crown*, Sir John Harington wrote, “Whensoever God shall call hir, I perceiue wee ar not like to be governed by a ladye shutt up in a chamber from all her subjects and most of her servants, and seen seeld but on holie-daies” (Harington 51). The mystical image of the Virgin Queen, although useful to the unmarried queen, also meant that Elizabeth had to paradoxically perpetuate the perception of Gloriana the Fairy Queen in public by keeping herself separate and hidden from view (“a ladye shutt up in a chamber”). As an object of worship to be seen “seeld but on holie-daies,” the Queen was portrayed as more of a mythic image than a real person. Elizabeth had to construct a royal image legitimizes her authority in a way that a male monarch would not have had to; perhaps Harington speaks to the desire for sovereign who did not have to resort to Petrarchan models of courtly love or religious affiliations with the Virgin Mary in order to maintain his power over his people.

Elizabeth had become increasingly unpopular towards the end of her reign, no doubt partly due to the anxiety over the succession and her unwillingness to name an heir. While there were fears regarding how Mary Stuart’s son James would treat a country that was not his homeland, Peter Hyland notes, “there was relief at the passing of a queen who, though greatly loved by her subjects, had become increasingly a burden on the public spirit” (Hyland 84). Regardless of James’s nationality, it seems that many were just glad that the new king was a man. Hyland suggests that the female monarch’s death “returned the kingdom to the ‘normality’

of patriarchy and, equally important, to a monarch who had sons, removing the possibility of a repetition of the nightmare of succession” (Hyland 84). Public opinion regarding Elizabeth’s reign was mixed at the time of her death and it was only after James proved himself to be a poor ruler uninterested in government affairs that the late queen’s stock began to rise again.

#### IV. TRANSITIONS OF POWER: THE DECAY OF THE FAÇADE

We must examine and attempt to characterize the specific cultural atmosphere of the early 1600s, from 1603 to 1606, in order to determine the significance of presenting the newly deceased virgin queen on stage in *The Revenger’s Tragedy* as Vindice’s murdered fiancé Gloriana. In doing so, it draws on contemporary historical accounts, portraiture, descriptions of processions and pageants, and other tracts. Through these contemporary representations of Elizabeth I, this thesis attempts to characterize a negative discourse surrounding Elizabeth in the early years after her death. Writings between 1603 and 1606, when *The Revenger’s Tragedy* was first performed, display both feelings of mourning over the queen and a sense of relief at the return to a male monarchy. It is to this discourse that *The Revenger’s Tragedy* responds to and participates in.

Elizabeth I died on March 24, 1603 at the age of 69. Although the people mourned the Queen’s death, many also rejoiced in the triumph of a new king; the courtiers especially were eager to curry favor with the new regime and had subsequently forgotten or discarded their loyalty to the old one. For several days, the body of the old Queen was left unattended at Richmond where she died, and the apparent disregard for the treatment of Elizabeth’s cadaver immediately after her death is evidence of this shift in allegiance (Lee 113). In a manuscript narrative of the Queen’s death, Elizabeth Southwell, a blood relative and royal maid of honor to

Elizabeth I, details the treatment of the monarch's body. Southwell's account focuses on the corruption of the Queen's body, dwelling in

“sometimes lurid and wholly unsympathetic detail upon the physical infirmity and emotional distress of Queen Elizabeth in the last days of her life; and also upon the spectacular corruption of her corpse after death... By focusing so insistently upon the debility, corruption, and violation of the Queen's physical body, Southwell's account undermines any sense that the mystical body of English kingship had inhered in it.” (Montrose 246)

In particular, Southwell describes the disemboweling of the dead sovereign, a practice common for the treatment of royal cadavers, but made questionable because of the Queen's status as a pure untouched virginal body (Montrose 246). The violation of the Queen's body natural reduces the mythical Gloriana to an earthly creature who ultimately cannot escape the clutches of mortality. Already, in the first few days after her death, the constructed image of the Elizabethan propaganda machine was already beginning to crumble.

Although she had never explicitly named an heir to her throne, it was rumored that on her deathbed, she named James VI of Scotland to be her successor. James VI, soon to be crowned as James I of England, was led in a grand procession from his home in Edinburgh to London, ascending the throne in 1604. Around this time, many pamphlets and poems circulated, commemorating the queen and celebrating the coming a new king.

One such work was “Sorrowes Ioy; or, a Lamentation for our late deceased Sovereaigne Elizabeth, with a Triumph for the prosperous Succession of our gracious King James, &c,” printed by John Legat in 1603 (Nichols 1). The poems contained in “Sorrowes Ioy” highlight much of the imagery that would come to be associated with Elizabeth in the years after her death.

The very title of the work displays a certain kind of ambivalence towards the death of the virgin queen as sorrow is transformed into joy. Grammatically, the word “Sorrowes” modifies and possesses “Ioy,” suggesting that there is a sense of happiness hidden beneath the grief of the people over their lost queen. Although the term Gloriana is first associated with Elizabeth in the 1580s, the association of the queen with Glory persists after her death. “Sorrowes Ioy” writes of Elizabeth’s death as “Glorie’s sunshine left the Royal Throne” (Nichols 2). The connection made between the deceased queen, glory, and the sun will be ironically inverted in *The Revenger’s Tragedy* as Gloriana’s ultimate triumph over her murderer will occur entirely in the dark (or at least an imagined dark as the play would have been performed during the day). Despite the fulfillment of Vindice’s revenge when the lecherous Duke dies, kissing the poisoned skull of the woman he had murdered, the figure of Gloriana in the play comes to be associated with death, decay, and darkness. There is no “glory” in *The Revenger’s Tragedy*’s Gloriana.

The ambivalence presented in the title of “Sorrowes Ioy” may perhaps be explained by examining the succession fears of the 1590s when Elizabeth had become too old to marry or bear children. Indeed, one of the first historical accounts of the proclamation of James as the next king alludes to the succession issue. Stow’s *Chronicle*, written by an early modern historian, describes the events of March 24, 1603. According to Howes, the Lords “within six houres after her Highnesse death, made Proclamation at the Court Gates in the open assemble, signifying and assuring the people her Majesty was dead, and that the right of succession was wholly in James the King of Scots” (Nichols 26). The usage of “assuring” in describing the proclamation of Elizabeth’s death is interesting as it suggests doubt and even anxiety. The following description of the people’s reaction by Howes is even more telling: “with one consent [they] cryed aloud, ‘God save King James,’ being not a little glad to see their long feared danger so cleerely

prevented” (Nichols 26). “Their long feared danger” must have referred to the long existing tensions over the past decade regarding what would happen to England after Elizabeth’s death. The War of the Roses, which had installed the Tudor dynasty onto the throne of England, had only occurred less than two generations ago and the concept of another civil war kept the people at a general unease.

The new regime encouraged a reversion to traditional masculine models of rule, and literary representations of power soon followed. Although the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century had seen a rise in female rulers – from Mary and Elizabeth Tudor to Mary, Queen of Scots in Scotland and Catherine de’ Medici in France – queenship was still regarded as an anomaly and a threat to patriarchal society. Kirilka Stavreva makes the argument that several of Shakespeare’s Jacobean plays align queenship with witchcraft, portraying queens as dangerous and evil. Historically, the fascination with witches may have come out “on the heels of witchcraft trials in the last decades of Queen Elizabeth’s reign,” but the association of witchcraft with queens undermines female authority and the concept of women as good rulers (Stavreva 152). Although Stavreva only deals with *Macbeth* and *Cymbeline*, the connection between queenship and witchcraft is a useful indication of seventeenth century misogyny and fears surrounding female rule. This type of misogyny was furthered by the queens themselves, who preferred to refer to themselves as “King” in order to maintain the authority that came with masculinity, or as Mortimer Levine suggests, to become “males, for the purpose of ruling” (Hopkins 30).<sup>7</sup> These misogynistic perspectives on women and queenship make specious the assertion for blind adoration and nostalgia for a female ruler in a patriarchal society.

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<sup>7</sup> For the way in which Elizabeth herself gendered herself as male, see Carole Levin’s “*The Heart and Stomach of a King*”: *Elizabeth I and the Politics of Sex and Power* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1994).

## V. GLORIANA'S SKULL IN *THE REVENGER'S TRAGEDY*

In order to discern what Gloriana, the poisoned “bony lady,” signifies in Thomas Middleton’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, we must first examine previous usages and connotations of the popular nickname for the virgin queen. The nickname Gloriana is most famously applied to Elizabeth I in Edmund Spenser’s epic poem *The Faerie Queene* as the unseen but often mentioned title character. However, the idea of Gloriana originates both from classical sources such as Livy, Cicero, and Ovid, and from Gloriande, who served as a lady in Oberon’s court in the 13<sup>th</sup> century French romance *Huon of Bordeaux*. The term Gloriana was first explicitly connected to Elizabeth in a 1578 Latin panegyric by Thomas Drant and even before that, the Queen was connected to the imagery of the fairy queen through the Woodstock entertainments of 1575, planned by Sir Henry Lee. Fairy imagery was also central to the Accession Day tilts and, at these events (which were attended by Elizabeth), “the fairy queen functions as a reification of the wondrous sovereign powers that Elizabeth invisibly wields in all of those entertainments and devices where her mere presence serves to enact a recovery or transformation” (Woodcock 104). The Queen took on a magical persona at royal entertainments and Spenser was well aware of the history and connotations of naming the queen of his fairy kingdom after the Queen of England. His explicit identification of Elizabeth with the mythological fairy queen “constitutes a final vital stage in the continuing process of incorporating fairy mythology into the personal mythology of Elizabeth, a process consciously initiated by Lee’s entertainment at Woodstock” (Woodcock 109).

At the time of Spenser’s first usage of the name in 1589, the fairy queen Gloriana evoked “a woman strong in character, beautiful, diligent, mysterious, chaste, and in some ways delightfully moody” (Hamilton 333). Spenser transposes these cultural significations onto

Elizabeth in *The Faerie Queene* as an effort to give the queen a public and royal proxy in his poem. Spenser's Gloriana represents a unified public and private identity that is impersonal in a way because as the fairy queen never leaves the realm of allegory to become a real character in her own right. While other proxies for Elizabeth in the epic, such as Britomart and Belphoebe, are actively involved in the plot, Gloriana remains far away at court, removed from the immediate happenings of the narrative. However, the fairy queen's presence is still felt throughout *The Faerie Queene*. As A.C. Hamilton puts it, Spenser's Gloriana is "part of the tradition of protagonists whose influence on the action of their poetic world is manifest through a kind of negative capability: by their absence or uninvolvedness, or through the indirect influence of a god or supernatural force" (Hamilton 333).

This characterization of Gloriana is particularly useful for our understanding of Middleton's usage of the same nickname in *The Revenger's Tragedy*. Middleton's Gloriana exhibits a similar "negative capability" as the dead fiancé of Vindice, the protagonist. Although she is unable to act or speak for herself, her presence in the play as well as Vindice's purposeful usage of her corpse to get revenge on her murderer make the dead Gloriana an important driving force throughout the work. Given the enormous popularity of *The Faerie Queene* during the 1590s, Middleton would most certainly have been familiar with both the power context and subtext of the nickname.

In naming Vindice's dead lover Gloriana, I argue that Middleton not only invokes the death of the real Queen of England just three years prior, but also subverts the mystical, legendary image of Elizabeth I. While scholars commonly assume the murdered Gloriana in *The Revenger's Tragedy* to represent the consequences of the corrupt and licentious court of the newly crowned James I, the timing of being the new king's ascension and the production of the

play makes such an argument appear specious. Although Elizabeth had died in 1603, James VI of Scotland did not officially ascend the throne until 1604 due to the plague. Only two years later, the King's Men put on a production of *The Revenger's Tragedy* for the first time. Given the prevalence of state censorship and lack of newspapers or information provided to the general public, news traveled much slower than it does in modern society. Cultural opinion did not change easily. Even though his disregard for honor appeared even before his coronation when James "knighted three hundred people... more people than Elizabeth [had knighted] in the whole of her reign," the respect that the people held for the office softened criticism of the king (Walter 38-41). Public attitudes towards James did not turn for the worst until after nearly a decade of poor leadership, much too late to have influenced the writing and interpretation of *The Revenger's Tragedy*.

Instead, I propose that the problematic portrayal of Elizabeth I as Gloriana in the play can be attributed to residual tensions that surrounded the final years of her life. In order to maintain royal authority and power over her subjects, Elizabeth positioned herself as the untouchable virgin queen, to be admired and fawned over, but never to be attained. She ran a court of love, in which her courtiers had to behave like suitors towards her, flattering and wooing her in order to remain in her favor. The virgin queen died at the ripe age of 69; yet even through the final years of her life, she insisted that poets and artists paint her as a beautiful and desirable young lady. The troubling denial of her old age and the impossibility of producing an heir for the English throne contributed to a culture increasingly hostile to the old queen's legacy and eager to replace a female monarch with a more reliable king. The French ambassador of Henri IV, Andre Hurault, noted in 1597 that "although the English people still professed love for their aging queen, the sentiments of the nobility were such that 'the English would never again submit to the rule of a

woman” (Mullaney 139). In fact, on the evening of Elizabeth’s death, celebrations broke out in London as people yelled in the streets, “We have a king!” (Mullaney 139). Although Elizabeth’s historical reputation would later be vindicated as the Jacobean and Caroline courts ran themselves into destruction (as witnessed by the execution of Charles I in 1649), the immediate reaction to her death appears to have been relief. Thus, when examining a play written so early after the ascension of a new king, it seems appropriate to ask exactly whose court is *The Revenger’s Tragedy* commenting on.

Again we must turn to *The Faerie Queene* to clarify the allusive Gloriana’s relationship to the historical Elizabeth by looking at exactly how Spenser envisioned Gloriana as the “greatest Glorious Queene of *Faerie lond*.” In Spenser’s Prefatory Letter to Sir Walter Raleigh, which was also circulated around the time of *The Faerie Queene*’s publication, Spenser outlines his allegorical piece, explaining what important figures were meant to represent and how they should be read. In describing Gloriana, Spenser writes,

“In that Faery Queene I meane glory in my generall intention, but in my particular I conceive the most excellent and glorious person of our souveraine the Queene, and her kingdome in Faery Land. and yet, in some places els, I doe otherwise shadow her. For considering she beareth two persons, the one of a most royall queene or empresse, the other of a most vertuous and beautiful lady.” (Spenser 716)

Here Spenser clearly states that the fairy queen is “our souveraine the Queene,” setting up the connection that Middleton would later exploit. However, what is even more interesting is the notion that the queen “beareth two persons,” which alludes to the early modern concept of the king’s two “bodies,” one corporal and mortal, the other abstract and eternal. While each monarch

possessed a physical body that would eventually age and die, the monarchy itself and the office of kingship would never change. When Elizabeth came to the throne in 1558, there became a need to provide the new queen with a similar security, inextricably linking her wellbeing to that of the state. Elizabeth's first speech after her sister Mary's death, delivered on November 20, 1558, utilized the language of the "two bodies," marking Elizabeth's first recorded use of the metaphor (Loades 36). Addressing her Council, the new Queen professed, "I am but one body naturally considered, though by His permission a body politic to govern" (Loades 36). From the very beginning of Elizabeth's reign as Queen, the twenty-five-year-old monarch sought to identify her physical body with the body of the state. In 1561, Elizabeth's lawyers solidified this message, legally endowing her with "two bodies: a *body natural* and a *body politic*... The body politic was supposed to be *contained within the natural body of the Queen*," giving her the right to govern (Axton 12). The Elizabethan propaganda machine adopted the rhetoric of the king's "two bodies" and "in the process of being regendered, the trope of the King's Two Bodies was fundamentally reshaped... the emphasis of the trope was no longer solely upon the distinction between the mystical office of kingship and its transitory creaturely occupant but also upon the contrasting character of a woman monarch's public and private virtues" (Montrose 219). The public "royall queene" is differentiated from the private "vertuous and beautiful lady" and Louis Montrose emphasizes the gendering of these two roles: "as the embodiment of divinely sanctioned political authority, the former person was implicitly masculine, whereas the latter, private person was explicitly feminine" (Montrose 219). Indeed, Elizabeth herself was aware of this division between the public masculine self and the private feminine self and tried to take advantage of the concept of the "two bodies" to validate her ability to rule despite her gender. In her often-quoted 1588 speech at Tilbury, Elizabeth attempts to blur gender distinctions, claiming,

“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” (King, *Tudor Royal Iconography* 254). She provides a juxtaposition, contrasting “weak and feeble woman” with “a king of England,” but in attributing both qualities to herself, the Queen makes some headway in breaking the black-and-white male-female binary. King, recognizing “this doubling of gender roles,” comments, “Whereby Elizabeth mirrors the Spouse in her private capacity as a woman at the same time that she projects the Solomonic role of king as a powerful ruler” (King, *Tudor Royal Iconography* 254). The notion of the “two bodies” aided the Queen’s transition into power by providing her with masculine authority while preserving aspects of her femininity.

The metaphor of the “two bodies” became even stronger during the 1580s after the Queen passed her childbearing years; the virginal “integrity of Elizabeth’s natural body [became] a symbol for the integrity of her realm” (Loades 54). Spenser splinters this dual image of Elizabeth as body natural and body politic into that of the glorious powerful yet absent ruler, Gloriana, and the many human, fallible, but physically present female characters through the poem. In a sense, Gloriana cannot be embodied within *The Faerie Queene* as a material character precisely because she represents the office of monarchy, rather than the ruler herself. The body politic of the monarchy represents a Platonic ideal of England, a form that can be imitated, but never to be achieved in reality. While the other female figures of the epic poem are continuously in danger of physical and spiritual transgressions, the perfect image of Spenser’s Gloriana remains out of sight and out of harm’s way.

And yet, Middleton transforms Gloriana into the most material figure of all: a bony skeleton, spiritless and noticeably mortal. Elizabethan and Jacobean culture was quite familiar with corpses and especially skulls. Households would often keep skulls as *memento mori*, or

reminders of death. The skulls were meant to remind people of their own mortality and the need to direct their attention towards religion and life beyond the grave. Portraiture often showed beautiful women with a reflected image of a skull in a mirror behind them; the skeletal image reminds the viewer that the “mask of youth” that the women wear is only a façade, a guise for the inevitable death that everyone eventually faces. Or as Vindice aptly puts it, “See, ladies, with false forms/ You deceive men, but cannot deceive worms” (III.5.96-97). For Vindice, women’s attempts to emulate the idealized beauty of Gloriana, maintained only “through the artifice of cosmetics,” actually reveal “behind the fictions of idealization, the horrors of the grave” (Finke 358).

In contrast, portraits of Elizabeth showed the aging queen as eternally young. Strong writes of the “decision to suppress all likenesses of the Queen that depicted her as being in any way old and hence subject to mortality” (Strong, *Gloriana* 147). Elizabeth preferred idealized portraits over verisimilar representations of her likeness; aside from the one occasion when she sat for Isaac Oliver, Elizabethan iconography dwelt in the realm of youthful fantasy. Isaac Oliver’s image which was truer to life and depicted the aging queen’s wrinkles did not please the Queen, who favored Nicholas Hilliard’s flattering renditions instead (Montrose 244). Perhaps due to her old age, the queen did not sit for a new portrait after 1594; Hilliard was thus “called upon to evolve a formalized mask of the Queen that totally ignored reality and instead gave visual expression to the final cadences of her cult in which the poets celebrated her seemingly eternal youth and beauty” (Strong, *Gloriana* 147). These idealized portraits of the virgin queen stand in stark contrast with the visual representation of the poisoned Gloriana on the stage.

In *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, the dead female body replaces any semblance of self or identity, as death and mortality announce themselves through the skull that Vindice holds as he

contemplates his mode of revenge. In the first scene of the play, Vindice describes the skull of his dead fiancé as “Thou sallow picture of my poisoned love./ My study’s ornament, thou shell of death” (I.1.14-15). Immediately, Vindice objectifies the Gloriana’s dead body as a “picture,” “ornament,” and “shell.” The phrase “my study’s ornament” in particular treats the skull as if it were a decoration for Vindice’s office while the “shell of death” not only indicates that the skull came from a corpse, but also that it signifies Death itself. Gloriana’s skull comes to function as a “grisly emblem uniting two dialectical notions of femininity: woman as ideal, as an object of adoration, and woman as death’s head, as a figure which evokes fear and hostility” (Finke 257). Despite the symbolic value of the skull, Gloriana appears in the play only as a decapitated silent skull, a faceless head without a voice.

Ultimately, Gloriana becomes a sort of non-person, noticeably unmentioned in the *dramatis personae* and transformed into a murder weapon in Act III. She loses all agency as Vindice physically “re-members Gloriana’s body in order to subject her to the Duke’s ‘slobbering’ tongue (III.v.162)” (Finin 25). Kathryn Finin argues that the gendered violence that saturates Vindice’s quest for revenge represents an attempt to dominate and suppress the “overwhelming presence of female power” within *The Revenger’s Tragedy* (Finin 1). Perhaps we can draw a parallel to the prevailing desire at the time to reappropriate the monarchy specifically as a *kingship* and regender the body politic as distinctly male. The eternally young virgin queen must finally discursively come face to face with her own death as the cultural imagination of Gloriana clashes on the stage with the reality of Elizabeth’s death. Haunted by the succession issue and social tensions of the 1590s, the English people attempt to put the deceased queen to rest.

**VI. FROM THE PHOENIX'S ASHES: QUEENSHIP AS A MEANS TO MALE  
PROGENY IN *HENRY VIII***

In *Henry VIII*, however, the queen is resurrected in order to comment on her successor, James I. As the chief dramatist of the King's Men, Shakespeare, as well as Fletcher who would become his successor, had particularly close ties to the Jacobean court. Jonathan Baldo argues that *Henry VIII* "would appear to provide assurances to the nostalgic..., but also betrays anxieties of the company's patron, who had reasons for wishing to disengage his own reign from those of Elizabeth and her father" (Baldo 132). In an attempt to revise history and marginalize Elizabeth, soon after his coronation, James had his predecessor's coffin moved from its original tomb to sit on top of Mary Tudor's unmarked grave (Walker 15). In doing so, James sought to subvert the Virgin Mary image associated with Elizabeth's chastity and recategorize the deceased monarch with her half-sister as barren women, queens who failed to produce heirs. To this end, the play reflects James's attempts to make his subjects forget his predecessor by marginalizing her contribution to history and welcoming the return of male rule. In the case of *Henry VIII*, the portrayal of Elizabeth not only reflects the opinions of the public as well as the playwrights, but also the ideology of the Jacobean court.

By the time Shakespeare collaborated with John Fletcher, a rising dramatist in the King's Men, on his final play *Henry VIII* in 1613, both politics and the drama scene were dramatically different from the days of Queen Elizabeth. Just as the Elizabethan politics of courtly love and adoration gave way to a Jacobean court concentrated on capital gain and the "divine right of kings," the older generation of playwrights, such as Ben Jonson, Thomas Dekker, and Shakespeare himself, was reluctantly ceding the stage to newcomers like Fletcher, Phillip Massinger, and John Webster. The material collaboration on *Henry VIII* as well as its treatment

of the birth of Elizabeth serve as evidence for such a transition between political and dramatic eras. With the change from queen to king, English Renaissance culture not only had to adjust to a new ideology, but also cope with a regendering of the office of monarchy. Shifting public opinion regarding the previous reign manifests itself in the play's struggle to represent the virgin queen while continuing to validate patriarchal rule.

After Elizabeth's death in 1603, playwrights were finally able to utilize the Queen as a character on the stage.<sup>8</sup> Thomas Heywood's two-part history play *If You Know Not Me You Know Nobody* (1605) preceded *Henry VIII* as one of the few plays to depict Elizabeth's life in the early 1600s (although many early Jacobean plays did deal with the topic of women rulers, most notably, John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*).<sup>9</sup> Another prime example would be Samuel Rowley's *When You See Me, You Know Me*. Michael Dobson and Nichola J. Watson count five plays produced about Elizabeth I in James's first decade as king, four of which were produced between 1604 and 1607, and remark that "it would be technically true to say that only two [of the plays] present 'Queen' Elizabeth at all: instead the majority share an overwhelming interest in her uncrowned youth. The Elizabeth who first revives in the theatre, so far from being an embodiment of absolute power, is more often a helpless victim" (Dobson, 50). *Henry VIII*, which focuses on Elizabeth the infant, certainly participates in the fascination with a pre-coronation, powerless Elizabeth.

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<sup>8</sup> Understandably, because the English government was so concerned with being in control of the royal image, the law prohibited playing companies from portraying living sovereigns in the theater.

<sup>9</sup> However, unlike Shakespeare and Fletcher's collaboration, which links the Elizabethan legacy to the new Jacobean regime, Heywood focuses instead on a more tumultuous moment in the Tudor past, especially Elizabeth's imprisonment in the Tower by the order of Mary Tudor. Instead of reflecting on the relationship between Elizabeth and her successor, Heywood sets up a "direct contrast between Elizabeth and her elder half-sister [Mary], a contrast which is made to stand equally for Protestant and Catholic rule" (Grant 137). Nevertheless, as Teresa Grant argues, *If You Know Not Me You Know Nobody* does provide some critical commentary on James's behavior towards and in comparison to the late Queen. See "Drama Queen: Staging Elizabeth in *If You Know Not Me You Know Nobody*."

*Henry VIII* is a fictional imagining of the title king's personal conflicts up until the birth of the princess Elizabeth. His divorce of Katherine of Aragon and subsequent marriage with Anne Boleyn, Elizabeth's mother, culminate in the birth and christening of the baby Elizabeth. By concluding the play with the future queen's christening, Shakespeare and Fletcher focus on the glory of the virgin queen's rule rather than the accomplishments of Henry VIII. In Cranmer, Duke of Norfolk's prophetic speech in Act V, scene 4, he proclaims that the child "now promises/ Upon this land a thousand thousand blessings,/ Which time shall bring to ripeness" (V.4.18-20). The laudatory message is hardly subtle here. Through Cranmer's prophetic foreshadowing, the audience is asked to look back on the Elizabethan era and remember (or reimagine) the legacy of the deceased queen. With elements more similar to Shakespeare's late romances than his other history plays with hints of Fletcherian tragicomedy, *Henry VIII* seems to offer a romantic reworking of Tudor history. However, to assume that *Henry VIII* is simply a piece of dramatic propaganda, glorifying the previous monarch, is to ignore the fact that the history play was written during James's reign. Ironically the play is also named *All is True*; the secondary title suggests Shakespeare and Fletcher's version of history as a truer account – one that stands to the advantage of King James I, the patron of their play company.

While the speech centers on Elizabeth's wisdom and virtue, nods towards James I pepper the monologue. Cranmer continues on, noting that the queen will serve as "a pattern to all princes living with her/ And all that shall succeed" (V.4.24-25). The mention of "princes" draws attention to Elizabeth's primary distinctive feature as a monarch: her gender. Historically, Henry VIII is known to have divorced his first wife in large part because she was unable to produce a male heir. In fact, when the historical Elizabeth was born, all the banners celebrating her birth had declared the birth of a prince; only after the mistake was discovered did the court rush to add

—ss at the end. In this way, Shakespeare and Fletcher’s version of that period of history deviates from fact and chooses instead to anachronistically insert later praise of Elizabeth’s virginity and female attributes into the christening scene. The “princes” that Cranmer speaks of not only anticipates James I, but also serves as an assurance of a patriarchal status quo in the monarchs to come. By stating that “all that shall succeed” the virgin queen shall be princes, the playwrights portray a future filled with male rulers; despite all the virtues that Cranmer piles on the queen, the virgin queen is assumed to be an anomaly in a world commanded by men.

As the speech continues, this emphasis on male successors moves specifically to James and the famous “maiden phoenix” metaphor. The phoenix was one of Elizabeth’s emblems throughout her reign. First used in two oil paintings by Nicholas Hilliard (c. 1572-6), “[The emblem is] concerned with the nature of rulership... [It emphasizes] the uniqueness and sanctity of Elizabeth’s government and her care for her people” (Strong, *Gloriana* 82). A creature from mythology, the phoenix complemented the Queen’s status as an object of worship, a fairy queen. However, the phoenix emblem also revealed an underlying desire for an heir to the throne. As a symbol of regeneration, the phoenix “was above all a vehicle rich in dynastic mysticism asserting the perpetuity of hereditary kingship and royal dignity” (Strong, *Gloriana* 82). Similar to the idea of the eternal body politic which transfers over to the next ordained ruler when the body natural expires, the phoenix trope represents the transference of kingly authority from a monarch to his successor. Consequently, it may come as no surprise that “references to James as a phoenix rising from Elizabeth’s ashes figure more frequently in accession commemorations than any other topos” (Watkins 17). As a foreign king not directly descended from his predecessor, James, like Elizabeth before him, needed to assert his legitimacy as heir to the throne. Henry Hooke preached a sermon before the new English king shortly after his accession,

utilizing the phoenix metaphor in order to bolster the new king's reputation amongst the English people. Hooke writes:

For when the rare Phoenix of the world, the queene of bird,... was now through age to be turned into dust and ashes, though she appeared unto men to die, yet she died not, but was revived in one of her owne blood; her age renewed in his younger yeeres; her aged infirmitie repaired in the perfection of his strength; her vertues of Christianitie and princely qualitie rested on him, who stood up a man as it were out of the ashes of a woman.<sup>10</sup> (Perry 156-7)

The conversion of female to male modifiers reflects the linguistic project to reconvert the rhetoric of queenship back to one of a masculine monarch. Hooke's description emphasizes the shifting of gendered language by repeating the "her" to "his" pattern in his comparisons between the phoenix and its progeny. James, "who was revived in one of [Elizabeth's] owne blood," is reborn with the qualities of Elizabeth. As John Watkins observes, "The phoenix trope asserted not just continuity but absolute identity between the regimes. Since poets and painters had long associated Elizabeth with the phoenix, the compliment's application to James reinforced their claims that he was himself the deceased queen reincarnate" (Watkins 18). Hooke not only endows James with Elizabeth's virtues, but also hints that the new king will heal or "repair" some of the riffs caused by the problems of the Queen's final decade. By characterizing James in this way, Hooke is able to provide the sovereign with legitimate authority without burdening him with the faults of his predecessor.

Thus, the regenerative properties of the phoenix trope proved beneficial to early Jacobean imagery and the symbolic value of the phoenix image made it particularly useful to Shakespeare

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<sup>10</sup> From Henry Hooke, *A Sermon Preached Before the King at White-Hall, the Eight of May, 1604... Jerusalems Peace* (London, 1604), sigs. C2v-C3 (quoted in Perry, *The Making of Jacobean Culture*).

and Fletcher's purpose of endowing James with his predecessor's authority. The phoenix trope thus factors heavily in the imagery of the final seventeen lines of Cranmer's monologue, which shift from the accomplishments of her reign to the queen's posthumous legacy. The duke prophesizes that when "the bird of wonder dies, the maiden phoenix,/ Her ashes new create another heir/ As great in admiration as herself" (V.4.40-42). At the moment of her birth in the play, the court is already looking towards Elizabeth's death. In the late 1590s, towards the end of the historical reign of Queen Elizabeth, public concern grew over who would succeed the childless aging queen. Despite the proliferation of sonnets and other poetry in praise of the queen, underlying cultural tensions festered as the English people worried about factional struggle and civil war if no clear heir was named when Elizabeth died. Shakespeare and Fletcher avoid this ambivalence by addressing the succession issue as soon as the princess is born in the play. The play acknowledges that Elizabeth never actually biologically gives birth to an heir; instead "her ashes new create another heir" (V.4.41). The phoenix imagery is especially powerful as a portrayal of asexual regeneration in which the essence of Elizabeth becomes manifested in her successor.<sup>11</sup> As in Hooke's sermon, all of the virtues described in the virgin monarch are thus transferred to James: "Peace, plenty, love, truth, terror,/ That were the servants to this chosen infant,/ Shall then be his" (V.4.47-49). In *Henry VIII*, the infant Elizabeth overpowers the king's legacy as the shining moment of glory for Henry in the play is the birth of his daughter; and yet, this event is also overshadowed by the looming presence of James in the concluding lines of the play.

What first appears as a simple glorification of the deceased queen turns into praise and hope for the reigning monarch for whom history had not yet been written. The play reckons back

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<sup>11</sup> For more reading on maternal imagery in *Henry VIII*, see Jo Eldridge Carney's essay "Queenship in Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*: The Issue of Issue," and Helen Hackett's essay "'Gracious be the issue': maternity and narrative in Shakespeare's late plays."

to medieval ideology that saw “the concept of female inheritance as one of *transmission* of power, rather than actual wielding of it” and situates queens (and therefore Elizabeth) as a means of producing royal progeny (Hopkins 31-2). As much as the Queen tried to escape the role of the queen as mother by remaining unmarried during her lifetime, she is nevertheless forced into that role discursively after her death.

While the “prophecies” for Elizabeth were written with the past in mind, the hopes that James’s “honor and the greatness of his name/ Shall be, and make new nations. He shall flourish” had not been validated yet at the time of Shakespeare and Fletcher’s collaboration (V.4.50-54). In fact, James had already disappointed the English people on a few occasions, such as the selling of hundreds of knighthoods, since his coronation in 1604. The two King’s Men playwrights produce a fantasy version of Tudor history in *Henry VIII*, writing out the later half of Henry VIII’s reign as well as any subsequent conflict in Elizabeth and James’s foreshadowed reigns.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Through an analysis of the negative representations of Elizabeth I in *The Revenger’s Tragedy* and *Henry VIII*, I aim to shed light on early modern views towards female authority as well as more specific attitudes towards Elizabeth herself in the early 1600s. This thesis attempts to contribute to further understanding of literary portrayals of queenship and complicate notions of Elizabeth as the legendary virgin monarch.

Although some critics dismiss Jacobean portrayals of Elizabeth I as veiled critiques of James I and the prevalence of corruption among his courtiers, an examination of contemporary historical accounts and iconography about the late queen suggest otherwise. Through elegiac

tracts such as “Sorrowes Ioy” and the many portraits of the virgin queen as pointed out by Roy Strong, a different representation of Elizabeth begins to emerge, one preoccupied with suppressing female rule and rife with the succession tensions of the previous decade.

Written only a few years after Elizabeth’s death, Middleton’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy* outlines these conflicting emotions towards a beloved but problematic queen through the absent figure of Gloriana, who channels and subverts the Gloriana of Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*. The negative portrayal of the poisoned “bony lady” who ultimately becomes her revenger’s murder weapon exemplifies the ambivalent and perhaps even hostile feelings that the English people felt towards the newly deceased Elizabeth. The negative portrayal of Elizabeth in *The Revenger’s Tragedy* is related not only to the participation of the public theater in the political discourse of Jacobean culture, but also to a reversion back to older ideas about Renaissance women and their place in the social structure.

However, these tensions slowly give way to the nostalgic sentiment that Foakes attributes to the entire Jacobean period. By the time, Shakespeare and Fletcher’s *Henry VIII* takes the stage, the licentious Stuart court had paved the way for a more positive memory of Elizabeth and of the previous reign as the Golden Age. Shakespeare and Fletcher’s *Henry VIII* celebrates Elizabeth’s reign, suggesting that she gave rise to the glory of the current Jacobean regime. James I and his supporters attempt to adopt the imagery and rhetoric of his predecessor in order to assume some of Elizabeth’s authority and sway with the people. These “memories” of the legendary Virgin Queen would only grow as historical distance washed away the bitter taste of the 1590s. In modern times, Elizabeth’s “body has ceased to become a sight at which to gaze...;

it has become a site of power, a wholly unrealistic but instantly recognizable image of a particular emblem of power” (Walker 2).<sup>12</sup>

While the two plays treat the subject of Elizabeth in different ways, both *The Revenger’s Tragedy* and *Henry VIII* are haunted by the cultural memory of an unmarried queen who singlehanded ruled England over the last half century. Whether they attempted to objectify and symbolically eliminate the Queen as in *The Revenger’s Tragedy* or reappropriate the authority of Elizabeth’s queenship back into a masculine system as in *Henry VIII*, the two plays both represent attempts give up the ghost of Gloriana and finally put the Queen’s body to rest.

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<sup>12</sup> As this paper focuses on the posthumous reputation of Queen Elizabeth I up to 1613, readers may refer to Julia M. Walker’s *The Elizabeth Icon: 1603-2003* as well as James Knowles’s essay “In the purest times of peerless Queen Elizabeth’: Nostalgia, Politics, and Jonson’s use of the 1575 Kenilworth Entertainments” for more reading on Elizabeth’s “transformation from woman to mythic figure to icon” since the early 17<sup>th</sup> century (Walker 2).

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