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at the Tudor Court***

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Abstract: This cluster of seven short essays focuses on sexualized representations of Tudor queens, especially in moments of pregnancy, childbirth, and public display. Each of the essays covers a familiar subject, such as Henry VIII's "Great Matter," in a new way, thus exposing the sexual politics of such events. The cluster shows how five Tudor queens were sexualized by their contemporaries, how their first sexual experiences were understood, and the ways in which beauty and fertility were discussed. Collectively, these essays suggest that a greater discussion of how these royal Tudor female bodies were understood in their own time will allow for more work on how that sexualization and de-sexualization was carried across time and genre, down to our own period.

Keywords: Elizabeth of York; Catherine of Aragon; Anne Boleyn; Mary Tudor; Henry VIII; Queen Mary I; Great Matter; virginity; pregnancy loss

Introduction

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exualization of Tudor women has become commonplace on television and film. In November 2022, *Blood, Sex, and Royalty*, Netflix's newly-released, three-episode series on Anne Boleyn, offered a "window into the lives of history's deadliest, sexiest and most iconic monarchs," even if it failed to deliver the sex that it promised.¹ Fifteen years earlier, Showtime's *The Tudors* provided an even more sex-filled tour of the Tudor court under Henry VIII.² In both of these programs, among so many others, members of the Tudor court, especially women, have been heavily

¹ Quotation taken from the tagline for the series.

² For an excellent study on *The Tudors*, see William B. Robison, ed., *History, Fiction, and The Tudors: Sex, Politics, Power, and Artistic License in the Showtime Television Series* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

sexualized. But what about by their contemporaries? How were Tudor women, and more specifically, Tudor queens, sexualized in their own time?

Royal sexuality has become a hot topic in recent historical studies. It was even the theme of the seventh Kings and Queens conference in 2018, held at the University of Winchester and Hampton Court Palace, and the subsequent special issue journal published by the *Royal Studies Journal* in 2019. There is also no shortage of books on gender and sexuality in the early modern world, and early modern England more specifically. Mary E. Fissell's *Vernacular Bodies* remains one of the foremost works of scholarship on the subject, though there are innumerable others.³ Like the sex-filled television shows about the Tudor court, popular history books have also captured public imagination, addressing more salacious aspects of sex at the Tudor court than their academic counterparts. These trade books tend to promise secret histories of the Tudor court, stories of romance, power, and desire.⁴

This cluster of short essays fills a niche, as it falls between the academic studies of gender, reproduction, and sexuality, and those trade books that sensationalize the Tudors. The articles in this cluster focus on sexualized representations of Tudor queens, especially in moments of pregnancy, childbirth, and public display. The essays are all well-researched and grounded in historical methods and debates, yet they are also accessible to a general audience, as many cover familiar subjects, such as Henry VIII's "Great Matter," in a new way, thus exposing the sexual politics of such events. In addition to thinking about familiar topics anew, this cluster also brings the conversations about these queens together, when they are often evaluated separately elsewhere.

Collectively, the following articles examine how five Tudor queens were sexualized by their contemporaries. The articles approach issues of sex and sexualization broadly

³ Mary E. Fissell, *Vernacular Bodies: The Politics of Reproduction in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Some notable studies include: Laura Gowing, *Domestic Dangers: Women Words, and Sex in Early Modern London* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); Anthony Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination in England, 1500-1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); Martin Ingram, *Carnal Knowledge: Regulating Sex in England, 1470-1600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Johanna Rickman (Luthman), *Love, Lust and License in Early Modern England: Illicit Sex and the Nobility* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2008); Alan Haynes, *Sex in Elizabethan England* (Stroud: The History Press, 1997).

⁴ Carol McGrath, *Sex and Sexuality in Tudor England* (Yorkshire: Pen and Sword History, 2022); Sarah Gristwood, *The Tudors in Love: Passion and Politics in the Age of England's Most Famous Dynasty* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2022); R.E. Pritchard, *Sex, Love & Marriage in the Elizabethan Age* (Yorkshire: Pen and Sword History, 2021); Kathryn Warner, *Sex and Sexuality in Medieval England* (Yorkshire: Pen and Sword History, 2022); Amy Licence, *In Bed with the Tudors: The Sex Lives of a Dynasty from Elizabeth of York to Elizabeth I* (Stroud: Amberley Publishing, 2012).

through an array of topics including royal women's sexuality, sexual conduct, fertility, and displays and standards of female beauty. At this collection's core, the authors are not looking to change the paradigm of how sexuality is defined or understood, but rather, to fit the Tudor queens into larger existing scholarship and debates. To do so, each essay examines female bodies in the Tudor court, their treatment by male and female contemporaries, their domestic and international significance, and the female body politic.

Each queen was subject to a great deal of sexual commentary, from the size of her breasts, to when she lost to her virginity, to the failure of her womb. The authors below offer insight into how these women were sexualized, how their first sexual experiences were understood, and the ways in which beauty and fertility were discussed. As the royal body was open for public discussion, authors highlight who participated in this discussion, such as ambassadors, political commentators, and even the queen's own women, and the political implications. Together, we argue for studying each of these queens for their own significance, yet in relation to one another, eschewing the teleological and anachronistic inconsistencies that tend to distort their histories.

Organized chronologically, William B. Robison focuses on the first Tudor queen, Elizabeth of York, and points out that, in relation to other Tudor women, she has not been especially sexualized; her sexualization has been overshadowed by her children and their spouses and her grandchildren. Yet, when one looks for sources or points of contacts for her sexualization, plenty exist. From her extant portraits painted through the lens of male gaze, to the treatment of her beauty in ambassadorial accounts, to her participation in multiple betrothals, Elizabeth was seen as sexually available and the bearer of royal children.

Emma Luisa Cahill Marrón offers a fresh perspective of a familiar sexualized Tudor subject—the case of Catherine of Aragon's virginity, both in 1509 and 1530—but does so from Catherine's perspective. Catherine had a reputation for her chastity, piety, and honor as Henry's wife. Once Henry challenged her spousal qualities, she enlisted several witnesses to vouch for her virginity upon marriage to Henry, going so far as to allow Cardinal Campeggio to break the vow of secrecy of the Catholic confessional. Marrón highlights the many overlooked Spanish witnesses of both of Catherine's wedding nights, suggesting that only in using both English and Spanish-language sources can a full picture of Catherine's queenship emerge.

Caroline Armbruster contextualizes Catherine of Aragon's pregnancies and pregnancy losses as tied to English diplomatic relations and geopolitics. With each

successive pregnancy, Catherine was subject to bodily scrutiny regarding her ability to produce a healthy, living heir, something that Ailish Girling and Valerie Schutte will show similarly happened to her daughter. By the loss of Catherine's fourth child, her fertility became directly tied to the strength of the Anglo-Spanish alliance; her perceived bodily failings had an impact on English political relationships with both France and Spain. Catherine's body, and its ability to produce a male heir, was increasingly discussed with each pregnancy, until Henry eventually declared that it was a failure.

Similarly, Charlotte Samways highlights how a queen consort's body was highly sexualized during a royal entry in order to showcase her ability to produce male children. For Mary Tudor, Queen of France, each pageant along her royal entry into Paris used imagery and iconography of virginity, fertility, and sexuality to symbolize the importance of Mary's body in preserving Anglo-French peace. For Anne Boleyn's royal entry into London, however, the topic of sexuality was avoided, in preference for iconography that represented her legitimacy as England's new queen. Samways concludes that the public image of both queens rested on the sexualization of their bodies.

Tracy Adams unpacks Anne Boleyn's reputation as sexually enticing, or even a whore, to show that those characteristics were thrust upon her, rather than representative of her actual beauty and character. To account for Henry divorcing Catherine of Aragon for Anne, historians have assumed that she must have held great sex appeal for the king. Yet, contemporaries described Anne as having grace, a combination of wit and modesty, that was both admirable and attractive in a potential wife. Adams concludes that because of this focus on Anne's sexualized body, she is distorted in historical memory and needs to be reevaluated with an emphasis on contemporary sources and descriptions.

Samantha Perez explicates early-sixteenth-century Italian diplomatic correspondence surrounding Great Matter, and how these diplomats described Catherine of Aragon and Anne Boleyn's physical bodies as representative of anxieties over England's political and religious climate. Perez convincingly argues that the Venetian ambassadors used descriptions of beauty as a reflection of moral character in order to advocate for Catherine's political legitimacy. Both Perez and Adams discuss contemporary descriptions of Anne Boleyn, highlighting how her looks and beauty, or lack thereof, were conflated with low moral character. By contrast, Catherine's handsome appearance proved her high morals and virtues, in addition to signaling her legitimacy as Henry's wife.

Ailish Girling and Valerie Schutte's essay on Queen Mary I rounds out this cluster. The co-authors point out that Mary's failed 1554-1555 pregnancy is often discussed in

terms of mental delusion or menstrual illness. They suggest that, rather than using anachronism to diagnose Mary's pregnancy, the narrative around the event should shift to how it was understood by her contemporaries. Using Imperial ambassadorial reports, Girling and Schutte show that throughout Mary's pregnancy, her body was debated in sexualized terms to affirm that she carried an Anglo-Spanish heir that was favoured by God. It was only once Mary did not deliver a child that her body and its perceived failings became used to describe her reign as barren.

Together, these essays feature a couple main themes that will certainly be applicable to more than just these five Tudor queens. Firstly, in early modern England (and Italy) there was absolutely a connection of physical beauty to inner beauty; put another way, physical beauty was considered indicative of virtue and morality. In the case of Mary Tudor's entry into Paris, her sexuality and virginity were praised as virtues that ensured her successful queenship and the continuation of the French monarchy through the king's potential sons. Yet, for Catherine of Aragon and Anne Boleyn, their sexuality was used against them, as demonstrative of Catherine's failure as a queen and Anne's immorality. Secondly, each essay shows how discussions of queenly sexuality and their sexualized bodies was primarily written about from a male perspective. Women had greater access to the queen's body, person, and bed, while men had to observe from afar, thus the reliance upon repeated gendered tropes of beauty and physicality. For Queen Mary I, this meant that male ambassadors wrote of the queen's physical body to discuss her pregnancy, while Elizabeth of York garnered much less sexual attention because she successfully performed her roles of queen and mother. Collectively, these essays suggest that a greater discussion of how these royal Tudor female bodies were understood in their own time will allow for more work on how that sexualization and de-sexualization was carried across time and genre, down to our own period.

The Sexualization of a "Noble and Vertuous Quene": Elizabeth of York, 1466-1503⁵

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Elizabeth of York (b. 1466) was the first child of Edward IV and Elizabeth Woodville, heir apparent until the birth of the future Edward V in 1470, and the first Tudor queen consort by her marriage to Henry VII in 1486.⁶ Like royal children in general, she was sexualized from the moment her mother knew she was pregnant. Sexualization, as used here, means regarding women in terms of what their female bodies have to offer to men, and that includes sexual attraction, sexual behavior, and female reproduction. Of course, at a time when the sex of an unborn royal child could not be determined, sexualization was conditional. Everyone hoped for a son who could defend the realm and father his own male heirs and who would be sexualized differently than a daughter. The only precedent for a female heir was Henry I's daughter Matilda, and while England had no Salic Law prohibiting female rulers, there is no evidence fifteenth-century Englishmen believed a queen regnant could be viable. Still, the expectant parents knew a daughter's body would make her a desirable bride and a useful diplomatic pawn. She might be betrothed at any age, and her duty would be to marry anyone her parents chose, welcome him to bed whenever he desired, and bear children to carry on his line. She would be a bargaining chip, by the crudest assessment commodified as much as a prostitute, even if her body was for sale rather than rent. Love was not essential, but she must be beautiful, compatible, fertile, willing to exchange premarital virginity for gratification of her husband, and able to endure the rigors of childbearing.⁷

Yet Elizabeth's sexualization is not an obvious topic. Known for virtue as much as beauty, she attracted less notice from the rumormongering courtiers and gossipy diplomats who enriched the historical record with salacious tales of scandalous royal

⁵ A condensed version of this article was presented at the 2022 Renaissance Society of America Virtual Conference in a roundtable titled "Virgins, Vixens, and Victims: Sexuality, Public Image, and Tudor Queens."

⁶ Arlene Naylor Okerlund, *Elizabeth of York: Queenship and Power* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) is a useful biography but best read in conjunction with more political narratives such as Charles Ross, *Edward IV*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); Rosemary Horrox, *Richard III: A Study in Service* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); and S.B. Chrimes, *Henry VII*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

⁷ J.L. Laynesmith, *The Last Medieval Queens: English Queenship 1445-1503* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) addresses at length the expectations for queens, which also apply to daughters of kings.

women. Discussion often focuses instead on how her marriage ended Lancastrian-Yorkist conflict, legitimized Henry, and relegated her to subordinate status despite her better claim to the throne. Indeed, that claim made her relationship to Henry unique among medieval kings and queens and may have influenced the extent to which she was sexualized after their marriage.⁸ Yet if her sexualization was more subtle, her beauty made it inevitable, her Yorkist heritage enhanced its political significance, and in her youth the Wars of the Roses made it dangerous—for example, she, her mother, and sisters sought sanctuary in Westminster Abbey during Henry VI's Readeption in 1470-1471 and in 1483-1484 after Richard III seized power.⁹ However, as will be shown below, her negotiation of such challenges and her role in politics, diplomacy, and court ritual show she was more than just a pretty face.¹⁰

To be sure, Elizabeth was a "a beautiful, golden daughter" and as an adult noted for her "golden hair, lovely features, tall stature, and cultured charm."¹¹ Likenesses confirm this. An oil portrait in the Royal Collection Trust, perhaps taken from life c.1502, portrays the queen in her mid-thirties, after six or seven pregnancies, and a year before her death as still pretty, slightly full-faced, with a cupid's bow mouth and strawberry blonde hair showing beneath her gable hood. Other well-known pieces include a similar late sixteenth-century oil portrait in the National Portrait Gallery, Pietro Torrigiano's funeral effigies of Henry and Elizabeth 1512-1518, and Remigius van Leemput's 1667 copy of Hans Holbein the Younger's 1537 Whitehall mural of Henry VII, Henry VIII, Elizabeth, and Jane Seymour; however, there were numerous others.¹² By representing her as an object of beauty, such images sexualized Elizabeth through men's eyes and served as royal propaganda for both

⁸ Lauren Rose Brown, "Elizabeth of York: Tudor Trophy Wife," in Aidan Norrie, Carolyn Harris, J.R. Laynesmith, Danna R. Messer, and Elena Woodacre, eds. *Tudor and Stuart Consorts: Power, Influence, and Dynasty* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 19-40.

⁹ Okerlund, *Elizabeth of York*, 5-7, 22-23, 30-34.

¹⁰ Browne, "Elizabeth of York," 31-35; Retha Warnicke, *Elizabeth of York and Her Six Daughters-in-Law: Fashioning Tudor Queenship 1485-1547* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 79-80, 136-138.

¹¹ Okerlund, *Elizabeth of York*, 2, 19.

¹² <https://www.rct.uk/collection/403447/elizabeth-of-york-1465-1503>;
<https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw02068/Elizabeth-of-York>;
<https://www.westminster-abbey.org/abbey-commemorations/royals/henry-vii-and-elizabeth-of-york>;
<https://www.rct.uk/collection/405750/henry-vii-elizabeth-of-york-henry-viii-and-jane-seymour>.

Henry VII and Henry VIII. Moreover, she was at least indirectly sexualized in the melding of Lancastrian red and Yorkist white in the Tudor rose.¹³

Further sexualization via the male gaze came in objectifying (even if well-intentioned) comments about her beauty from chroniclers, diplomats, and others. Thomas More observed that Edward IV left "much fair issue" and the Crowland Chronicler that he had "five beautiful girls."¹⁴ In 1497, the Venetian ambassador Andrea Trevisano reported meeting Elizabeth, dressed in cloth of gold and "a handsome woman."¹⁵ The Portuguese ambassador intended no flattery in 1501 when he called her "stout and large-breasted," and modern historian Rosemary Horrox has opined that her portrait is "pudgy-faced."¹⁶ However, such adjectives are relative, and fifteenth-century observers considered wide hips beautiful and indicative of childbearing ability. The Renaissance aesthetic also associated blonde hair with the Virgin Mary, as well as virginity before marriage and fertility after, perhaps allowing Elizabeth to be sanctified and sexualized at the same time.¹⁷

Those who commented on Elizabeth's beauty often praised her ability and virtue, too. Bernard André was especially effusive about her "praiseworthy and commendable acts ... while she was still a girl."¹⁸ At her coronation banquet, the Garter King of Arms beseeched God to "send your Grace to live in honor and virtue," and apparently the Almighty was listening.¹⁹ The *Chronicles of London* referred to her as "the noble and vertuous Quene Elizabeth."²⁰ Polydore Vergil praised her as a "most choice woman" and "a woman intelligent above all others, and equally beautiful."²¹ In 1498, the Sub-Prior of Santa Cruz, Fray Johannes de Matienzo, wrote to Ferdinand and Isabella that she was a "very noble

¹³ Jacqueline Johnson, "Elizabeth of York: Mother of the Tudor Dynasty," in Liz Oakley-Brown and Louise J. Wilkinson, eds. *The Rituals and Rhetoric of Queenship: Medieval to Early Modern* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009), 47–58.

¹⁴ Thomas More, *The History of King Richard III*, in *The Yale Edition of the Complete Works of Thomas More*, vol. 2, ed. Richard S. Sylvester (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), 3; Nicholas Pronay and John Cox, eds., *The Crowland Chronicle Continuations 1459-1486* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing Ltd., 1986), 149, omits Margaret (d.1472) and Mary (d.1482).

¹⁵ Rawdon Brown, ed., *Calendar of State Papers Relating To English Affairs in the Archives of Venice, Volume 1, 1202-1509* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1864), no. 754.

¹⁶ Rosemary Horrox, "Elizabeth [Elizabeth of York] (1466-1503)." doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/8635, 2020.

¹⁷ Laynesmith, *Last Medieval Queens*, 50–52.

¹⁸ Bernard André, *The Life of Henry VII*, ed. and trans. Daniel Hobbins (New York: Italica Press, 2011), 33.

¹⁹ Okerlund, *Elizabeth of York*, 85.

²⁰ Charles Lethbridge Kingsford, ed., *Chronicles of London* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), 258.

²¹ Polydore Vergil, *The Anglica Historia of Polydore Vergil, A.D.1485-1537*, ed. and trans. Denis Hay, Camden Society, 3rd Series, 74, (1950), 7.

woman," and much beloved.²² Shortly after her death in 1503, the Venetian ambassador, Alvise Mocenigo, described her as "a very handsome woman of great ability" and "in conduct very able."²³ But Kavita Mudan Finn has shown that while fifteenth and sixteenth century authors admired Elizabeth's virtue, being a "good" girl limited her literary potential compared to the "traitor" Margaret of Anjou and "adulteress" Elizabeth Woodville, who allowed for more risqué representation and didactic moralizing. Writers lauded Elizabeth of York for uniting Lancaster and York, and they sometimes portrayed her as a virgin martyr in accounts where Richard III tried to force her into wedlock. But otherwise, legitimizing Henry undercut her status by subordinating her to him, and in literary sources she rarely appears following their marriage. In William Shakespeare's works, she practically disappears.²⁴

Part of Elizabeth's appeal as a bride was her potential fecundity, though Sir Francis Bacon's description of her as "beautiful, gentle, and fruitful" might equally well apply to a mare.²⁵ In any case, her mother Elizabeth Woodville had two children by her first marriage to Sir John Grey of Groby and ten with Edward IV, her paternal grandmother Cecily Neville, Duchess of York had twelve, and her maternal grandmother Jacquetta of Luxembourg had fourteen. As it turned out, Elizabeth was the only Tudor queen to bear more than one child who survived infancy. She became pregnant at least eight times in seventeen years of marriage and bore eight children, of whom Arthur, Margaret, Henry VIII, and Mary survived into adulthood.²⁶

Because wealth and power are intrinsically potent aphrodisiacs, Elizabeth presumably had additional sex appeal simply from being Edward IV's daughter. Henry Tudor agreed to marry her sight unseen in 1483. But he must also have found her attractive. The betrothed couple probably cohabited before marriage, as it was perfectly acceptable for a betrothed couple to have sex, and their first child Arthur was born eight months after

²² G.A. Bergenroth, ed. *Calendar of State Papers, Spain, Volume 1, 1485-1509* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1862), no. 205.

²³ *Calendar of State Papers, Venice*, no. 754.

²⁴ Kavita Mudan Finn, *The Last Plantagenet Consorts: Gender, Genre, and Historiography, 1440-1627* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

²⁵ Francis Bacon, *The History of the Reign of King Henry VII, and Selected Works*, ed. Brian Vickers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 20.

²⁶ Michael Hicks, "Elizabeth [née Elizabeth Woodville] (c.1437-1492)," doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/8634; Rosemary Horrox, "Cecily, Viscountess Welles, 1469-1507," doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/4984. Among Elizabeth's daughters, Margaret had three marriages and eight children, of whom two survived infancy, and Mary had two marriages and three children.

their wedding.²⁷ The conjugal linkage of Elizabeth's sexualized body to Henry's not only solidified his claim but also provided him with heirs at a time when fathering an heir and defending the realm were a king's most important duties.

Yet until Edward IV's death in 1483, their marriage would have been inconceivable. Elizabeth seemed destined for a political marriage that would benefit her father. Seeking to repair relations with the Neville family, Edward betrothed her in 1469-1471 to George, son of John Neville, Marquess Montague, though neither rapprochement nor engagement succeeded. Though there was nothing sexual about dancing at court with her father and the Duke of Buckingham at the age of six, there was an element of sexualization in her performance as princess in public, where potential suitors or their agents might observe her.²⁸ Subsequently, Elizabeth was betrothed for seven years to Louis XI's son, the Dauphin Charles, by the 1475 Treaty of Picquigny, which ended Edward's invasion of France. But Louis refused to pay her dowry until the marriage was consummated and broke the treaty in 1482.²⁹

Elizabeth remained unmarried when her father died and was vulnerable to real threats and sexualized rumors after Richard III seized the throne from her brother Edward V. Historians debate whether Richard contemplated marrying her after his wife Anne died (or before) and whether the fragmentary Buck Letter attributed to Elizabeth proves she was infatuated with the king. But popular belief that Richard intended to wed his niece led his advisors William Catesby and Sir Richard Ratcliffe to persuade him to publicly deny it.³⁰ The Crowland chronicler claimed Elizabeth scandalized the court in 1484 by dressing like Queen Anne, implying their equality of status, though in fact it was not unusual for royal women to dress alike.³¹ There was even a rumor that Elizabeth was pregnant with Richard's child. Later, Richard contemplated marrying her to Manuel, Duke of Breja, brother of John II of Portugal, though Bosworth rendered this moot.³²

Questions remain about whether Elizabeth willingly married Henry, whether he treated her kindly and with respect, and whether they truly loved each other. It is unclear how much choice she had about their marriage. Henry agreed to their betrothal in order

²⁷ Okerlund, *Elizabeth of York*, 48, 56.

²⁸ Okerlund, *Elizabeth of York*, 5-8.

²⁹ Horrox, "Elizabeth [Elizabeth of York] (1466-1503)." doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/8635.

³⁰ Okerlund, *Elizabeth of York*, 35-39.

³¹ Crowland *Chronicle Continuations*, 175.

³² Barrie Williams, "The Portuguese Connection and the Significance of the 'Holy Princess,'" *The Ricardian* 6/90 (1983): 138-145.

to gain Yorkist support in the failed Buckingham Rebellion of 1483. Though he took the throne in 1485 by defeating Richard in battle, his marriage to Elizabeth was critical to maintaining support.

He married Elizabeth in 1486 and had her formally crowned in 1487 as the first Tudor queen consort. Some scholars assert that he delayed the marriage until 1486 and her coronation until 1487 to demonstrate that he was king in his own right, to determine whether Elizabeth was fertile, and/or because he lacked enthusiasm. However, before marrying, Henry had to have parliament repeal *Titulus Regius*, the 1484 statute that Richard pushed through parliament to declare Edward IV's marriage and his children illegitimate. He also needed Pope Innocent VIII's dispensation allowing them to marry within the prohibited degrees of consanguinity.³³

Henry perhaps revealed his true feelings when he wrote to the pope:

The beauty and chastity of this lady are indeed so great that neither Lucretia nor Diana herself were ever either more beautiful or more chaste. So great is her virtue and her character so fine, that she certainly seems to have been preserved by divine will from the time of her birth right up until now to be consort and queen.³⁴

While some historians suggest this was mere rhetoric, there is no reason to doubt Henry's sincerity. But whether Elizabeth was willing or not, her marriage has sexual implications. If she acted of her own volition, she likely was content. If she subordinated her desires to those of her husband, mother, and mother-in-law, she was a victim. Either way, becoming queen consort ended her sexualization as a potential bride and began ritualized sexualization as queen consort that was even more public and intense. The large sums Henry and Elizabeth spent on her clothing and jewelry were intended to show off her beauty—along with her intelligence and political acuity—at her wedding and coronation, state occasions, court revels, and the like, and she was frequently present when Henry met with ambassadors.³⁵

Contemporaries believed Margaret Beaufort dominated Elizabeth and had greater influence with Henry, and there may have been Freudian or even Oedipal overtones to the relationship among the three. However, Elizabeth and Margaret often cooperated. They secured publication of *The Fifteen Oes*, a set of prayers attributed (wrongly) to St. Birgitta of

³³ Chrimes, *Henry VII*, 65–67.

³⁴ Laynesmith, *Last Medieval Queens*, 59.

³⁵ Laynesmith, *Last Medieval Queens*, chapter 5.

Sweden. Following the betrothal of Elizabeth's daughter Margaret to James IV of Scotland, they persuaded Henry to postpone her move to the Scottish court and her own sexualization until she was older.³⁶ In the end, evidence suggests Elizabeth and Henry had a happy marriage. They regularly shared a bed and often exchanged gifts. Perhaps the best proof is their shared joy at the births of their children and grief at their deaths—especially Arthur in 1502—and the profound sorrow Henry exhibited when Elizabeth died.³⁷

If one can measure such a thing, Elizabeth of York was less sexualized than her mother, whose marriage to Edward IV outraged England; her grandmother Jacquetta of Luxembourg, who was accused of witchcraft, a crime often profoundly sexual in nature; and Henry's own scandalous ancestors—Katherine Valois, Katherine Swynford, and Margaret of Anjou (his great aunt by marriage). At least during Henry's reign, however, she was more sexualized than her mother-in-law Margaret Beaufort, who—despite being married four times and giving birth at thirteen—was known for her nun-like appearance and religious devotion. Elizabeth's children overshadowed her even more. Arthur had the most controversial wedding night in Tudor history; Margaret's three marriages were tawdry; Henry VIII's six wives and various mistresses were all hyper-sexualized; and Mary's brief marriage to Louis XII of France inspired ribald jests, while her illegal marriage to Charles Brandon almost cost both their heads. Her granddaughters Mary I and Elizabeth I were profoundly sexualized, as were her great-granddaughters Mary Stewart and Jane Grey.³⁸

Elizabeth of York's sexualization, modest though it may have been by comparison, never really ended, for her body was essentially the property of the state, and she never had true privacy. On her wedding night, she had to participate in the ritual whereby courtiers accompanied the newlyweds to their bedchamber and watched them get into bed and embrace, before departing so that they might conclude the consummation of her marriage. Her monthly cycles and pregnancies were public business, and each time she was with child, she went through the lengthy ritual of confinement with her ladies, birth without her husband present, baptism that occurred in her absence, and churching that

³⁶ Retha Warnicke, "Margaret Tudor, Countess of Richmond, and Elizabeth of York: Dynastic Competitors or Allies?" in Valerie Schutte, ed., *Unexpected Heirs in Early Modern Europe: Potential Kings and Queens* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 35–59.

³⁷ Okerlund, *Elizabeth of York*, chapters 16 and 17.

³⁸ All of this is well-known and writ large in the scholarship on each individual; short scholarly accounts of each appear in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

restored her to a state of ritual cleanliness.³⁹ Yet she also helped arrange marriages for her sisters and was extremely kind to Catherine of Aragon.⁴⁰

Elizabeth was only thirty-seven and still attractive when she died from complications of her final pregnancy in 1503. She had never lived in entirely tranquil times. The diplomacy in which she sometimes participated was part of Henry's effort to establish peaceful relations with as many states as possible. Yet her death came just four years after the execution of the Yorkist pretender Perkin Warbeck and three years before the final imprisonment of the real Yorkist claimant, Edmund de la Pole, 3rd Duke of Suffolk. That she was able, devout, charitable, and kind is beyond question. That she sacrificed her claim to the throne for the good of the kingdom is obvious. That Henry used her abilities to his advantage is clear enough, but that he unfeelingly exploited her is doubtful. That her son Henry VIII could be chivalrous to women until something triggered his legendary temper owes much to him growing up in close proximity to his mother, whose sexualization never obscured her maternal qualities.

³⁹ Tracy Borman, *The Private Lives of the Tudors: Uncovering the Secrets of Britain's Greatest Dynasty* (New York: Grove Press, 2016), 19-36; Brown, "Elizabeth of York," 25-30; Laynesmith, *Last Medieval Queens*, chapter 2; Warnicke, *Elizabeth of York and Her Six Daughters-in-Law*, chapter 2; Okerlund, *Elizabeth of York*, chapters 5 and 6.

⁴⁰ Okerlund, *Elizabeth of York*, chapters 14 to 16.

Questioning an Honest Queen: The Scrutiny Around Queen Catherine of Aragon's Virginity

Emma Luisa Cahill Marrón

INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR

Queen Catherine of Aragon's virginity has been one of the most debated topics in Tudor history because of the scrutiny imposed over her sex life by her husband, King Henry VIII. After the outcome of the Legatine Court in the summer of 1529 at Blackfriars and Henry's decision to continue to pursue the divorce, on 2 January 1530 the Queen of England wrote a letter to her nephew Emperor Charles V urging him to protect her against the Tudor monarch's decision.⁴¹ In the famous speech she gave at the Blackfriars trial, Catherine made it clear that she was fully aware that having a conflict with the king of England as a foreign consort ruined her chances of a fair trial. She knew that Charles was her only chance to defend her case successfully and that is why she wrote him the letter. Since the death of King Ferdinand of Aragon in 1516, her nephew had been her *paterfamilias*, the head of the Spanish Monarchy, and the most powerful monarch in Europe. Catherine played an active role as ambassadress in the Tudor court, and she was one of his biggest European supporters. Seven months after Catherine's plead, Charles sent a letter to his wife Empress Isabella in Spain who was acting as his Governor during his absence.⁴² He entrusted her with a mission, to find evidence and witnesses that could help their aunt in her cause to defend her marriage. This essay explores the scrutiny around Catherine of Aragon's virginity during the Great Matter and the support she received from the Spanish court to defend her honesty and virginity in 1509.⁴³

It is important to understand why Catherine's virginity was so significant for Henry VIII. When the king decided he wanted to marry Anne Boleyn, he raised concerns over the validity of his marriage, arguing that Catherine's previous marriage, and her sexual encounters with his brother Prince Arthur Tudor, were the reasons they had been

⁴¹ [Carta], 1530 enero 2, *Degramache, de Catalina de Aragón al emperador Carlos V pidiéndole protección*, Real Academia de la Historia, Signatura: 2/Ms Caja 3 no. 23.

⁴² Júlia Benavent, "El apoyo de Isabel de Portugal a Catalina de Aragón, reina de Inglaterra. Registro de cartas de la emperatriz (AGS, Est. Libro 68)," *Hipogrifo* 9, no. 2, (2021), 432. Catherine of Aragon was the aunt of both Charles and Isabella. Charles was the son of Catherine's sister Queen Joanna I of Castile while Isabella was the daughter of her sister Mary of Aragon and Castile who had been Queen of Portugal.

⁴³ About Catherine of Aragon's life, see Garrett Mattingly, *Catherine of Aragon*, (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company 1941).

childless. According to Henry, his marriage with Catherine had never existed because they had offended God with their union according to a passage in *Leviticus*. Despite this, there is no trace in the sources to show that the Tudor monarch ever had a doubt about Catherine's virginity before his infatuation with Anne Boleyn. Another important fact is that by 1526 Catherine had a long trajectory as a chaste, pious, and honest wife, and she was also extremely committed to her duty as queen consort. Many European monarchs and leading humanist figures viewed her as the perfect example of the new Christian woman, and she was a crucial agent of change in the development of Renaissance female education. This meant that Catherine had moral authority and was believed by many. By questioning her honesty, the king was attacking his wife's most sacred value, her chastity. For a sixteenth-century royal woman, the main way in which she could secure her family's honour was by being a chaste wife. To defend herself against her husband's accusations of dishonesty, Catherine decided to engage in the annulment trial, urging the Emperor to defend her position as queen consort and mother of the future Queen of England.

In the case of Henry, he was able to secure the testimony of his brother's former male servants and other courtiers using a questionnaire. This same format would also be used later in Spain to prepare Catherine's defence. Anthony Willoughby, who was one of the closest servants of Prince Arthur at the time, declared that after the wedding night the fourteen-year-old boy had said: "Willoughby, bring me a cup of ale, for I have been this night in the midst of Spain."⁴⁴ Two other testimonies, one of them from an unnamed person, repeated the "midst of Spain" comment. This implied that Arthur had made a statement about having penetrated Catherine vaginally, proving the consummation of the marriage. If this were true, it had a very different tone than the one used by the Tudor Prince in the letter dated on 30 November 1501 sent to Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand promising to treat his new bride with the utmost respect.⁴⁵ We do not have many testimonies coming directly from the Arthur during his lifetime, but these assertions seem more patriarchal fabrications of middle-aged men wanting to please their monarch than truthful accounts. It is also important to note that the Bishop of Ely declared that he doubted that the consummation had taken place because "the Queen has often told him, on the testimony of her conscience, '*quod [non] fuit carnaliter a dicto Arthuro cognita;*' but they were both of sufficient age." Regardless of the outcome of the marital conflict, Queen

⁴⁴ J. S. Brewer (ed.), *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII, Volume 4, 1524-1530* (London 1875), 5574.

⁴⁵ *Carta del Príncipe de Gales, Arturo, a los Reyes Católicos expresando su felicidad al desposarse con la Infanta Catalina y promete tratarla muy bien*, Archivo General de Simancas, Patronato Real, leg. 53, doc. 44.

Catherine's actions, and the important support she received, show the agency she was able to exercise while exiled and the influence that she still had in the European arena.

After the death of Arthur Tudor in April 1502, Catherine always denied having sexual intercourse with her first husband. For example, after Wolsey and papal legate Lorenzo Campeggio visited her to convince her to enter a nunnery, she asked the Italian prelate to confess her.⁴⁶ She told him that she had only shared the bed with Arthur seven nights during their five-month long marriage. She declared under confession that she had remained a virgin, and that she freed him of the confessional duty to keep this a secret. This was the smartest thing she could do. This clearly contradicted Henry VIII's argument invoking the passage from the Old Testament *Leviticus* 20:21: "If a man takes his brother's wife, it is impurity; he has uncovered his brother's nakedness, they shall be childless." According to Henry, this made his marriage to Catherine unlawful in God's eyes. But Catherine was not a prude and directly told the king at the Blackfriars trial that he knew that she had been a virgin on their wedding night. She also contradicted the king by stating that the couple were not childless because Princess Mary, born in February 1516, was heiress apparent. When the king and queen's marriage collapsed, the princess was already presiding over the Welsh court like other heirs before her. Even though there was no precedent of a successful female succession in England, Catherine had grown up under the rule of her mother Queen Isabella I who had been the first *reina propietaria* in the Crown of Castile. She arguably became the most powerful ruler of her time and gave her four daughters an avant-garde Renaissance education. The four sisters became consummated Latinists and because the Castilian court was led by a woman, they had a lot of exposure in the public sphere. Isabella also became an archetype of queenship for future generations of women in the Spanish Monarchy and constructed an image of power where chastity was a key component of her power as a female ruler. This not only had a deep impact on Catherine as Queen of England but also in the way people viewed her moral authority as a strong chaste woman.

But why have Catherine's witnesses been less cited in the Great Matter when addressing her virginity? The first reason is that until Garrett Mattingly's 1941 biography little was known about her extraordinary work as ambassadress of the Spanish Monarchy.⁴⁷ But when the American scholar was researching in Europe, he was not able to access the Spanish archives due to the Spanish Civil War and the early days of Francisco Franco's

⁴⁶ Mattingly, *Catherine of Aragon*, 269.

⁴⁷ Mattingly, *Catherine of Aragon*.

dictatorship. Since then, these sources have been underused by Tudor scholars, possibly because many of them are written in Spanish *cortesana* scripture. This changed in 2010 when Giles Tremlett published his biography of Catherine.⁴⁸ Using an English translation of a previously unpublished manuscript in the Real Academia de la Historia in Madrid, Tremlett presented a very different perspective when he included the testimonies given by Catherine's former servants in Spain.

As well as Mattingly and Tremlett's contributions, in recent years several historians and art historians in Spain have carried out extensive research work on some of these important documents. The three main sources are focused on the actions lead by Empress Isabella to help her aunt's cause as Governor in the Spanish court at the beginning of the 1530s. In 2018 Sergio Bravo Sánchez documented several of the *mandados* (orders) sent by her to different parts of the Iberian Peninsula to gather evidence. The first was directed to the officers in the *Chancillería* in Aragon to look for any legal documents related to the marriage negotiations. Another order was sent to elaborate a list of people who were still alive and who had been witnesses in the negotiations concerning Catherine's marriages. A second group of people were those who had accompanied Catherine to England in 1501. The third order included a questionnaire for these people that directly addressed Catherine's virginity.⁴⁹

In 2021 María José Redondo Cantera also presented evidence about Isabella's communication process once Charles V had entrusted her to help their aunt. The messages from England came via Eustace Chapuys because Catherine was already Henry's prisoner and communications with her were strictly forbidden. The Empress also exchanged messages with two key agents in Rome. One was the Imperial ambassador Miquel May, the other Dr Pedro Ortiz, an expert in law and Lecturer at the University of Salamanca designated to defend Catherine's case in the papal court.⁵⁰ He went as far as saying that Catherine's letters were relics in Rome because she was a Catholic martyr. Another article published the same year in the journal *Hipogrifo*, rubricated by Júlia Benavent, was

⁴⁸ Giles Tremlett, *Catherine of Aragon, The Spanish Queen of Henry VIII* (New York: Walker Publishing Company 2010).

⁴⁹ Sergio Bravo Sánchez, "La intervención en el divorcio de la Reina de Inglaterra," in *La Gran Gobernación de la Emperatriz Isabel (1529-1533)*, (Master of Arts dissertation, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 2018), 82:84. I want to thank Sergio Bravo Sánchez for sending me copies of some of these important documents.

⁵⁰ María José Redondo Cantera, "Isabel de Portugal. Una Emperatriz entre reinas y otras mujeres de estirpe real," in *Mujeres en la corte de los Austria. Una red social, cultural, religiosa y política*, ed. María Leticia Sánchez Hernández (Madrid: Polifemo, 2019), 155:220. I want to thank Professor Redondo Cantera for her comments on the sources she published in this article.

dedicated specifically to the issue of Empress Isabella's support for her aunt.⁵¹ It included an annex with the transcription of three key documents: the list of people that would have information to testify about documents or important events, the questionnaire, and the Governor's directions to Jeronimo de Curiel, the person sent by her to carry out this important mission.

In the case of the questionnaire, several of the inquiries were related to virginity and sex. For example, the second question cited King Henry VII's royal council advising against the early consummation of the marriage over health concerns focused on Prince Arthur. It is important to note that in 1497 Catherine's brother Prince John had died shortly after his marriage to Margaret of Austria, leaving his young bride pregnant. There were many who thought that an early consummation could lead to death or fertility problems, like in the case of the Arthur's paternal grandmother Margaret Beaufort. She was never able to conceive again after giving birth to Henry VII at thirteen years old. The third question was an inquiry about Arthur's alleged fragile nature, and it specifically states if the witnesses thought the Prince "was not made for a woman and if by his appearance he looked impotent." The following question read:

[I]f it was spoken and was considered a very true thing amongst everyone in the palace, the Spanish as well as English, that the said Arthur had not met the said lady queen and that she had remained a virgin when such Arthur died and that when *se velaron* there were no symbols or signs in the sheets of having lost her virginity.⁵²

It is clear that this question is referencing the assumption that blood in the sheets is a sign that the woman's hymen had been broken, meaning that she had been a virgin before the vaginal penetration. The fifth and sixth questions referenced virginity directly too:

5- Item that once [he was] dead the said lady queen was very sick and crippled and that from her mouth she was foaming many bad humours and that about her illness there was a gathering of many and great physicians, those who after seeing her affliction and indisposition and having had all the information about it said that the cause of her bad state was being a virgin and not being *conocida*⁵³ by Arthur and that if she married a person that was skilful with women that she would cure and like that

⁵¹ Benavent, "El apoyo de Isabel de Portugal a Catalina de Aragón."

⁵² *Velarse* is a reference to the act of a couple being alone for the night in bed presumably to have sex after their servants had closed the curtains.

⁵³ "known by."

when later she married the King Henry her husband she became healthy and fat and with very good colour and disposition.⁵⁴

6- Item when *se veló* with king Henry her husband the said lady was whole and virgin and that is what was said and published amongst all courtiers and in the palace and it was believed to be true and that was said and published by the said king Henry her husband.

The seventh item was related to Henry's desire to marry Catherine as soon as his father had died, referencing his urgent need to "*velarse*" with the Spanish princess, meaning that was very eager to have sex with her. The eighth and final question offered clarification on the advice given by his father's royal council and the king's "*abuela*," Margaret Beaufort the Countess of Richmond and Derby, to ignore the Spanish alliance and take the sister of the King of France as his bride. This fits with Henry's enthusiasm in his letter to King Ferdinand dated 17 July 1509, letting him know that he had married his daughter declaring that he would choose her over any other woman in the world.⁵⁵ The last question urged these witnesses to think of anyone else who had further information to defend the Queen of England.

As well as the 1530 list of former servants, we have the original and longer list gathered in 1501 with the people that served the Princess of Wales in the Tudor court.⁵⁶ The 1530 list mentions four women and three men. The first person was "*Catalina* the slave that was of said queen and that used to make her bed. She is married to a Moorish crossbow maker in Valdeizcarría. She was there the first time that the said queen and her husband Henry were first joined as one."⁵⁷ The next was Catalina Fortes, the niece of one of one of Isabella's treasurers in the original list too. In 1530 she was a nun in the convent of Madre de Dios in Toledo. The next woman was Doña María de Rojas, the title denoting her noble status, who had been one of Catherine's ladies-in-waiting but who now lived in Northern Spain and was married to Álvaro de Mendoza. The report claims that she was the one who "slept in the bed of the queen after the death of Arthur first husband of the queen." The

⁵⁴ This is referring to the concept of "greensickness," a disease believed to specifically affect young women who were not yet sexually active. See Jennifer Evans and Sara Read, eds. *Maladies & Medicine: Exploring Health & Healing, 1540–1740* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword History, 2017).

⁵⁵ *Carta de Enrique VIII al Rey Católico informándole de la muerte de su padre, Enrique VII, y su boda con Catalina de Aragón*. AGS, PR, leg. 54, fol. 100.

⁵⁶ *Relación de los oficiales, damas y mujeres que van con la Princesa de Gales para servirla en Inglaterra*, General de Simancas, Patronato Real, leg. 52, fol. 162.

⁵⁷ Benavent, "El apoyo de Isabel de Portugal a Catalina de Aragón," 439.

next woman mentioned was "Juan de Cuero's wife, that was the *camarera*⁵⁸ of the queen, she lives in Madrid." They all declared in favor of Catherine's virginity, giving special attention to the fact Catalina declared that she had found blood in the bed sheets the morning after Catherine and Henry's wedding night.

The first man listed was one Formizado, who had been one of Alonso de Esquivel's servants. Esquivel had been the Princess of Wales *maestresala*⁵⁹ during her time in England, the leading male figure of her household.⁶⁰ The next was Tamayo, the Princess' scribe, who is mentioned as one of the witnesses present at Catherine and Henry's marriage in 1509. In 1539 he was living in Seville serving the Marquis of Tarifa. The last person cited was Catherine's former confessor, fray Diego Hernández. The source mentions that he had already provided key information about the marriage contract that had been signed for Henry and Catherine's union. He told Empress Isabella's representative that he had given copies of this marital contract to the archbishop of Canterbury, the Lord Chamberlain, and the bishop of Winchester. The testimonies given by Catherine's witnesses were based on facts versus a single comment from a third party. The arguments are more sound, credible, and consistent. But, as Catherine stated at the Blackfriars trial, this conflict was not a fair one, and the efforts to defend the Queen of England from Spain did not bear the desired fruit. Despite Empress Isabella's support for her aunt, the Tudor monarch decided to continue to dissolve his marriage to Catherine to pursue his obsession to marry another woman. In doing so, he claimed that an honest woman and queen consort had been lying all along about the most important asset she brought into the Tudor dynasty, her virginity and chastity. It comes as no surprise that when Catherine's daughter became Queen Mary I in 1553 she chose the personal motto "Veritas Temporis Filia," or "The Truth is Daughter of Time."

⁵⁸ Her husband was Juan de Cuero, the *camarero* or steward of the Princess of Wales.

⁵⁹ There is no equivalent in the Tudor royal household.

⁶⁰ The source cited Antonio de Esquivel, proving that these servants were not familiar in the Spanish court almost three decades after the events.

"This Dolorous Chance:" Contemporary Views on Catherine of Aragon's Pregnancy Losses

Caroline Armbruster

BAYLOR SCHOOL

Between 1509 and 1518, Catherine of Aragon conceived at least six times. Only one daughter, Mary, survived into adulthood. One son, Henry, died within two months of his birth. The remaining four pregnancies were stillbirths. Some contemporary rumors point to the possibility of additional pregnancies, and historians have debated the exact number.⁶¹ Regardless of Catherine's precise gynecological history, it is clear that, like many Tudor women, Henry VIII's first queen suffered repeated pregnancy losses. The long-term political consequences of Henry and Catherine's reproductive misfortunes have been the subject of considerable scholarly discourse. Yet even prior to the commencement of the "Great Matter" in the 1520s, male political observers commented repeatedly on the state of Catherine's marriage and body. The political implications of Catherine's pregnancy losses were apparent from the beginning.⁶² Yet the men discussing her earlier pregnancies tended to focus on explaining and remedying her fertility issues, using contemporary knowledge found in midwifery manuals. Observers focused on Catherine's diet, activity, and menstrual cycles, maintaining the common belief that the mother was to blame for the success or failure of a pregnancy. This understanding quickly took on deeper diplomatic dimensions, and exchanges became more vocal and speculative with each failed pregnancy. As a foreign princess, Catherine's body was consistently sexualized throughout her lifetime. During her marriage to Henry, her womb became ever more symbolically intertwined with the health of the Tudor dynasty and its place within European geopolitics. Ambassadors, courtiers, monarchs, and even the pope made her a focus for intense discussion regarding her sexual encounters with her husband and the functioning of her body.

⁶¹ See, for example: John Dewhurst, "The Alleged Miscarriages of Catherine of Aragon and Anne Boleyn," *Medical History* 28 (1984): 49–53; Antonia Fraser, *The Wives of Henry VIII* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 69–70; Garrett Mattingly, *Catherine of Aragon* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1941), 142–143, 169, 174–175; David Starkey, *Six Wives: The Queens of Henry VIII* (London: Harper Collins, 2004), 114–122, 149–154, 158–160; Giles Tremlett, *Catherine of Aragon: The Spanish Queen of Henry VIII* (New York: Walker Publishing, 2010), 148–149, 182, 209.

⁶² David Loades, *The Tudor Queens of England* (London: Continuum, 2009), 5–6.

Catherine of Aragon's reproductive experiences were not exceptional. At least half of all sixteenth-century pregnancies ended in loss.⁶³ Midwifery manuals, first published in vernacular languages in the sixteenth century, devoted ample attention to the subject.⁶⁴ The first English translation of a midwifery guide, titled *The Birth of Mankind*, appeared in 1540 and influenced the genre in England for centuries.⁶⁵ *The Birth of Mankind* devotes two chapters to the discussion of miscarriages and stillbirths. These sections largely detail the ways pregnancy loss could be avoided, such as by avoiding unhealthy foods, alcohol, hot baths, strenuous labor, and dangerous falls. The guide focuses its attention on "weak and spare" women, who were considered "more likely to abort." These women were to eat nourishing foods, such as capon flesh, lamb, and partridge. Expectant mothers were also to avoid excessive emotions, such as "anger, fear, dread, [and] sorrow."⁶⁶ The manual's section on stillbirth is centred around identifying and expelling "dead births" to prevent the mother from succumbing as well. *The Birth of Mankind* provides an array of "medicinal" remedies, such as "[receiving] the fume" of the "dung of an ass" placed on coals, and "[drinking] the milk of another woman." If labor could not be brought on through medicinal methods, then the manual detailed instructions for "more severe and hard remedies, with instruments."⁶⁷

The Birth of Mankind's English translator, Richard Jonas, dedicated the work to Queen Katherine Howard.⁶⁸ By dedicating the midwifery manual to another of Henry VIII's queens, Jonas was participating in an accepted and public sixteenth-century discourse regarding the body of a queen of childbearing age.⁶⁹ Jonas was writing twenty years after Catherine of Aragon's final pregnancy, and his allusion to the new queen's anticipated fertility indicates that the intensity surrounding the pregnancies of Henry's queens had

⁶³ David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 47; Fraser, *The Wives of Henry VIII*, 69.

⁶⁴ Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 84.

⁶⁵ "The History of the Birth of Mankind," in Thomas Reynalde, *The Birth of Mankind: Otherwise Named, The Woman's Book*, ed. Elaine Hobby (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), xviii.

⁶⁶ Richard Jonas, *The Birth of Mankind, Newly Translated out of Latin into English* (London, 1540), 41–53.

⁶⁷ Jonas, *The Birth of Mankind*, 13, 49–52.

⁶⁸ Jonas, *The Byrth of Mankynde*. Valerie Schutte, "Richard Jonas's *The Byrth of Mankynde* as Counsel to Queen Katherine Howard," in *Forgotten Queens in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, edited by Valerie Schutte and Estelle Paranque, 78–93 (Oxon: Routledge, 2018).

⁶⁹ Laura Gowing, *Common Bodies: Women, Touch and Power in Seventeenth-Century England* (Yale University Press, 2003), 111–148; Jennifer Evans and Sara Read, "'Before Midnight She Had Miscarried': Women, Men and Miscarriage in Early Modern England," *Journal of Family History* 40, no. 1 (2015): 6–7.

not subsided over the intervening decades. Additionally, by detailing the various ways an expectant mother could avoid losing her baby, midwifery guides like *The Birth of Mankind* reinforced the belief that she was responsible for the outcome of the pregnancy. This view acquired deeper political implications when, like Catherine of Aragon, the mother was a queen responsible for producing a male heir. From her first pregnancy in 1509 to her last in 1518, Catherine was the subject of international attention regarding the functioning of her childbearing body.

Five months after their wedding in June 1509, Henry wrote triumphantly to his father-in-law Ferdinand of Aragon: "The Queen is pregnant, and the child in her womb is alive." Ferdinand replied later that month, writing that "her pregnancy is a great blessing, since ... the English people have wished it so much." He then advised Catherine to "be careful of her health" and to "avoid all exertion," such as writing letters in her own hand. Ferdinand's anxiety about the safety of Catherine's pregnancy is evident in his subsequent letter to her Spanish confessor, Fray Diego Fernández, in which he declared, "No news ... could afford him so much pleasure as the tidings of the pregnancy of the Queen."⁷⁰ Her father's concern was understandable based on the realities of sixteenth-century pregnancy, and likely stemmed from both genuine fatherly devotion as well as fear that the Anglo-Spanish alliance was in the balance.

In late January 1510, Catherine gave birth to a stillborn daughter. When the swelling in Catherine's stomach did not subside, her physicians convinced her that another fetus remained in her womb. Although the king and queen quietly waited for the anticipated birth, eventually the swelling decreased. Whether out of embarrassment or anxiety, Catherine did not inform her father of the events for some months. Likely following the queen's instructions, Fray Diego wrote to Ferdinand on 25 May, detailing the stillbirth and the misunderstanding that followed. He declared, "the physicians deceived themselves until time was the judge of the truth," for Catherine's uterus had swelled "so much as never was seen in a pregnant woman." The "affair" was kept secret from all except Henry, two of Catherine's Spanish women, the physician, and himself.⁷¹ On 27 May, Catherine finally wrote to her father and obscured the timeline of events by informing him, "Some days before [she] was delivered of a daughter" and the "child was stillborn." She described the loss as "a misfortune in England" and explained that she had therefore "not written sooner,

⁷⁰ G. A. Bergenroth, et al., eds., *Calendar of Letters, Despatches, and State Papers, Relating to the Negotiations Between England and Spain* (London: Longman, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1866.), 2: 23, 28, 29.

⁷¹ Bergenroth, *Calendar of Letters*, Supplements Vols. 1 and 2, 7.

or permitted any other person to send the news of her confinement." Finally, she begged Ferdinand "not to be angry with her, for it has been the will of God."⁷² Amidst the normal platitudes about divine will that usually followed a pregnancy loss, Catherine's anxiety is evident. Her marriage was the cornerstone of the Anglo-Spanish alliance and the survival of the Tudor dynasty depended on her ability to provide Henry with an heir.

Soon after, the new Spanish ambassador Don Luis Caroz wrote to Ferdinand with his own account of the events. He explained that Catherine's monthly courses had continued for five months after the announcement of her pregnancy, and while the ambassador admitted that some pregnant women did experience bleeding, "they are so few that I feared some error." He indicated that the king's privy counselors were "vexed and angry at the mistake." He further underscored the political implications by mentioning that many at court were "murmuring" and presuming that, "because the queen was not pregnant, she was incapable of conceiving." Catherine was understandably "sad and disconsolate, as she had desired to gladden the King and the people with a prince." Caroz then proceeded to offer his advice regarding Catherine's fertility. He believed "some irregularity in her eating and the food which she takes cause her some indisposition," and that this had given her an irregular menstrual cycle, which "is the main cause of not conceiving." Caroz ended with the news that Catherine's cycles had ceased once again and that she claimed to be pregnant. He pronounced, "God grant it may be so, and that we all may rejoice and recover the lost."⁷³

Fray Diego confirmed that Catherine was pregnant again by late spring 1510, writing optimistically to Ferdinand, "I hope in God that it has been a beginning to give to your Majesty a hundred grandsons of their Graces my Sovereigns instead of one." Catherine gave birth to a healthy son on 1 January 1511. The birth of an heir to the throne precipitated an expectedly joyous uproar both in England and abroad. The baby was christened Henry and immediately made Duke of Cornwall, but he died within two months of his birth. In his *Chronicle*, Edward Hall wrote: "The king like a wise prince, took this dolorous chance wonderous wisely, and the more to comfort the Queen, he dissimulated the matter, and made no great mourning outwardly: but the Queen like a natural woman, made much lamentation."⁷⁴ Catherine was pregnant again when Henry VIII appointed her

⁷² Bergenroth, *Calendar of Letters*, 2: 43.

⁷³ Bergenroth, *Calendar of Letters*, Supplements Vol. 1 and 2, 8.

⁷⁴ Edward Hall, *Hall's Chronicle; Containing the History of England during the Reign of Henry the Fourth and the Succeeding Monarchs to the End of the Reign of Henry the Eighth* (London, 1809), 519.

regent while he was away at war in France in the summer of 1513. In October, the Venetian ambassador wrote that "a male heir was born to the King of England, and will inherit the crown, the other son having died."⁷⁵ While the baby lived long enough for Venetian officials to declare him Henry's heir, no other commentators at the time made mention of the child, and it must be concluded that he died soon after birth and was quietly mourned by his parents. Catherine likely delivered prematurely, as Henry was still in France at the time, and not expected to return until later that month.⁷⁶

By June 1514, reports circulated once again of a royal pregnancy at the Tudor court. A witness reported to Margaret of Austria that "the Queen is believed to be with child" and that she was "of a lively and gracious disposition."⁷⁷ In September, a Venetian diplomat confirmed the news.⁷⁸ Charles Somerset, Earl of Worcester, wrote to Wolsey in November, "The King [Louis] wished Wolsey to desire Henry, if God should send him a son, that he might be godfather, as he was last." Louis then promised to send "a good and honourable personage to be there against the Queen's deliverance."⁷⁹ Yet the French king's promises were in vain, for in December the Venetian ambassador wrote that Catherine "had been delivered of a still-born male child of eight months, to the very great grief of the whole Court."⁸⁰ The chronicler Raphael Holinshed also recorded that a prince was born and lived not long after.⁸¹ In December, the Italian theologian Peter Martyr wrote of the news to a Spanish diplomat, blaming Catherine's loss on her "grief ... for the misunderstanding between her father and her husband." The Anglo-Spanish alliance was under threat due to a reproachment between England and France symbolized by the marriage of Henry's sister, Mary, to Louis XII of France in October. Martyr claimed that Henry "had reproached her with her father's ill faith, and he poured out his grievances upon her."⁸² Catherine's fertility was now being explicitly associated with the strength of the Spanish alliance.

Rumor and speculation of yet another pregnancy intensified throughout Europe in 1515. An Italian man in France swore to an English informant he would bet his life that "the

⁷⁵ Rawdon Brown, ed., *Calendar of State Papers Relating to English Affairs in the Archives of Venice*, 2: 329, 331.

⁷⁶ Dewhurst, "Alleged Miscarriages," 51–52.

⁷⁷ J. S. Brewer, R. S. Brodie, and James Gairdner, eds., *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*: Volume 1: 3041.

⁷⁸ *Calendar of State Papers Relating To English Affairs in the Archives of Venice*, ed. Rawdon Brown, 38 vols. (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1864–1947), 2: 505.

⁷⁹ *L&P, Henry VIII*: 1: 3416.

⁸⁰ *CSP Venice*, 2: 555.

⁸¹ Raphael Holinshed, *Holinshed's Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (London, 1807), 3: 834.

⁸² *L&P, Henry VIII*: 1: 3581.

Queen of England would have a male child within a year." In August, Emperor Maximilian I asked the English ambassador Sir Robert Wingfield whether "her grace should be with child or not." The Governor of Tournai also wrote to Wolsey asking the same so that he could order the appropriate prayers to be said for Catherine and the child. Catherine had in fact conceived again, for she gave birth to her only surviving child, Mary, in February 1516. While the baby was healthy, celebrations were muted. Mary was christened on 21 February, and the Venetian ambassador Sebastian Giustinian congratulated Henry on behalf of the Venetian government, though he admitted the king "would have been more satisfied if it had been a son." Henry then ensured Giustinian that he and his wife "are both young; if it was a daughter this time, by the grace of God the sons will follow."⁸³

Despite Henry's confidence in 1516, Catherine only conceived once more, in 1518. The king and queen were understandably cautious, yet international commentary reached a crescendo. Richard Pace wrote to Wolsey in April: "It is secretly said that the Queen is with child. Prays God heartily it may be a prince, to the surety and universal comfort of the realm." In May, Thomas Spinelly, Henry's ambassador in Spain, indicated that Charles V was "delighted to hear" that "the Queen's grace is with child." In June, Sebastian Giustinian wrote that the queen's pregnancy was an "event most earnestly desired by the whole kingdom." The pregnancy progressed as hoped, and in July, Pace wrote to Wolsey that the queen welcomed Henry to Woodstock Palace "with a big belly." He also reported that *Te Deum laudamus* was to be sung at St. Paul's in celebration. In August, Pope Leo X asked if Catherine was indeed pregnant again and responded with delight when her condition was confirmed. By October, Giustinian was writing to the Doge, "The Queen is near her delivery, which is anxiously looked for. Prays she may have a son, that the King may be at liberty to embark in any great undertaking."⁸⁴ But the ambassador wrote again on 10 November, after "the Queen was delivered of a daughter, to the vexation of as many as know it," for "never had the kingdom so anxiously desired anything as it did a prince." Giustinian reasoned that, had Catherine's stillborn daughter come sooner, Princess Mary may not have been betrothed to the Dauphin of France that year. The ambassador explained that "the sole fear of this kingdom [was] that it may pass into the power of the French through this marriage."⁸⁵ He was also viewing Catherine's ability to produce a male heir through a political lens, indicating that the security of their relationship with England was at stake.

⁸³ *L&P, Henry VIII*: 2: 285, 807, 890, 1551, 1585.

⁸⁴ *L&P, Henry VIII*: 2: 4074, 4146, 4213, 4279, 4288, 4398, 4529.

⁸⁵ *CSP Venice*, 2: 1103.

Catherine had conceived at least six times in less than ten years, and the shifting political environment made her body and its childbearing abilities an increasingly significant factor within Tudor political discourse.

Catherine of Aragon's repeated pregnancies—at least six within eight years—would have exacted a substantial physical and emotional toll. While she was only thirty-three by the end of 1518, contemporaries began to describe her as an older woman, implying that she was infertile and past her prime. While Sebastian Guistinian praised her as "religious, and as virtuous as words can express," he made sure to point out that she was "not handsome."⁸⁶ Francis I stated callously that Henry VIII had "an old deformed wife, while he himself is young and handsome."⁸⁷ These descriptions of Catherine's appearance indicate that observers were beginning to acknowledge her waning fertility alongside the king's continuing need for a male heir. Like the modern era, the sixteenth century inextricably linked youth with beauty. By the early 1520s, Henry certainly abandoned any possibility of further children with Catherine and eventually stopped sharing her bed.⁸⁸

Many scholars have highlighted the fevered debate over Catherine of Aragon's virginity during the "Great Matter." Yet her body, and its sexual and reproductive history, was the subject of public discussion from the moment she arrived in England at the age of fifteen. Between 1509 and 1518, geopolitical tension exaggerated this discourse regarding the state of her body and its relationship to England's political potency. By the 1520s, Henry VIII's progressive obsession with the need for a male heir had also amplified these associations. Catherine's experiences as a procreating queen consort consequently influenced the ways in which her contemporaries scrutinized and politicized royal pregnancies within the framework of European politics.

⁸⁶ Sebastian Giustinian, *Four Years at the Court of Henry VIII: Selection of Despatches Written by the Venetian Ambassador*, trans. Rawdon Brown, vol. 2 (London, 1854), 313.

⁸⁷ *CSP Venice*: 2: 1230.

⁸⁸ J. J. Scarisbick, *Henry VIII* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 152.

Visualising Sexuality and Maternity in the Royal Entries of Mary Tudor (1514) and Anne Boleyn (1533)

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Royal entries marked the ruler's formal entry into a city and were magnificent affairs that extended the limits of the court in order to include the public in the construction and dissemination of royal spectacle.⁸⁹ Drawing upon a rich lexicon of iconography and theatrics, royal entries were integral in fashioning the monarchy's public image and sustaining its authority, prestige, and relationship with the populace. For queen consorts, a core characteristic of each of their ceremonial entries was its intrinsic reference to their sexual body. This stemmed from public concern with the vitality of the royal sexual body and its ability to provide healthy male heirs. The following article focuses on the royal entries of two Tudor queen consorts: Mary Tudor, sister of Henry VIII and briefly the Queen of France (1514-1515); and Anne Boleyn, the ill-fated Queen of England (1533-1536). Mary's royal entry highlighted her sexual body in order to communicate the populace's hope for a male heir to strengthen Anglo-French relations. However, Anne's royal entry avoided explicit reference to her sexual body on account of her widespread unpopularity as a mistress-turned-queen; instead, the entry presented Anne's prospective maternity as an emulation of the Virgin Mary in order to render her queenship legitimate.

Mary Tudor

The success of the 1514 peace treaty between England and France was contingent upon the marriage between Mary Tudor and Louis XII of France. Louis had been married twice before but remained without a son: his first marriage to Jeanne de France had been unconsummated and was subsequently annulled, whilst the only issue from his second marriage to Anne de Bretagne were two daughters, Claude and Renée. If Louis died without a male heir, the throne would pass to Claude's husband, François d'Angoulême. However,

⁸⁹ Further studies on royal entries include: Neil Murphy, *Ceremonial Entries, Municipal Liberties and the Negotiation of Power in Valois France, 1328-1589* (Leiden: Brill, 2016); *Writing Royal Entries in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Marie-Claude Canova-Green and Jean Andrews, with Marie-France Wagner (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013); *Ceremonial Entries in Early Modern Europe: The Iconography of Power*, ed. by J. R. Mulryne, Maria Ines Aliverti, and Anna Maria Testaverde (New York: Routledge, 2015); Giovanna Guidicini, *Triumphal Entries and Festivals in Early Modern Scotland: Performing Spaces* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2020).

in 1514, Louis was fifty-two years old, debilitated, and plagued with gout, which meant Mary was likely his last opportunity to father an heir.

On 6 November 1514, the day after her coronation in the abbey of Saint-Denis, Mary entered Paris amidst copious splendour and pageantry. According to the English chronicler, Edward Hall, "the quene was in a chyre covered ... in white cloth of golde" and wore "a coronall all of greate perles, her necke and brest full of Juels."⁹⁰ Cloth of gold was a highly desirable, sumptuous fabric because of its rich quality and expert finish; it denoted wealth and prestige, which would have enhanced Mary's magnificence.⁹¹ White indicated purity and imparted a quasi-angelic appearance to heighten Mary's majesty, whilst the pearls adorning Mary's crown classically symbolised wisdom, purity, and transcendence. Meanwhile, Mary's bejewelled breast indicated beauty and prospective fertility; the Renaissance litterateur, Agnolo Firenzuola, considered the bosom to lend "great majesty to the entire body" and stressed that it provided important "nourishment for little babies."⁹² Thus, Mary radiated queenly magnificence and was fashioned in such a way as to emphasise her purity and prospective fertility.

Allusions to Mary's sexual body and prospective fertility were abundant in the pageants arranged for the royal entry, an official account of which was preserved by Pierre Gringoire. The first pageant in the procession took place at the gate of Saint-Denis, and featured a ship, complete with mast and sails, steered by Bacchus and Ceres.⁹³ The depictions of Bacchus, the God of wine and festivity, and Ceres, the goddess of agriculture and fertility, alluded to the city's wine and corn trade.⁹⁴ The pageant was primarily intended to welcome Mary to Paris, which was underlined in the accompanying chanson: "Noble lady, welcome to France/ Through you we will live in pleasure and joy/ Frenchmen, Englishmen live at their pleasure/ Praise to God for the good he sends us."⁹⁵ The chanson underscored how Mary embodied dynastic peace. However, while Bacchus and Ceres were

⁹⁰ Edward Hall, *Hall's Chronicle; Containing the History of England, during the Reign of Henry the Fourth, and the Succeeding Monarchs, to the End of the Reign of Henry the Eighth* (London, 1809), 571.

⁹¹ Maria Hayward, "'Outlandish Superfluities': Luxury and Clothing in Scottish and English Sumptuary Law from the Fourteenth to the Seventeenth Century," in *The Right to Dress: Sumptuary Laws in a Global Perspective, c.1200-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 104.

⁹² Agnolo Firenzuola, *On the Beauty of Women*, trans. by Konrad Eisenbichler and Jacqueline Murray (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 31.

⁹³ Pierre Gringoire, "Pageants for the Reception of Queen Mary of France in Paris." British Library, Cotton MS Vespasian BII, fol. 4v.

⁹⁴ David Loades, *Mary Rose* (Stroud: Amberley, 2014), 88.

⁹⁵ "Noble dame bienvenue en France/ Par toi [nous] vivons en plaisir et en joye/ Français, anglais, vivêt à leur plaisance/ Louange à Dieu du bien qu'il nos envoie." BL, Cotton MS Vespasian BII, fol. 4v.

emblematic of Parisian trade, they also connoted abundance and fertility. In short, the scene communicated the city's happiness and its citizens' anticipation of a fruitful union to ensure peace and security between the realms.

Mary was then conducted to La Fontaine de Ponceau where a second scaffold was erected depicting three Graces beside a fountain, from which grew entwined lilies and roses: the respective national flowers of France and England.⁹⁶ The Graces were Prosperity, Mirth, and Beauty, all virtues that the pageant associated with the new queen. In Greek mythology, the Graces were Aphrodite's attendants and represented love, beauty, and fertility. Finer details in the pageant similarly emphasised the subject of fertility. First, flowers traditionally betokened new life and generation; by entwining the lilies and the roses, the pageant represented the physical union of the French king and English princess and anticipated the fruits of their union.⁹⁷ Second, the pageant's orators deliberately emphasised the roses' vermillion hue.⁹⁸ Red connoted lineal or menstrual blood and thus prospective fertility. Third and last, the fountain's flowing water also emblematised fertility, for water was the first element from which life was created and was vital in nourishing crops.⁹⁹ The pageant thus clearly conveyed the city's hope that fruitful prosperity would ensue from the royal marriage.

A complex multi-layered scaffold was also arranged at the Church of the Holy Innocents. Upon a small, elevated stage was erected a lily orchard within a gold tent, around which were positioned representations of Pity, Truth, Fortitude, and Mercy.¹⁰⁰ Below this scaffold was a tableau featuring a walled town, within which blossomed a rosebush. A young maiden emerged from one of the rosebuds and reached upwards to the lily orchard in the tent. By emerging from a rose, the national flower of England, it was clear that the maiden represented Mary. An opening rosebud was a popular early modern analogy for the female reproductive organs and defloration; the seventeenth-century midwife Jane Sharp referred to the vagina once the hymen was broken as "a Rose half

⁹⁶ BL, Cotton MS Vespasian BII, fol. 6r.

⁹⁷ Zohreh Behjati-Ardakani, Mohammad Mehdi Akhondi, Homa Mahmoodzadeh, and Seyed Hasan Hosseini, "An Evaluation of the Historical Importance of Fertility and its Reflection in Ancient Mythology," *Journal of Reproduction & Infertility*, 17:1 (2016), accessed 29 June 2021, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4769851/>.

⁹⁸ BL, Cotton MS Vespasian BII, fol. 6r.

⁹⁹ Behjati-Ardakani, 'Historical Importance of Fertility', <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4769851/>.

¹⁰⁰ BL, Cotton MS Vespasian BII, fol. 10r.

blown ... thence came the word deflowred."¹⁰¹ Moreover, enclosing the rosebush within a walled town symbolised virginity or inviolable chastity.¹⁰² In so doing, the scene fashioned Mary's chastity as a cardinal component of her public image. All the while, a representation of Peace guarded the walled town, repressing a figure named Discord. In a surviving illustration of the tableau, Peace subtly placed her left hand on her stomach.¹⁰³ The gesture of cradling one's belly was a popular motif for pregnancy in early modern art through its implications of soothing maternal affection.¹⁰⁴ Consequently, the pageant suggested that, if Mary produced an heir, peace between England and France would triumph over discord.

The final pageant in the entry was staged at the Palais Royal. Atop the palace's gate, a representation of the angel Gabriel bestowed a lily upon the Virgin Mary, whilst a corresponding scene below showed the King and Queen enthroned amidst a garden of lilies, flanked by representations of Justice and Truth respectively.¹⁰⁵ Fertility and sexuality were mutually important themes in the last pageant. To begin with, Gabriel's gift of a lily underlined the city's hopes that Mary, like her namesake, would be blessed with a son. Next, the garden of lilies connoted fecundity. Lastly, the figures of Justice and Truth inferred that the King and Queen were two halves of the same body, whose virtues combined would ensure the prosperity of both the realm and the monarchy.

Therefore, Mary's Parisian royal entry, as recounted by Pierre Gringoire, reveals the significance of Mary's sexual body to her public image as Queen of France. The reason for this was clear: the Parisian populace considered Mary's sexual vitality and fecundity as paramount to the preservation of Anglo-French peace.

Anne Boleyn

Whilst fertility and sexuality were salient themes in Mary's royal entry, the royal entry of her sister-in-law nineteen years later deliberately avoided the theme of sexuality. Anne Boleyn was an unpopular, former mistress: indeed, the imperial ambassador, Eustace Chapuys, referred to her as the "English Messalina or Agrippina."¹⁰⁶ Further to this, Anne was in the second trimester of her pregnancy with the future Queen Elizabeth I during her

¹⁰¹ Jane Sharp, *The midwives book, or, The whole art of midwifery discovered* (London, 1671; ESTC R203554), 48.

¹⁰² Andrea Frownfelter, "Flower symbolism as female sexual metaphor" (PhD thesis, Eastern Michigan University, 2010), 26.

¹⁰³ BL, Cotton MS Vespasian BII, fol. 10r.

¹⁰⁴ Karen Hearn, *Portraying Pregnancy: From Holbein to Social Media* (London: Paul Holberton, 2020), 58.

¹⁰⁵ BL Cotton MS Vespasian BII, fol. 15r.

¹⁰⁶ *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, Vol. 6, ed. by James Gairdner (London, 1882), p.11, en.27; L&P, 10: 909.

royal entry. It was not unusual to crown a pregnant queen: on occasion, kings wanted to ensure their queen's fertility before crowning them. However, Anne's pregnant state was a testament to a sexual relationship with Henry VIII before he had divorced Catherine of Aragon, which could have been interpreted by the populace as evidence of Anne's loose morals and promiscuity. Therefore, Anne's formal entry into London in 1533 was critical in attempting to render her queenship legitimate and redeem her public image.

On 29 May 1533, approximately fifty barges proceeded down the River Thames to collect Anne at Greenwich Palace before heading to the Tower of London. The procession, headed by a barge fashioned as "a great Dragon continually [moving] and casting [wildfire]," was a magnificent display that Anne "tooke great pleasure to beholde."¹⁰⁷ The waterborne procession was flanked by the most "wonderfull [number] of people that ever was sene."¹⁰⁸ Observers recounted how the music played on the barges was a marvelous sweet harmony, whilst the barges' gold ornamentation looked "goodly agaynste the [sun]."¹⁰⁹ The observing citizens were critical players in the ceremonial entry because they were instrumental in both approving and legitimizing Anne's queenship.

On 31 May, Anne proceeded by land from the Tower to Westminster for her coronation. The procession route was graveled and draped with "[fine] scarlet, crimosyn and other grained clothes, and in some place with riche arras, tapestry and carpettes."¹¹⁰ Anne was transported "in a litter of white cloth of golde," akin to Mary's sumptuous litter in 1514.¹¹¹ Anne elected to wear French apparel for the occasion: "a circot of white clothe of Tyssue & a mantle of the same furred with Ermyne" with her hair hanging loose.¹¹² Anne's apparel helped to legitimize her queenship because queen consorts traditionally wore white cloth of gold enrobed in ermine for their coronations; by 1533, legislation had limited such fabrics to the royal family alone.¹¹³ Significantly, wearing one's hair loose signified virginity.¹¹⁴ Although Anne's pregnancy was unmentioned in official accounts, the

¹⁰⁷ Hall, *Hall's Chronicle*, 799.

¹⁰⁸ Anonymous, *The noble tryumphaunt coronacyon of queene Anne, wyfe unto the moost noble kynge Henry the viii* (London, 1533; STC 656), fol.2.

¹⁰⁹ *L&P*, 6: 563.

¹¹⁰ Hall, *Hall's Chronicle*, 800.

¹¹¹ Hall, *Hall's Chronicle*, 801.

¹¹² Hall, *Hall's Chronicle*, 801.

¹¹³ Alice Hunt, *The Drama of Coronation: Medieval Ceremony in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 57; Hayward, "Outlandish Superfluities," 103.

¹¹⁴ J. L. Laynesmith, *The Last Medieval Queens: English Queenship, 1445-1503* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 93.

contrast between the virginal loose hair and the swollen belly would have been confounding to spectators. A positive way of reinterpreting the image was to focus on Anne's maternity as an emulation of the Virgin Mary. Furthermore, the entry's pageants cleverly redeployed traditional Marian iconography in order to ground Anne's queenship in tradition.¹¹⁵ In this way, Anne could be envisaged as the mother of a future savior, which the pageants' designers no doubt hoped would obviate the negative connotations of her pregnant state.¹¹⁶

At Leaden Hall, a costly castle was erected with a roof in the guise of Heaven, beneath which sprung a large root festooned with red and white roses.¹¹⁷ From the heavenly roof descended a white falcon that rested upon the root, followed by an angel who bestowed upon the falcon a crown.¹¹⁸ The imagery of the falcon settling upon a root of roses imitated Anne's badge, which, Eric Ives has argued, suggested that Anne would bring life to the seemingly barren royal family.¹¹⁹ Meanwhile, the falcon's celestial crowning indicated that approval for Anne's coronation indisputably derived from God.

As this tableau unfolded, the figure of Saint Anne sat before the castle, surrounded by her progeny. Saint Anne, the patron saint of unmarried and childless women, emblemized sacred maternity, hence the inclusion of her children in the tableau: the Virgin Mary cradling Christ; Mary Salome with her husband and two sons; and Mary Cleopas with her husband and four children.¹²⁰ Generational maternity was pertinent to the pageant because it communicated the city's hope that Anne would replicate her namesake's maternity. Moreover, one of the Marys proclaimed to Anne that "We the Citizens, by you in short space/Hope such issue and descent to purchase;/Wherein the same faith shall be defended,/And this City from all dangers preserved."¹²¹

A later pageant at the lesser conduit depicted the Judgement of Paris, in which a contest was held between the goddesses Aphrodite, Hera, and Athena to determine who was the fairest. According to myth, the adjudicator, Paris, chose Aphrodite, who had promised to give him Helen of Troy in return. However, within the pageant, Paris instead chose Anne, presenting her with a ball of gold "with certayne verses of great honour"

¹¹⁵ Hunt, *The Drama of Coronation*, 66.

¹¹⁶ Hunt, *The Drama of Coronation*, 62.

¹¹⁷ Anonymous, *The noble tryumphaut*, fol.7.

¹¹⁸ Anonymous, *The noble tryumphaut*, fol.7.

¹¹⁹ Eric Ives, *The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn: 'The Most Happy'* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 221.

¹²⁰ Hall, *Hall's Chronicle*, 801.

¹²¹ Ives, *The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn*, 221.

whilst children sung "a balade to her grace."¹²² His choice suggests that Anne was not only the fairest of all, but also that she possessed the goddesses' collective virtues of beauty, felicity, and wisdom, despite pervasive contemporary rumours to the contrary.

After this, at St. Paul's gate, another pageant showed three virgins before an empty throne. A roll was unravelled at the virgins' feet, wherein was written "Queene Anne whan [you] shalte beare a new sone of [the] kynges bloode, there shalbe a golden worlde unto thy people."¹²³ The roll's prophetic inclinations support Ives's suggestion that the three virgins represented the sibyls, ancient oracles who prophesised the coming of Christ.¹²⁴ Therefore, the spectators were left with no reason to doubt that Anne was carrying a son, and that this child should be regarded as a future national saviour.

The pageants attempted both to undermine the popular view of Anne as a promiscuous mistress and to celebrate her pregnant state by equating her with the Virgin Mary and underscoring her supposed virtue. Unlike Mary's royal entry, which focused on her sexual body, Anne's royal entry represented her as a virtuous and salvific maternal figure in an attempt to amend her public image.

Conclusion

Historians remain fascinated by the dramatic rise and fall of Anne Boleyn, which has resulted in the neglect of other intriguing queen consorts like Mary Tudor. Yet Anne and Mary were very much alike, insofar that their queenships were brief and their sexual bodies a cardinal component of their public image. Mary Tudor had been Queen of France for little under three months when Louis XII died on 1 January 1515. Although Louis's death was officially attributed to gout, rumours proliferated that Mary had tired her husband out in the bedroom; the contemporary historian, Robert de la Marck, Seigneur de Fleuranges, reported that the king had "desired to be a pleasing companion with his wife, but he deceived himself, as he was not the man for it."¹²⁵ Meanwhile, Anne Boleyn commenced her queenship tainted by her former status as the king's mistress. Three years later, on 19 May 1536, Anne was executed for treason and adultery at the Tower of London, the very site from which she had commenced her royal entry. Although Anne had failed to produce the much-anticipated male heir, she did succeed in providing the prophesised national saviour

¹²² Anonymous, *The noble tryumphaut*, fol.9.

¹²³ Anonymous, *The noble tryumphaut*, fol.9.

¹²⁴ Ives, *The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn*, 223.

¹²⁵ Loades, *Mary Tudor*, 99.

in the shape of her daughter, Elizabeth. For both Mary and Anne, royal entries were critical ceremonial displays that emphasised their royal bodies as a public concern. These entries shaped the queen's public image while simultaneously communicating what urban citizens expected from their queen consorts.

Sexuality and Grace, *Grazia*: What made Anne Boleyn so special?

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A few eye-witness assessments that Anne Boleyn was no great beauty have led modern historians to speculate on the reason for Henry VIII's great passion for her. The most popular hypothesis is "spectacular sex appeal:"¹²⁶ if she was not gorgeous, she must have been the "perfect, quintessentially French, *cocotte*," a woman who "had mastered the art of seduction."¹²⁷ Or, in the words of Anne's great biographer, Eric Ives, she must have "radiated sex."¹²⁸ The characterization, however, depends on a model of eroticism perceptible only from the mid-nineteenth century, when beauty and sexual allure were to some extent decoupled and sensuality became a stand-alone quality. What do contemporary sources suggest about Anne's effect on observers?

In her essay above, Charlotte Samways notes that as Anne made her way from the Tower to Westminster for her coronation, she was presented to the public as a Marian figure: her virginity suggested by her loose, flowing hair, her maternity by her visible pregnancy. The imagery can be seen as a response to contemporary attempts to sexualize her—to insult her—for illegitimately displacing Queen Catherine of Aragon. A favorite way of maligning women was to impugn their chastity, from Eleanor of Aquitaine to Isabella of France to Joan of Kent to Margaret of Anjou, to name just a few examples. Anne's contemporaries assumed that all humans desired erotic contact with attractive members of the opposite sex, but they believed women to be especially vulnerable to sexual

¹²⁶ "A young lady of no particular importance or talents – she was neither a great beauty nor a captivating charmer but possessed spectacular sex appeal ..." Lacey Baldwin Smith, *Anne Boleyn: The Queen of Controversy* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Amberley Publishing, 2013), 9.

¹²⁷ David Starkey, *Six Wives: The Queens of Henry VIII* (London: Vintage Books, 2004), 257, 263; Jessie Childs, *Henry VIII's Last Victim: The Life and Times of Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey* (New York: Random House, 2014), 48.

¹²⁸ Eric Ives, *The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 44.

temptation, as sixteenth-century guides to female comportment make clear.¹²⁹ The abuses that enemies heaped on Anne—she “entysed” the king, she was a whore, she inspired the king’s lust—tell us nothing about Anne herself.

Reports intended to offer court observers genuine information on Anne’s appearance are mixed regarding Anne’s beauty. The Venetian diarist Marino Sanuto reports that he had heard from France that the daughter of Thomas Boleyn was “bellissima.”¹³⁰ Simon Grynaeus writes to Martin Bucer that Anne was “young, pretty [‘speciosa’], quite dark, likely enough to have children.”¹³¹ In a long poem detailing her downfall, Lancelot de Carle, secretary to French ambassador to England, writes that the queen was “beautiful and of elegant stature,” adding that “even more attractive were her eyes.”¹³² Less enthusiastic is Carlo Capello, Florentine ambassador, who writes that she is not “the handsomest women in the world; she is of middling stature, swarthy complexion, long neck, wide mouth, bosom not much raised, and in fact has nothing but the English King’s great appetite, and her eyes, which are black and beautiful.”¹³³ For John Barlow, priest and dean of Westbury, a member of the Emperor’s council in Brabant, Elizabeth Blount was prettier.¹³⁴ The Imperial ambassador to England Eustace Chapuys reports to Emperor Charles V on the day of Anne’s execution that many referred to the king’s jubilation at being rid of a skinny, old, and nasty “tramp” [‘bague’].¹³⁵

The least enthusiastic description of Anne, promulgated by Catholic priest Nicholas Sander, has been highly influential, although he never saw the queen with his own eyes. After claiming that Anne was the daughter of Henry VIII himself, Sander claims that she was “rather tall of stature, with black hair” and that her “oval face” was of “sallow

¹²⁹ See chapter one of Judy Kem, *Pathologies of Love: Medicine and the Woman Question in Early Modern France* (Lincoln: University Press of Nebraska, 2019), and Ann Rosalind Jones, “Nets and Bridles: early modern conduct books and sixteenth-century women’s lyrics,” *The Ideology of Conduct: Essays on Literature and the History of Sexuality*, ed. Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse (New York: Methuen, 1987), 39–72.

¹³⁰ *I Diarii di Marino Sanuto*, 47: 11.

<https://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/metabook?id=sanudodiary>

¹³¹ Simon Grynaeus to Martin Bucer, *Bucer: Briefwechsel/Correspondance*, ed. Jean Rott et al, 10 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1979–2016), 6: 105.

¹³² Lancelot de Carle, *The Story of the Death of Anne Boleyn: A Poem by Lancelot de Carle*, trans., ed. and essays JoAnn DellaNeva (Tempe, AZ: ACMRS Press, 2021), 157.

¹³³ As recorded in the *I Diarii di Marino Sanuto*, 57: 316. See also *Calendar of State Papers Relating To English Affairs in the Archives of Venice*, ed. Rawdon Brown, 38 vols. (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1864–1947), 4: 355–368, no. 824.

¹³⁴ *Calendar of State Papers, Spain*, ed. Pascual de Gayangos, 13 vols. (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1879–1954), 4.2: no. 967.

¹³⁵ *CSP, Spain*, 5. 2: 55, no. 19.

complexion, as if troubled with jaundice." In addition, she "had a projecting tooth under the upper lip, and on her right hand six fingers," plus a "large wen under her chin."¹³⁶ These last imperfections, associated with witches, seem to be figments of Sander's imagination. Nonetheless, Sander's readers, starting with George Wyatt, nephew of Thomas Wyatt, have tried to reconcile the polemicist's obviously allegorizing propaganda with positive descriptions of Anne's appearance. Normalizing the signs of the sorcerer, Wyatt produced a compromise:

There was found, indeed, upon the side of her nail upon one of her fingers, some little show of a nail, which yet was so small, by the report of those that have seen her, as the workmaster seemed to leave it an occasion of greater grace to her hand ... Likewise there were said to be upon some parts of her body certain small moles incident to the clearest complexions.¹³⁷

Like Wyatt, many modern historians have tried to reconcile the enthusiastic and lukewarm descriptions, along with Sander's signs of the witch.¹³⁸ The result has been the perfectly tautological explanation with which I began, that to compensate for her deficiencies in beauty Anne must have been incredibly sexy.

And yet, no quality anything like what modern historians mean by sex appeal has left a trace in writing related to Anne. Instead, she enters written history as eager to please. In late summer of 1513, at about twelve, she accompanied her father to Mechelen near Antwerp, seat of the government of Marguerite, Archduchess of Austria, regent of the Low Countries on behalf of her nephew, the future Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. Thomas Boleyn, who had met the Archduchess on official business for Henry VIII the year before, requested, or perhaps Marguerite asked, that Anne serve her as *filles d'honneur*.¹³⁹ Soon after Anne's arrival, Marguerite wrote to thank Thomas for having sent her such a "well-

¹³⁶ Nicolas Sander, *Rise and Growth of the Anglican Schism*, trans., intro, and notes, David Lewis (Paris: Burns & Oates, 1877), 25.

¹³⁷ George Wyatt, "Extracts from the Life of Queen Anne Boleigne, by George Wyatt;" George Cavendish, *The Life of Cardinal Wolsey by George Cavendish, his Gentleman Usher*, ed. Samuel Weller Singer (London, 1827), 424.

¹³⁸ See Susan Bordo, *The Creation of Anne Boleyn* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013), 28, and Retha M. Warnicke, *The Rise and Fall of Anne Boleyn* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 58-59. Ives, *The Life and Death*, accepts modified versions of Anne's "witch signs" based on Wyatt's family memoir, 40. Bordo and Warnicke, however, argue that such flaws would surely have been remarked upon by a contemporary source had they been real.

¹³⁹ Ives, *Life and Death*, 19.

behaved ['bien addressée'] and pleasant" girl.¹⁴⁰ After a year with Marguerite Anne joined the entourage of Mary Tudor, bride of King Louis XII, at the French royal court. When Louis died just months later, Anne remained in France at the request of the new queen, Claude.¹⁴¹ Many years later, Claude's sister, Reformer Renee Duchess of Ferrara, affirmed that Elizabeth I's mother, Anne Boleyn, had been "a virtuous and sage lady," adding that her happy memories of Anne made her goodwill toward Elizabeth all the stronger.¹⁴²

In 1521, after seven years with Claude, Anne was summoned back to England, where the quality that most struck contemporary observers was her "grace."¹⁴³ Although John Barlow, as we have seen, deems Anne less beautiful than Elizabeth Blount, he also avers that she was "more eloquent and graceful."¹⁴⁴ George Wyatt describes her beauty and "graces of nature," which were "graced" by "gracious education."¹⁴⁵ He then states that when his grandfather Thomas first saw her, he was "surprised" by her beauty, and, later, by her "witty and graceful speech."¹⁴⁶ After Anne's execution, apologist for the king William Thomas recalls her "many outward good qualities in playing on instruments, singing, and such other courtly graces, as few women were of her time."¹⁴⁷ Lancelot de Carle writes of her "assets and such exquisite graces;" she was "accomplished in courtesy and social graces."¹⁴⁸

To understand exactly what grace connoted, Guillaume Budé's treatise on kingship first presented in 1519 to the young king of France, Francis I, offers some context, describing visitors thronging to watch the royals "as at a spectacle of honour" or a "theatre of nobility."¹⁴⁹ The ladies of the court were important actors on this stage. Claude's mother, Anne of Brittany (1476-1513), had nurtured groups of young women, forming "a very lovely

¹⁴⁰ *Correspondance de l'empereur Maximilien Ier et de Marguerite d'Autriche, sa fille, Gouvernante de Pays-Bas, de 1507 à 1519*, ed. André-Joseph-Ghislain Le Glay, 2 vols. (Paris: Renouard, 1839), 2: 461, no. 2.

¹⁴¹ See Carle, *The Story of the Death of Anne Boleyn*, 157.

¹⁴² *Calendar of State Papers Foreign, Elizabeth I*, 3, ed. Joseph Stevenson et al (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office 1865-1950), 3: 480-495, no. 870.

¹⁴³ *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, ed. J. S. Brewer, 21 vols. (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1875-1910), 3: 848-866, no. 1994.

¹⁴⁴ *CSP, Spain*, 4. 2: 462-478, no. 967.

¹⁴⁵ Wyatt, "Extracts," 423-424.

¹⁴⁶ Wyatt, "Extracts," 424.

¹⁴⁷ William Thomas, *The Pilgrim: A Dialogue on the Life and Actions of King Henry VIII*, ed. J.A. Froude (London: Parker, Son, and Born, 1861), 56.

¹⁴⁸ See Carle, *The Story of the Death of Anne Boleyn*, 57, 59.

¹⁴⁹ Guillaume Budé, *Le Livre de l'Institution du Prince* (Paris: Jean Foucher, 1548), 25-26.

school for ladies,"¹⁵⁰ and Claude continued her mother's tradition.¹⁵¹ The ladies performed both beauty and chastity: they were "nymphs in body, goddesses in manner."¹⁵²

They also performed grace. The trait is often associated with eloquence, Budé noting that a man or woman's language was "venuste," or beautiful and worthy of Venus, when "grace combined with eloquent language such that one speaks gravely and delectably and gains the favor of the listeners through this grace."¹⁵³ But the foremost theoretician of grace, "grazia," was Baldassare Castiglione, whose *The Book of the Courtier* was associated from its earliest days with the court of Francis I, who is first mentioned in a manuscript version of the work in 1515.¹⁵⁴ In England the work was known before 1530, although courtiers there would not have needed to read it to be aware that grace should be "the adornment informing and accompanying" all the actions of a courter.¹⁵⁵ The trait includes, in addition to a series of talents associated with the nobility, a particular manner of self-presentation: Castiglione, writes Peter Burke, is "well aware that he is instructing his readers how to play a role, how to 'become another person' or better, perhaps, to 'put on a different mask.'"¹⁵⁶ Selecting Cardinal Ippolito d'Este as example, narrator Count Ludovico explains that grace is a "weight of character" such that "anyone who speaks to or merely sets eyes on the Cardinal feels a lasting affection for him."¹⁵⁷ Inborn in the highest nobility but acquired by others through imitation, grace has to be worn lightly to give the impression of "a certain nonchalance ['sprezzatura']."¹⁵⁸ This is why Carle, who depicts the young Anne listening "to the ladies-in-waiting, endeavoring to engage/ All her wits to imitate them well," also insists that she improved her graces ["ses graces amenda"] at Claude's court to the extent that everyone took her for native French in her manners.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁰ Pierre de Bourdeille, seigneur de Brantôme, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Ludovic Lalanne, 11 vols. (Paris: Renouard, 1864-82), 7: 314-315.

¹⁵¹ Caroline zum Kolk, "The Household of the Queen of France in the Sixteenth Century," *The Court Historian* 14 (2009): 12.

¹⁵² Claude Chappuys, *Discours de la court* (Paris: André Roffer, 1543).

¹⁵³ Budé, *Le Livre de l'Institution du Prince*, 155.

¹⁵⁴ Although the work was translated into French only in 1528 and published in 1537. Cecil H. Clough, "Francis I and the Courtiers of Castiglione's *Courtier*," *European History Quarterly* 8 (1978): 23.

¹⁵⁵ Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. and intro George Bull (London: Penguin, 1976), 55; *Il libro del Cortegiano*, ed. Giulio Preti (Turin: Einaudi, 1965), 29. Diplomat Edmund Bonner asks Thomas Cromwell in a letter of 1530 if he could borrow Cromwell's copy. See Peter Burke, *The Fortunes of the Courtier* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), 60.

¹⁵⁶ Burke, *The Fortunes of the Courtier*, 30-31.

¹⁵⁷ Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, 55; *Il libro del Cortegiano*, 29.

¹⁵⁸ Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, 67; *Il libro del Cortegiano*, 44.

¹⁵⁹ Carle, *The Story of the Death of Anne Boleyn*, 155-157.

This notion of sprezzatura returns us to what struck observers as special about Anne. Descriptions of her grace recall in particular book three of *The Courtier*, where ladies are coached in maintaining this delicate balance. The courtly lady:

Should seek modestly to win credit for knowing what she does, and, as was said, she should always avoid affectation. In this way she will be adorned with good manners; she will take part in the recreations suitable for a woman with supreme grace; and her conversation will be fluent, and extremely reserved, decent and charming. Thus she will be not only loved but also revered by all.¹⁶⁰

Grace, then, implies not what we would think of as sexual allure, but wit performed with sprezzatura—with modesty. It is crucial to note that Claude, Renee, and Claude's sister-in-law, Marguerite of Navarre, in whose presence Anne grew to adulthood, were renowned for grace. Queen Claude was "very cultivated, generous and pious," the "summit of feminine grace;" God gave her as many graces and goods as Pandora obtained from the gods.¹⁶¹ Counselor to Marguerite of Austria Mercurino de Gattinara reported that although Claude was very short and overweight, her "grace made up for her deficit in beauty."¹⁶² The poet Clément Marot remembered Renee for her "divine graces," and Marguerite was "astonishing," filled with "gifts of immortal graces."¹⁶³

Henry VIII's passionate letters to Anne have suggested to many that he was drawn primarily by her sexual allure. And yet, Robert Browning wrote love letters to Elizabeth Barrett, but no one suggests that she "radiated sex." Having been at the English court for at least five years before the king began to court her, Anne seems more likely to have struck him as graceful, or eloquent, like Claude, Renee, and Marguerite, than as lust-inspiring. True, the king asks Anne to become his "only mistress" ("seulles mestres"), which, to a modern ear suggests a long-term extra-conjugal affair. However, as a glance through sixteenth-century French and English dictionaries reveals, mistress for the king would have meant a woman he intended to marry. There is no reason to doubt Henry's own comment that at forty-one "the lust of man is not so quicke, as in lustie youth," or that he

¹⁶⁰ Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, 214; *Il libro del Cortegiano*, 221.

¹⁶¹ Guillaume Michel, *Les élégies, threnes et complaintes sur la mort de très illustre dame, madame Claude, jadis en son vivant royne de France* (no place of publication, 1526).

¹⁶² André-Joseph-Ghislain Le Glay, ed., *Négociations diplomatiques entre la France et l'Autriche durant les trentes premières années du 16ème siècle*, 2 vols. (Paris: Imprimerie royale, 1845), 2: 53.

¹⁶³ Clément Marot, *Oeuvres Poétiques*, ed., intro., and notes Yves Giraud (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1973), 370–371.

loved Anne for the "the purity of her life, her constant virginity, her maidenly and womanly pudicity, her soberness, chasteness, meekness, humility, wisdom, descent of right noble and high through regal blood, education in all good and laudable [qualities] and manners."¹⁶⁴

But, most importantly, the king seems to have believed that his marriage to Anne was sanctioned by the "common consent of the Lords Spiritual and Temporal."¹⁶⁵ Hall's chronicle, too, reinforces the notion of heavenly approval: "God loued this mariage, consideryng that the newe Quene, was so sone with childe."¹⁶⁶ A pamphlet justifying the marriage proclaims "how God herewith is pleased, we think it doth evidently appear by many things, First, so briefly upon this latter and lawful matrimony, so soon issue had."¹⁶⁷ Anne mirrors the conviction, telling Capello that God had inspired his Majesty to marry her."¹⁶⁸

When no son was forthcoming and the king decided that he had been duped into believing that God had approved his marriage to Anne, his hatchet men sexualized her body to bring her down. But the fit was never convincing to contemporaries who knew Anne well. And just as the lives and careers of the French women with whom Anne passed her formative years would be distorted if they were routinely described as "sexy" with an "exotic allure," Anne's story is similarly distorted.¹⁶⁹ Eschewing the image of the brunette bombshell in favor of a pious, intelligent, and graceful version of Claude, Renee, and Marguerite would undoubtedly bring us closer to the real woman.

¹⁶⁴ For the first, as reported to chronicler Edward Hall, *Hall's Chronicle: containing the history of England, during the reign of Henry the Fourth, and the succeeding monarchs, to the end of the reign of Henry the Eighth* (London, 1809), 788; for the second, from Henry VIII's instructions of January 1534 to an embassy to the German Princes, *Letters and Papers*, 7: 4–12, no. 21.

¹⁶⁵ *CSP, Venice*, 4: 430–441 no. 933.

¹⁶⁶ Hall, *Hall's Chronicle*, 796.

¹⁶⁷ Nicholas Pocock, *Records of the Reformation; the divorce 1527-1533* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1870), 529–530.

¹⁶⁸ *CSP, Spain*, 4: 415–430, no. 924.

¹⁶⁹ A description of Anne in a "feminist reinterpretation" of the wives of Henry VIII, Karen Lindsay, *Divorced, Beheaded, Survived: A Feminist Reinterpretation of the Wives of Henry VIII* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1995), 48.

Bodies in Competition: Italian Descriptions of Sexuality, Fertility, and Beauty in the King's Great Matter

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In his May 1551 *relazione*, following his two-year term in England, the recently recalled Venetian ambassador Daniele Barbaro complained to the Senate that Henry VIII's Great Matter had created a "confusion of wives" that caused the death of "so many noblemen and great personages ... so much church plunder ... and so many acts of disobedience," which he claimed came as "penalty of that first sin."¹⁷⁰ In recounting this identified transgression, Barbaro focuses almost entirely on the sexual encounters of Henry's wives, citing Catherine of Aragon's relationship with Arthur, the accusations of adultery associated with Anne Boleyn and Catherine Howard, and Catherine Parr's marriages before and after Henry. Far from an isolated interest in the sexual activity of Henry's wives, Barbaro's account fits into a well-developed rhetoric in sixteenth-century Italian diplomatic and personal correspondence that emphasized the bodies—the beauty, fertility, and sexuality—of the women in Henry's circle. Exploring Venetian accounts of Catherine of Aragon and Anne Boleyn at the start of Barbaro's "first sin" and this "confusion of wives," this analysis of ambassadorial records reveals that Italian observers positioned within Henry's court in the 1520s and 1530s employed descriptions of women's physicality to express anxieties about England's unfolding political and religious upheaval and present the Great Matter as a competition of female bodies.

Hoping to expand Venetian trade and secure English support in ongoing conflicts on the peninsula, the Serenissima relied on its ambassadors in London to closely monitor activity in the English court that might impact international relations during the reign of Henry VIII. Venice had established its first permanent embassy in England under doge Agostino Barbarigo in 1497 with the goal of strengthening commercial ties as well as gaining Henry VII's support of Alexander VI's Holy League to oppose French ambitions in Italy. Since the embassy's foundation, the continuation of the Italian Wars (1494-1559) had only further focused Italian politics towards alliances beyond the Alps, and the encroaching Ottoman Turks, which threatened Venetian mercantile activity and the

¹⁷⁰ Daniele Barbaro, "Relazione d'Inghilterra del clarissimo Daniel Barbaro" in *Relazioni degli Ambasciatori Veneti al Senato*, vol 4, ed. Eugenio Alberi (Firenze, 1840): 243-244.

security of their *stato da mar*, encouraged the Republic to seek military aid from major European powers, like England. In November 1501, the newly installed doge Leonardo Loredan and the Senate instructed the Republic's ambassadors to use the occasion of Catherine's recent wedding to Arthur as an opportunity to solicit Henry VII's military support against the Turks. After offering "congratulations on the marriage," the ambassadors were to "represent the great danger with which the Christian religion is threatened by the Turk" and "persuade the King to make an attack next spring upon the common enemy."¹⁷¹ By 1516, Sebastian Giustinian, ambassador in England from 1515 to 1519, warned the Signoria that "it was more than ever necessary to cultivate the friendship of King Henry, who was able to supply the enemies of Venice with money, without openly declaring himself."¹⁷² Following Venice's significant losses to the League of Cambrai, the Republic began to increasingly rely on diplomatic activity to ensure its continued independence from foreign control and tasked its ambassadors with the responsibility of navigating and negotiating the precarious balance of international power.

The Great Matter, as it unfolded, was then seen as a hugely disruptive political crisis that strained international relations and immensely complicated Venice's attempts to leverage diplomacy to protect its territorial and economic interests. As early as 1514, ambassador Vettor Lippomano alerted the Republic from Rome that "the King of England ... desires to end his marriage and will obtain what he wants from the Pope," and the Senate's agents in London spent the next several years following the building tensions within Henry and Catherine's marriage with great apprehension.¹⁷³ In its effort to solicit the support of so many powers—Rome, France, England, and the Holy Roman Empire—in the ever-shifting political climate of the early sixteenth century, the Venetian state strove to maintain its impartiality and, as Donald Queller and Emma Gurney Salter have shown, strictly ordered its representatives to remain neutral in foreign disputes, a policy that occasionally invited unintended trouble.¹⁷⁴ After the Signoria advised Venetian doctors at the University of Padua to refrain from giving opinion on the matter of Henry's divorce in the summer of 1530, the king wrote directly to the Republic to express his utmost displeasure and sent

¹⁷¹ *Calendar of State Papers and Manuscripts Relating to English Affairs, Existing in the Archives and Collections of Venice, and in Other Libraries of Northern Italy* (hereafter CSP Venetian), ed. Rawdon Brown, 1:291. November 17, 1501.

¹⁷² CSP Venice, 2:281. February 6, 1516.

¹⁷³ Sanuto, *Diarii*, vol. xix, 7.

¹⁷⁴ Donald E. Queller, "Early Venetian Legislation Concerning Foreign Ambassadors," in *Studies in the Renaissance* 12 (1965): 13. Emma Gurney Salter, *Tudor England through Venetian Eyes* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1930), 41.

John Stokesley, then Bishop-Elect of London, to secure a favorable outcome. The Council of Ten insisted that they were "unable to do so without sacrificing the friendship of the Princes who [were] interested" in the proceedings,¹⁷⁵ but Stokesley responded with "violent language" and threatened the future of Venetian shipping to England.¹⁷⁶ Two years later, ambassador Carlo Capello was still reporting Henry's outrage over the Signoria's handling of the University of Padua decision.¹⁷⁷ Treading carefully through messy English politics and contentiously avoiding obvious judgement of Henry's affairs, the ambassadors, on whom friendly conduct with England depended, thus relied on more coded means to deliver political opinion to governing assemblies back home.

Attention to female bodies central to Henry's marriage and divorce provided Venetian ambassadors with suitable language to convey political message without overtly declaring sympathies for or criticism of either party. From the beginning, even before public debates over Catherine's virginity or Anne's alleged adultery, women's physical presence defined the stability—or instability—of Henry's reign. Venetian observers recognized the origins of Henry's crisis as a failure of the female body, namely Catherine's inability to produce a male heir. After the queen's early losses in 1510 and 1511, ambassador Andrea Badoer gave brief assurance to the Signoria that the royal couple would conceive again, but as subsequent pregnancies resulted in additional stillbirths, he instead began to emphasize the political ramifications of Catherine's failed pregnancies.¹⁷⁸ In December 1514, after the late-term loss of another son, Badoer acknowledged the "very great grief of the whole Court."¹⁷⁹ His inclusion of the public response to another loss indicates the mounting anxieties, felt by both the English and international communities, concerning Henry's succession. Badoer's replacement, Sebastian Giustinian, declared that "never had the kingdom so anxiously desired anything as it did a prince."¹⁸⁰ When Giustinian congratulated Henry on the birth of his daughter Mary in February 1516, he addressed Venetian concerns and informed the king that the Republic "would have been yet more pleased had the child been a son." Henry, at least outwardly still confident in his thirty-year-old queen's ability to deliver a male heir, responded that "if it was a daughter

¹⁷⁵ *CSP Venice*, 4:247-248. July 20, 1530.

¹⁷⁶ *CSP Venice*, 4:250. July 30, 1530.

¹⁷⁷ Sanuto, *Diarii*, vol. lvi, 26.

¹⁷⁸ *CSP Venice*, 2:34. July 15, 1510.

¹⁷⁹ *CSP Venice*, 2:223. January 8, 1515.

¹⁸⁰ *CSP Venice*, 2:474. November 10, 1518.

this time, by the grace of God, the sons will follow.”¹⁸¹ However, the birth of a stillborn daughter in 1518 prompted Giustinian to again employ Catherine’s body to signal English frustration: the result of her latest pregnancy caused the “vexation of everybody” and threatened unwanted French influence in England, given the recent betrothal between the dauphin and Mary, still Henry’s only legitimate potential heir.¹⁸² In this way, Catherine’s queenship remained largely defined by her physical ability to produce a son until the introduction of Anne Boleyn forced a re-evaluation of her status as queen, wife, and mother. While Badoer and Giustinian used Catherine’s pregnancies to communicate concerns over Henry’s succession, the development of the Great Matter prompted a defense of Catherine’s royal body and her qualities as queen.

As Venetian ambassadors observed and reported developments in the Great Matter, they included descriptions of both Catherine and Anne to denounce the instability caused by the scandal by drawing a correlation between physical beauty and moral character. Although Venice had an ambassador in London at the time of Catherine’s arrival in 1501 and throughout the period of her widowhood, there are remarkably few mentions of her physical appearance in the diplomatic record prior to the increased marital tensions of the late 1510s and 1520s. The conflict emphasized the presence of women in Henry’s political realm, and their beauty provided Venetian diplomats with a means to express subtle judgment on the affair without clear condemnation of the king’s behavior. In his report on Henry’s coronation and wedding to Catherine in 1509, Badoer only mentioned that the king had married his sister-in-law, the daughter of Ferdinand II of Aragon, with no detail of her dress or appearance.¹⁸³ However, beginning in 1519, references to the queen began to include more details of her physical features as an extension of her virtue. In his *relazione* from September that year, Giustinian admitted that, at age thirty-five, Catherine was no longer particularly handsome but still had “a very beautiful complexion,” and followed with a declaration that she was “religious and as virtuous as words could express.”¹⁸⁴ Similarly, when describing Charles V’s visit in 1520, Marino Sanuto stressed Catherine’s elegance in attire—“dressed in gold lined with ermine with a beautiful strands of pearls on her neck”—and in her tearful reunion with her nephew and ended with another testament to her piety, concluding that the queen and her party attended Mass.¹⁸⁵ This association

¹⁸¹ CSP Venice, 2:285. February 24, 1516.

¹⁸² CSP Venice, 2:474. November 10, 1518.

¹⁸³ CSP Venice, 2:2. July 27, 1509.

¹⁸⁴ *Relazione del Regno d’Inghilterra di Sebastiano Giustiniani* (Venezia, 1865), 25.

¹⁸⁵ Sanuto, *Diarii*, vol. xxix, 227–228.

between Catherine's attractiveness and her characteristics as a stately, pious queen continued throughout her estrangement from Henry. Lodovico Falier, stationed in London from 1528 to 1531 during those critical early years of the king's pursuit of divorce, informed the Venetian Senate that "the Queen is of low stature...with a modest countenance; she is virtuous, just, replete with goodness and religion ... she is beloved by the islanders more than any Queen that ever reigned."¹⁸⁶ Through these details of Catherine's appearance, the ambassadors provided the state with an appraisal of the queen's character and indicated the English population's attitudes towards her, which centred on, as Timothy G. Elston has revealed, her piety, charity, and nobility.¹⁸⁷

By contrast, Venetian depictions of Anne Boleyn in the early 1530s emphasize her baseness to suggest she is unfitting for queenship, a clear opposition to their defense of Catherine's position and status. After seeing Anne in Calais in October 1532, Sanuto scathingly reported that she "is not one of the most beautiful women in the world; her stature is ordinary, her complexion swarthy, her neck long, her mouth large, her bosom not very high, and in effect has nothing but the king's great appetite and her eyes, which are black and beautiful."¹⁸⁸ Repeatedly, Venetian chroniclers like Sanuto reduced Anne simply to a female body awarded political significance only by sexual attraction of the king. Even as late as 1554, Giacomo Soranzo, ambassador during the reigns of Edward VI and Mary I, argued that Henry had spent "twenty consecutive years with [Catherine] in the most complete love and concord" and only pursued the divorce after he "became enamoured of a damsel ... and [wished] to enjoy her, not merely as his mistress, but if possible as his wife."¹⁸⁹ Confident that Anne's uncle, the Duke of Norfolk, bore extreme ill-will towards Venice, the Republic's representatives in London warned the state that Anne's elevation would corrupt otherwise stable power dynamics.¹⁹⁰ During his brief tenure in England in 1531, Mario Savorgnano presented Anne as "a young noblewoman, although many say not of good character, according to whose will [Henry] is governed," implying

¹⁸⁶ *Relazione d'Inghilterra di Lodovico Falier* in *Le Relazioni degli Ambasciatori Veneti al Senato*, ed. Eugenio Albèri (Florence: Società Editrice Fiorentina, 1853), Series 1, vol. 3, 9–10.

¹⁸⁷ Timothy G. Elston, "Widow Princess or Neglected Queen? Catherine of Aragon, Henry VIII, and English Public Opinion, 1533–1536" in *Queens and Power in Medieval and Early Modern England*, ed. Carole Levin and Robert Bucholz (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 16–30.

¹⁸⁸ Sanuto, *Diarii*, vol. lvii, 316.

¹⁸⁹ *Relazione d'Inghilterra di Giacomo Soranzo* in *Le Relazioni degli Ambasciatori Veneti al Senato*, ed. Eugenio Albèri (Florence: Società Editrice Fiorentina, 1853), Series 1, vol. 3, 34–35.

¹⁹⁰ *Relazione d'Inghilterra di Lodovico Falier*, 14.

Anne embodied an inversion of gender and political order¹⁹¹ at odds with Catherine's insistence throughout the issue that "all things belonged to his Majesty, including her own person."¹⁹² Furthermore, where Catherine's appearance indicated her virtue, the ambassadors used similar actions by Anne to portray her as an imposter. Sanuto wrote that "Madame Anne lives like a queen at Calais, and the King accompanies her to Mass and everywhere as if she were a queen."¹⁹³ By including such information in their official reports, Venetian ambassadors stressed to the Senate that Anne was merely a pretender and usurper of Catherine's rightful political authority and that her continued influence might negatively impact Venetian fortunes in the English court.

The Venetian ambassadors' frequent emphasis on beauty, so aligned with contemporary literary tropes of physical reflections of moral character, was then extended and employed to specifically reference stability of state and indicate to the Republic the potential conflict if Henry's divorce proceeded. In their reports to the Signoria, the diplomats again relied on women's bodies to present political legitimacy as an inheritable trait, incapable of being manufactured or self-fashioned, in order to endorse Catherine's authority and Mary's succession to the throne. A Venetian description of Catherine in 1533 insisted that she was "loved as though she were a queen from the royal blood of England, and the Princess in the same way. If the divorce should happen, the King will be at war with the Emperor and with Scotland."¹⁹⁴ Mario Savorgnano more clearly equated Catherine's demeanor as an expression of her virtue, legitimacy as queen, and the loyalty of the English people. Admitting that if the nearly fifty-year-old queen was "not handsome, she is not ugly," Savorgnano underscored assertions of her resoluteness during the divorce proceedings with claims that she "always has a smile on her countenance" and praised her natural prudence and moral character. Savorgnano's report depicted Catherine's inward qualities as evidence of her rightful status and the maintenance of her queenship as the best solution to avoid insurrection, and he declared that "[not] during the present Queen's life will [the English people] have any other Queen in the kingdom."¹⁹⁵ Details of Catherine's attire in Venetian dispatches further accentuated these political points. In her recent examination of clothing and the royal body, Michelle L. Beer identifies a close attention to Catherine's dress in the accounts of Nicolo Sagudino, the secretary to Giustinian in London,

¹⁹¹ Sanuto, *Diarii*, vol. liv, 590.

¹⁹² Sanuto, *Diarii*, vol. lviii, 508.

¹⁹³ Sanuto, *Diarii*, vol. lvii, 316.

¹⁹⁴ Sanuto, *Diarii*, vol. lviii, 202.

¹⁹⁵ Sanuto, *Diarii*, vol. liv, 590.

and correctly argues that Sagudino recorded details of the lavish attire and rich adornments of Catherine and her ladies to communicate the queen's assertion of her own authority at court.¹⁹⁶ Capello insisted that, even in her exile from court, Catherine maintained good cheer and had a retinue of beautiful attendants, whom she dressed in fine new clothes with the initials H & K,¹⁹⁷ defending her union to Henry and recalling banners with similar monogram earlier in their marriage.¹⁹⁸

For the Venetian ambassadors, Catherine's appearance and choice of wardrobe served as an outward reflection of her inherent legitimacy as queen, and although they were careful to not too strongly criticize Anne, reports from diplomats like Capello make clear that Anne lacked similar attributes. When Anne began assuming the dress and jewels befitting a queen—as Sanuto tells us, "completely covered with the most costly jewels"—these descriptions were often followed by mentions of the upheaval caused by the Great Matter and warnings that her elevation would yield "great commotion and disturbance" in England and, more broadly, the international political arena in which these ambassadors had to maneuver.¹⁹⁹ Venetian diplomats depicted Anne's attempts to stylize herself as queen as subversive and undermining established English political institutions. Capello notified the Signoria in April 1533 that Anne was seen attending Mass the day before Easter "with all the pomp of a Queen, dressed in gold, and loaded with the richest jewels ... although they have not yet proclaimed the decision of the Parliament."²⁰⁰ Here, Capello tempers the account of Anne's fashionable attire with a stern warning to the Senate that Anne's interference meant a corruption of England's traditional socio-political structures, on which Venetian diplomacy depended.

Through these warnings, Venetian ambassadors informed the Signoria that Catherine's continued queenship meant stability within England and, more broadly, international politics while Anne's accession meant unrest and rebellion. Carlo Capello claimed that "it is said that the queen is king of this island, by the love that the people have for her, for her goodness and wisdom,"²⁰¹ and upon his return to Venice in November 1531, Falier predicted that "were the [queen's] faction to produce a leader, it is certain that the

¹⁹⁶ Michelle L. Beer, *Queenship at the Renaissance Courts of Britain: Catherine of Aragon and Margaret Tudor, 1503-1533* (Rochester: Boydell Press, 2018), 45-46.

¹⁹⁷ Sanuto, *Diarii*, vol. lviii, 489.

¹⁹⁸ *CSP Venice*, 2:399. July 10, 1517.

¹⁹⁹ Sanuto, *Diarii*, vol. lviii, 145.

²⁰⁰ Sanuto, *Diarii*, vol. lviii, 145.

²⁰¹ Sanuto, *Diarii*, vol. lvi, 287.

English nation, so naturally prone to innovation and change, would take up arms for the Queen."²⁰² On the surface, the ambassadors here reinforce previous reports of a potential revolt in England over Catherine's abandonment, but, more profoundly, the repeated references to a woman in power notified the Signoria of the possibility of female succession in England and, in the opinion of these ambassadors, its popular support. Furthermore, while earlier Italian records had described the failures of Catherine's body to produce a surviving son, the threat of disorder caused by the Great Matter now positioned Mary as a suitable heir because of the continuity provided by Catherine as mother. Venetian ambassadors asserted Mary's inheritance of legitimacy and noble qualities by drawing parallels between daughter and mother. Falier maintained that Mary is "handsome, amiable, and very accomplished Princess, in no respect inferior to her mother,"²⁰³ and Marin Giustinian asserted that Catherine's popular support extended to Mary: "[T]he English King is not popular with his subjects, chiefly on account of his intention to divorce his wife, who is much loved, and they hold her daughter in very great account."²⁰⁴ By focusing on the maternal relationship, Venetian representatives in London advised the Senate that Catherine's queenship and Mary's succession provided the best means of achieving stability.

This brief essay has suggested the ways in which Venetian ambassadors used descriptions of Catherine's and Anne's bodies to present the Great Matter as a competition between the two women and to pass subtle political judgement to the governing bodies of the Republic without overtly disregarding orders of impartiality. Naturally, one has to wonder about the accuracy of the queens' reported physical features: were the diplomats truthful in their claims of Catherine's stateliness and Anne's homeliness, or did they ignore realism to deliver a particular message to the Signoria? For this present analysis, the answer does not much matter. Details of the queens' appearance in the 1520s and 1530s were only valuable to diplomacy because of the political meaning these accounts allowed. As these foreign agents witnessed and communicated the events of Henry's divorce to the Venetian state, their diplomatic correspondence utilized portrayals of women's physical appearance and conduct as commentary on this divisive and disruptive issue and, in the process, positioned the female body at the center of English and international politics.

²⁰² *Relazione d'Inghilterra di Lodovico Falier*, 26.

²⁰³ *Relazione d'Inghilterra di Lodovico Falier*, 10.

²⁰⁴ *CSP Venice*, 4:387. 13 March 1533.

Diplomatic Presentations of Queen Mary I's 1555 Pregnancy

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Since 1555, Queen Mary I's first pregnancy (and failure to deliver) has almost always been discussed in religious and political terms, such as how the baby symbolized the joining of Spain and England and the physical embodiment of the Catholic revival in England. This is often coupled with the idea that Mary was never pregnant at all and was delusional or hysterical and convinced herself that she was pregnant. In 1844, the Strickland sisters wrote that Mary's

hope of bringing offspring was utterly delusive; the increase of her figure was but symptomatic of dropsy, attended by a complication of the most dreadful disorders, which can afflict the female frame; under which every faculty of her mind and body sunk, for many months.²⁰⁵

Though they were not the first to write of Mary's pregnancy in this way, the influence of the Stricklands on later historiography of Mary cannot be underestimated. They often took a domestic approach to the English queens whom they wrote about, and, in reducing Mary's pregnancy to delusion and illness, their interpretation permeated later scholarship. One hundred years later, in 1940, H.F.M. Prescott understood the importance that was placed upon Mary's pregnancy and why Mary would have been very unwilling to give up hope, yet she boiled the failed pregnancy down to a mental delusion and a menstrual illness.²⁰⁶ David Loades noted that the failed pregnancy was a setback to Habsburg plans, but was the result of Mary clinging "to her hope with an obstinacy that was as pathetic as it was unreasonable."²⁰⁷ More modern scholarship has begun to fight against this traditional narrative. Judith Richards rejected the idea that Mary's failed pregnancy is

²⁰⁵ Agnes Strickland, *Lives of the Queens of England* (London: Henry Colburn, 1844), 398.

²⁰⁶ H.F. M. Prescott, *Mary Tudor: The Spanish Tudor* (London: Orion House, 1940, 2003), 392–393.

²⁰⁷ David Loades, *Mary Tudor: A Life* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1989), 251, 253, quote on 251. In his later biography of Mary, Loades even called the chapter on her pregnancy "A Woman's Problems," suggesting that her failed pregnancy was the result of her own delusions. Loades, *Mary Tudor* (Stroud: Amberley, 2012), 165.

grounds for calling her hysterical or delusional, but suggested that Mary's "fertility was always a matter of much public debate; even before she married, the question of whether she was likely to have children became an important issue of high politics."²⁰⁸ Furthermore, "both sides of the great religious divide accepted that the future religious well-being of England hung upon the outcome of this pregnancy."²⁰⁹ John Edwards fought against the interpretation that Mary killed heretics out of grief and bitterness for not being able to have a child, writing that a baby for Philip and Mary meant stabilizing the dynasties of Habsburgs and England together.²¹⁰

This essay, however, wants to offer a new way of thinking about Mary's 1555 pregnancy. We are not interested in whether or not Mary was actually pregnant, as five hundred years after the event we will never know. Nor will we attempt to diagnose either her physical or mental state during that time. Rather, we suggest refocusing scholarship around Mary's pregnancy to consider how it was understood at the time. One such way is to use Imperial ambassadorial accounts of Mary's pregnancy to show how those written encounters focused on her body and its physical manifestations. As Anna Whitelock noted, "every aspect of Mary's appearance was scrutinized and reported on."²¹¹ We argue that in these ambassadorial sources Mary's pregnancy was reported on in one of two ways: either as a physical sign from God of his preference for Catholicism, or as a commentary on Mary's breasts and changing body. In discussing and commenting on the appearance of the queen's body, ambassadors sexualized her as both a woman and a political entity. Through her pregnancy, Mary's body took on multiple roles and meanings—personal, dynastic, and political. As a result, in ambassadorial accounts, she was largely reduced to a sexualized physical body.

Rumors about Mary's pregnancy began almost immediately after her and Philip's wedding on 25 July 1554 at Winchester Cathedral. On 18 September, Imperial ambassador Simon Renard reported to the Emperor that:

²⁰⁸ Judith Richards, *Mary Tudor* (Oxon: Routledge, 2008), 173.

²⁰⁹ Richards, *Mary Tudor*, 175.

²¹⁰ John Edwards, *Mary I: England's Catholic Queen* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 266, 268. The conflation of Mary's pregnancy and the burnings at Smithfield originated in the seventeenth century. See Nathaniel Bacon, *The Continuation of An historicall discourse of the government of England, until the end of the reign of Queen Elizabeth with a preface, being a vindication of the ancient way of parliaments of England* (London, 1651), 264. Francis Fullwood, *The church-history of Britain from the birth of Jesus Christ until the year M.DC.XLVIII* (London, 1655), 231.

²¹¹ Anna Whitelock, *Mary Tudor: Princess, Bastard, Queen* (New York: Random House, 2009), 273.

Your Majesty is aware how advisable it is to transact important business in this country in the winter and not in summer; and the coronation too had better take place before spring, if the English will allow it, which is by no means certain as they will say they have a crowned Queen already. If the Queen were to be with child, however, there would be an end to dispute...One of the Queen's physicians has told me that she is very probably with child; and if it is true everything will calm down and go smoothly here. As soon as I know for certain I will inform your Majesty, and I have already caused a rumour to be started for the purpose of keeping the malcontents within bounds.²¹²

Renard's report highlights the critical political consequences of Mary's pregnancy so shortly after her wedding; her pregnancy would make it easier to persuade the Privy Council that Philip should have his own coronation and be more directly involved in the political operations of England if he was father to the heir. Only one day later, Count Giovan Tommaso Langosco di Stroppiana, ambassador to the Duke of Savoy, wrote to the Bishop of Arras that:

The Queen is with child. I have personal reason to believe it, as I have noticed her feeling sick, besides which her doctor has given me positive assurance, saying that if it were not true all the signs described by physicians would prove to be fallacious.²¹³

Less than two months after her marriage to Philip, Imperial ambassadors waited expectantly for Mary to announce her pregnancy, relying on commentary of her body to provide proof. This set the precedent for how Mary's pregnancy would continue to be discussed.

Two weeks later, Ruy Gómez de Silva, one of Philip's main advisors, reported that "the Queen is with child. May it please God grant her the issue that is so sorely needed to set affairs here to rights and make everything smooth!" This clearly summarizes the Spanish attitude towards Mary's 1555 pregnancy. Most importantly, her pregnancy was pleasing to God and accomplished because of God's favor toward Mary. Secondly, an Anglo-Spanish baby would solidify the political relationship of England and Spain, while

²¹² Royall Tyler, ed., *Calendar of State Papers, Spain, Volume 13, 1554-1558* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1952), entry 60. Letter from Simon Renard to the Emperor, dated 18 September 1554. Hereafter abbreviated *CSP Spain*.

²¹³ *CSP Spain*, 13: 61. Letter from Count Giovan Tommaso Langosco di Stroppiana to the Bishop of Arras, dated 19 September 1554.

assuring England's full return into the Catholic fold. Gómez de Silva was not alone when he envisioned that "this pregnancy will put a stop to every difficulty."²¹⁴ Mary's body, and what it signified, was an important matter of state.

Throughout the month of November and prior to Mary's formal announcement of her pregnancy, the Imperial ambassadors continued to discuss the likeliness of her being pregnant based on the actions and behaviors of her body. Ambassador Renard reported that "there is no doubt the Queen is with child, for her stomach clearly shows it and her dresses no longer fit her."²¹⁵ Ambassador Luis Vanegas wrote that: "The Queen is in excellent health and three months with child. She is fatter and has a better colour than when she was married, a sign that she is happier, and indeed she is said to be very happy."²¹⁶ On 23 November, Renard again informed the Emperor that: "The Queen is veritably with child, for she has felt the babe, and there are other likely and customary symptoms, such as the state of the breasts."²¹⁷ Likewise on 25 November, Stroppiana told the Bishop of Arras Mary had begun to feel the baby move.²¹⁸

On 28 November, in the morning at High Mass at St. Paul's, Mary's pregnancy was formally announced and *Te Deum*'s were sung. The queen also publicized her pregnancy through her dress, sitting under her cloth of estate at Whitehall Palace, "richly apparelled, and her belly laid out, that all men might see that she was with child."²¹⁹ That afternoon, Cardinal Reginal Pole proclaimed the restoration of papal authority in England. In the words of Judith Richards, it was "a truly blissful day for Mary," one that must have seemed like a "miraculous occasion."²²⁰ Once the pregnancy was confirmed, the Imperial ambassadors shifted their focus to combine speculations about Mary's body with the pregnancy as confirmation of God's favor.

On 30 November, Renard wrote to the Emperor to proclaim that Philip "had good reason to render thanks to God that such fruit, fertile in increase of authority for him,

²¹⁴ *CSP Spain*, 13: 71. Letter from Ruy Gómez de Silva to Francisco de Eraso, dated 2 October 1554.

²¹⁵ *CSP Spain*, 13: 92. Letter from Simon Renard to the Emperor, 6 November 1554.

²¹⁶ *CSP Spain*, 13: 99. Letter from Luis Vanegas to the King of the Romans, dated 14 November 1554.

²¹⁷ *CSP Spain*, 13: 108. Letter from Simon Renard to the Emperor, dated 23 November 1554.

²¹⁸ *CSP Spain*, 13: 111. Letter from Count Giovan Tommaso Langosco da Stroppiana to the Bishop of Arras, dated 25 November 1554.

²¹⁹ John Strype, ed. *Ecclesiastical Memorials: Relating Chiefly to Religion and Reformation, Under the Reigns of King Henry VIII, King Edward VI, and Queen Mary I*. In Seven Volumes (London: Samuel Bagster, 1816), IV, 335; Maria Hayward, "Dressed to Impress," in *Tudor Queenship: The Reigns of Mary and Elizabeth*, edited by Alice Hunt and Anna Whitelock, 81–94 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 85.

²²⁰ Richards, *Mary Tudor*, 174.

should already have come of the match, encouraging us to hope that God means to incline the enemy's heart to desire lasting peace."²²¹ For Philip, the baby symbolized God's will for peace among his Anglo-Spanish subjects, religious unity, and an increase in his own authority within England. On that same day, Renard wrote to Ferdinand, King of the Romans and brother to Charles V, that the "lady is well with child, God be thanked! for she has felt the babe and presents all the usual signs on her breasts and elsewhere."²²² Tellingly, when writing to the Emperor, Renard couched the pregnancy as part of God's plan for England, while for King Ferdinand, he continued to mention Mary's breasts and quickening, or foetal movements within the womb. This shows how the ambassadors, Charles, and Philip understood Mary and Philip's baby to be representative of God's approval for England returning to Catholicism and the empire's role in that process. Even Juan Vazquez de Molina, an important imperial figure in Castille, understood that both Mary's pregnancy and religious affairs in England were making progress; it was remarkable that God's plans coincided so nicely with both Charles V and Philip's desires.²²³ Yet, this all depended upon Mary's body, her breasts and belly, continuing to manifest signs of pregnancy.

Mary, herself, considered her pregnancy to be a sign of God's favor. Writing to the Emperor on 20 December, she exclaimed that:

As for that which I carry in my belly, I declare it to be alive, and with great humility thank God for His great goodness shown to me, praying Him so to guide the fruit of my womb that it may contribute to His glory and honour, and give happiness to the King, my Lord and your son, to your Majesty, who were my second father in the lifetime of my own father, and are therefore doubly my father, and lastly that it may prove a blessing to this realm.²²⁴

Mary, too, acknowledged that the baby had a large role to play in both domestic and foreign political and religious relations. Yet, she knew that she needed to assure Charles that her body was behaving as though she was pregnant, and one way to do this was to mention that she felt the baby alive in her womb; perhaps she was reassuring both herself and her father-in-law.

²²¹ *CSP Spain*, 13: 115. Letter from Simon Renard to the Emperor, dated 30 November 1554.

²²² *CSP Spain*, 13: 116. Letter from Simon Renard to the King of the Romans, dated 30 November 1554.

²²³ *CSP Spain*, 13: 132. Letter from Juan Vazquez de Molina to Philip, dated 22 December 1554.

²²⁴ *CSP Spain*, 13: 130. Letter from Queen Mary to the Emperor, dated 20 December 1554.

By April 1555, Imperial ambassadorial reports no longer focused on the Divine Providence of Mary's pregnancy, but more so on her confinement and actual delivery. On 21 April, Renard reported that:

The Queen has withdrawn, and no one enters her apartments except the women who serve her and who have the same duties as the court officials. This is an ancient custom in England whenever a princess is about to be confined: to remain in retirement forty days before and forty days after. However, it is believed that she will be delivered before the ninth day of next month. She would have liked to go to Windsor, but as that place is far from London, it was thought preferable that she should stay at Hampton Court. Troops will be at hand in case they are needed.²²⁵

Renard suggested that Mary's confinement had been delayed somewhat as a due date of 9 May was only twenty days after she entered her confinement, not the typical forty. Yet, if extra troops were needed to surround Mary during her confinement, perhaps it was delayed due to fears of unrest as the country would be left in the hands of her foreign husband.

The remainder of Mary's confinement passed with little commentary, likely because the ambassadors viewed it as a female only activity. Yet discussions of Mary's body abounded by the beginning of May, as a result of rumors that Mary gave birth to a child. On 6 May, Renard wrote that "a few days ago there was a rumor that the Queen had given birth to a child, whereupon the people of London and several other places held great rejoicings, with bonfires, true evidence of joy."²²⁶ However, the rumors were false and Mary remained in her confinement. After this, the Imperial ambassadors again focused on Mary's body in their correspondence to discuss Mary's pregnancy.

On 22 May, Ruy Gómez de Silva, to support a later due date than originally expected based on Mary's confinement, wrote that:

These last days she has been walking all about the garden on foot, and she steps so well that it seems to me that there is no hope at all for this month. I asked Dr. Calagila what he thought about her Highness's condition, and when she would be delivered. He said it might happen any day now, for she had entered the month. But according

²²⁵ *CSP Spain*, 13: 178. Letter from Simon Renard to the Emperor, dated 21 April 1555.

²²⁶ *CSP Spain*, 13: 184. Letter from Simon Renard to the Emperor, dated 6 May 1555.

to her count it would not be strange if her delivery were to be delayed until the 6th of June.²²⁷

Gómez de Silva continued to support the due date of 6 June, using her body as evidence, noting that on May 31 she began to feel some stomach pain and the next week her belly was so heavy that she should deliver any day.²²⁸ Yet, as that due date passed, Gómez de Silva amended his reports to suggest that Mary would not give birth until St. John's Day, 24 June, as "the calculations got mixed up when they [her physicians] saw her" with a great belly. He continued that: "All this makes me doubt whether she is with child at all, greatly as I desire to see the thing happily over."²²⁹ This was the first instance in which an Imperial ambassador doubted Mary's pregnancy, even though he greatly wished she had a child by Philip. However, Gómez de Silva continued to believe that Mary's pregnancy was interlaced with God's plan for the Empire, as he wrote, "our cause is just in the sight of God and He has initiated this affair," believing that "the delay of the Queen's deliverance will work out to our advantage."²³⁰ God would see Mary's pregnancy through as part of Philip's greater plans and affairs of state.

The Venetian ambassadors were also concerned with the physical manifestations of Mary's body. Giovanni Michiel, the Venetian ambassador in England, reported that, "her Majesty's belly having greatly declined, which is said yet more to indicate the approaching term."²³¹ Here, it is clear that Michiel had his doubts as to whether or not Mary was actually pregnant since her expected due date was past. But it is also clear that he did not have great understanding of how a woman's body changed during pregnancy, so he had to admit that a shrinking belly could indicate an impending labour. Furthermore, because Mary's pregnancy was of international importance, Giacomo Soranzo, the Venetian ambassador in France, repeated circulating rumours that,

the Queen of England had not yet brought forth, which began to surprise everybody, but that the ambassador resident here had told him lately that she could not go beyond the 20th of this month; and although some persons chose to disbelieve her pregnancy, and

²²⁷ *CSP Spain*, 13: 193. Letter from Roy Gómez de Silva to Francisco de Eraso, dated 22 May 1555.

²²⁸ *CSP Spain*, 13: 204. Letter from Roy Gómez de Silva to Francisco de Eraso, dated 1 June 1555.

²²⁹ *CSP Spain*, 13: 212. Letter from Ruy Gómez de Silva to Francisco de Eraso, dated 8 June 1555.

²³⁰ *CSP Spain*, 13: 215. Letter from Ruy Gómez de Silva to Francisco de Eraso, dated 20 June 1555.

²³¹ Rawdon Brown, ed., *Calendar of State Papers Relating to English Affairs in the Archives of Venice, Volume 6, 1555-1558* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1877), entry 89. Letter from Giovanni Michiel to the Doge and Senate, dated 21 May 1555. Hereafter abbreviated *CSP Venice*.

an individual who had seen her Majesty asserted that her body bore no signs whereby any one could vouch for it, yet nevertheless, knowing women's ways, his most Christian Majesty was of opinion that she was pregnant, but exceeded her time, as they often do, but that at any rate the matter will soon be very manifest to everybody.²³²

Soranzo, like Michiel, was unsure what to make of Mary remaining pregnant past her due date. Yet, he conceded that he must rely on the signs of her body and accept that it was quite possible to deliver after a promised due date.

Renard, however, was well aware how Mary's delay in giving birth "encourages the heretics to slander and put about false rumours; some say that she is not with child at all, but that a suppositious child is going to be presented as hers, and that if a suitable one had been found this would already have been done."²³³ Though he, like Gómez de Silva, believed that Mary's body continued to show signs of pregnancy, such that the queen

seems to be in as good health as could be desired, so much so that one cannot doubt that she is with child. A certain sign of this is the state of the breasts, and that the child moves. Then there is the increase of the girth, the hardening of the breasts and the fact that they distil."²³⁴

Even in July, Renard continued to trust that though many doubted her pregnancy, "outward signs are good and she asserts that she is indeed pregnant."²³⁵ Finally, in mid-August, Mary exited her confinement, having never delivered a living child, and her body returned to its pre-pregnant state. By the end of August, Philip left England for the Low Countries, not to return until 1557. Immediately, and for the last five hundred years, Mary's false pregnancy came to be defined by both its religious and political ramifications. Mary's failure to produce an heir allowed her to be villainized by Protestants as anathema to God's plan, as well as disregarded as hysterical and delusional for being deceived by her body. As Carole Levin suggested, Mary's "phantom pregnancy became the most important thing about her" and was used against James II's consort, Mary of Modena, generations after

²³² *CSP Venice*, 6: 91. Letter from Giacomo Soranzo to the Doge and Senate, dated 23 May 1555.

²³³ *CSP Spain*, 13: 216. Letter from Simon Renard to the Emperor, dated 24 June 1555.

²³⁴ *CSP Spain*, 13: 217. Letter from Simon Renard to the Emperor, dated 29 June 1555.

²³⁵ *CSP Spain*, 13: 226. Letter from Simon Renard to the King of the Romans, undated July 1555.

Mary I.²³⁶ Mary's child would have been the crowning achievement of her reign, embodying an Anglo-Spanish alliance that could have ensured the dominance of Catholicism and imperial expansion for a Tudor-Habsburg dynasty.

Yet, while these religious and political implications have been largely written about and discussed in Marian and reformation studies, what is lacking in the scholarship is how Mary's body was written about, sexualized, and used as a pawn in religious and political policy. Mary's body always had political importance, from the time she was de facto Princess of Wales until her death, but perhaps more so when she was assumed to be pregnant in 1554-1555.²³⁷ Thus, her body came to be discussed in a sexualized manner, from the size of her breasts to the firmness of her belly. Perhaps discussions of Mary's body abound in their reports because there was no scientific method to determine a woman's pregnancy other than looking at her bodily symptoms.²³⁸ Foreign observers had to use the physical signs of Mary's body to speculate on both the pregnancy's progress and Mary's due date. As they all admitted, even Mary being past-due could have been a simple miscalculation, though her detractors used it as evidence of a false pregnancy. Yet it was not until spring 1555, near Mary's due date that any doubts of Mary's pregnancy were written, as her body appeared to be pregnant.

Mary was not unique in misinterpreting her bodily signs as a pregnancy, and we as modern spectators will never know if she was actually pregnant.²³⁹ But, we can determine how her pregnancy was treated in written sources at the time. For the Imperial ambassadors, Mary's body carried a baby that would unite England and Spain for the future, solidify the return of Catholicism, and secure Philip's place as a king with power within England. Moreover, because the baby represented all of these things, the Spanish understood the pregnancy to be ordained by God as part of His greater plan; Mary, her reign, and her pregnancy all came to be understood as granted through Divine Providence. It was only once Mary's body failed to deliver a baby by mid-May that the ambassadors and detractors alike suggested that Mary's body had failed her, or worse, that Mary was intentionally deceptive about her pregnancy or lack thereof. Therefore, the queen's body was sexualized for both determining her pregnancy and due date, as well as arguing against

²³⁶ Carole Levin, "Pregnancy, False Pregnancy, and Questionable Heirs: Mary I and Her Echoes," in *The Birth of a Queen: Essays on the Quincentenary of Mary I*, edited by Sarah Duncan and Valerie Schutte, 179–193 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 190.

²³⁷ Richards, *Mary Tudor*, 51–52.

²³⁸ Loades, *Mary Tudor* (2012), 180.

²³⁹ Levin, "Pregnancy," 180–183.

her ever being pregnant at all. Both the Imperial and Venetian ambassadors knew the potential of Mary's baby to unite England and Spain as a Catholic imperial powerhouse, so ambassadors on each side used Mary's body—and its perceived failings—as a way to either praise or denigrate the future of England. It was only after Mary's false pregnancy, especially highlighted in Elizabeth's reign, that Mary's pregnancy was represented as a delusional failing symbolic of Mary's reign as a whole.

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