

*Renaissance
Papers
2019*

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Renaissance Papers 2019

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Published for
THE SOUTHEASTERN RENAISSANCE CONFERENCE
by
Camden House
Rochester, New York

THE SOUTHEASTERN RENAISSANCE CONFERENCE

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Renaissance Papers, 2019

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Library of Congress Catalog Number A 55-3551

ISSN: 0584-4207
ISBN-13: 978-1-64014-083-7 (hardcover)
ISBN-13: 978-1-78744-948-0 (ePDF)

Published by:

Camden House
An imprint of Boydell & Brewer, Inc.
668 Mt. Hope Avenue, Rochester, NY 14620-2731, USA
and of Boydell & Brewer Ltd.
P.O. Box 9, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 3DF, UK
www.boydellandbrewer.com

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Renaissance Papers

A Selection of Papers
Submitted to the
Seventy-Sixth Annual Meeting
October 18–19, 2019
North Carolina State University
Raleigh, North Carolina

The Names' Two Bodies: Mary, Queen of Scots, Elizabeth I, and the Politics of Correspondence

Deneen M. Senasi

No body escapes naming. The body bears the name; the name bespeaks the body, and, as signifier and signified meet, the subject stands poised at their intersection, like a butterfly on a pin. Yet, while these terms may appear to amalgamate, they are never equal in their relative value as indices of early modern cultural legitimacy. Though the name may appear passive, an “add-on” to the more material body, their relative value is clear. While no body escapes naming, the name regularly “escapes” the body, exceeding and extenuating it through an array of performatively produced forms that echo their material counterpart and, in some instances, come into competition with it. This essay explores the relative value of names and bodies in early modern culture, beginning with a brief look at Shakespearean meditations on the subject, then turning to the so-called “secret correspondence” between Elizabeth I and James VI, while the latter’s mother, Mary Queen of Scots, was under house arrest on English soil. In that context, I will argue that James’s aspirations to the English throne turn on the name’s capacity to extenuate the prerogatives of the material (and, in this case, maternal) body. To borrow a line from Romeo, “by a name” these rhetorical forms are brought into being, underscoring that specialized sign’s role in the making (and unmaking) of the early modern subject in general and the early modern sovereign in particular.

Shakespeare shows us this constitutive capacity throughout the canon, providing a dramaturgical framework for a broader cultural preoccupation. When Juliet asks, “What’s in a name?”, she

articulates an early modern conundrum in which, rather than wielding the name at will, *the subject* appears *subject to* the sign. The lovers' ill-fated attempt to "doff" their names in order to escape the filial constraints that would keep them apart underscores the tragic tenacity of words like "Montague" and "Capulet." Yet, Shakespeare reminds us, the power of the name cuts both ways, engendering possibilities as readily as limitations. In *Henry IV Part 2*, for example, Falstaff claims to subdue his opponent on the battlefield by declaring: "I have a whole school of tongues in this belly of mine, and not a tongue of them all speaks any word but my name" (4.3.18–20).¹ It is the authority of that name, Falstaff insists, rather than his imposing bulk, which causes his opponent to yield without a fight. This sense of prerogative is even more pronounced in the case of the king or queen whose sovereign name underwrites the production of an entirely new body: the body "politic" described by Ernst Kantorowicz that exists in tandem with the king or queen's body "natural." If, as a mere subject, Falstaff can claim "a whole school of tongues" to bespeak *his* name, as queen, Elizabeth can rely on entire battalions, each armed with the awesome authority vested in that sovereign sign, to trumpet *hers*.

In *Richard II*, Shakespeare dramatizes what it means to lose such a name. When Richard returns from Ireland, he expects to find an army of Welshmen awaiting his commands. On learning they have gone over to Bolingbroke, he asks: "But now the blood of twenty thousand men / Did triumph in my face; and they are fled. / And till so much blood thither come again / Have I not reason to look pale and dead?" (3.2.75–79). Yet the disappearance of those bodies is counterpoised in the same scene with Richard's name *as king*: "Is not the King's name twenty thousand names? Arm, arm my name! A puny subject strikes / At thy great glory" (3.2.85–86). Though the twenty thousand Welshmen register in the metonymic trace of their blood disappearing from his countenance, Richard insists they are expendable, since they may be so precisely made up by the "twenty thousand names" subsumed within that of the king. Once Bolingbroke's ascendancy is established, however, Richard

¹ All references to the works of Shakespeare are from *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008).

acknowledges, "I have no name, no title— /No, not that name was given me at the font," lamenting that he has "worn so many winters out / And know not what name to call myself!" (4.1.254–58). He then calls for a mirror in order to see "what face I have / Since it is bankrupt of his majesty" (4.1.256–66). This desperate recourse to visual confirmation encapsulates Richard's overthrow, as he moves from *a name* so powerful he need not bemoan the loss of twenty thousand soldiers' *bodies* to *a body* so vulnerable he struggles to recognize himself without the twenty thousand *names* subsumed in the symbolic surname of the king.

Seen in this light, Elizabeth I's oft-cited "I am Richard II, know ye not that?" suggests something of her awareness of the significance of that sign in the making (or unmaking) of an English sovereign. While Richard loses his sovereign name in a perfect storm of circumstance, Elizabeth's had been under erasure ever since her mother Anne Boleyn's 1536 trial for treason. Allison Findlay points out that "Elizabeth had been declared a bastard by the 1536 Succession Act and was still technically illegitimate when she ascended the throne,"² while Alison Weir suggests that "many regarded the daughter of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn as a bastard from the time her birth."³ As Weir notes, although Henry later named Elizabeth in the line of succession, he did not have her declared legitimate, leaving her vulnerable at the level of the name. Her refusal to marry complicated matters further, so that in the question of her own heir, the "Virgin Queene's" *body* would not signify; her successor must be *named*.

Within this already fraught semiotic field, the name of the English "queen" was potentially compassed by another "body natural"—Elizabeth's cousin, the Catholic Queen of Scots, Mary Stuart, great-granddaughter of Henry VII. Mary's alleged involvement in the death of her husband, Lord Darnley, led to her forced abdication in favor of her infant son, James. She fled Scotland in 1568 and ended up under house arrest on English soil for the next nineteen

² Alison Findlay, "A great kindred in the kingdome': Illegitimacy in Renaissance England," *Illegitimate Power: Bastards in Renaissance Drama* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1994), 1–44.

³ Allison Weir, *The Life of Elizabeth I* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998), 4.

years. James was left in the hands of regents until he assumed control of Scotland in his own right in March 1578. He would never see his mother again.

In their 1938 biography, Clara and Hardy Steelholm suggest that "the tragedy of James's life was that his mother was Mary Queen of Scots, and his predecessor, Elizabeth of England."⁴ Jonathan Goldberg goes further, suggesting that James abandoned his mother to imprisonment and execution in order to safeguard his claims as Elizabeth's successor. While Goldberg argues that James substitutes "one queen for another,"⁵ the "secret correspondence" between Elizabeth and James that began in June 1585 and continued after Mary's death looks less like simple substitution than an instance of Derridean free play. Like the name of the king vacillating between Richard II and Henry IV, in James's letters the name of "mother" moves erratically between the woman who gave birth to him and the one who would give him England's crown.

This nominative free play is inflected by the gendered bodies and names inscribed in James's "ontological" path to England's throne. The body of the mother bespeaks a constitutive significance traditionally counterpoised with the masculine surname, as the cultural signatory of the subject's "birth." By contrast, James's father, Lord Darnley, is almost immaterial (pun intended); his pedigree can augment but not ensure the path to the English throne. Thus, James finds himself in what, for the early modern period, was a curious situation in which the body and name of the mother was effectively all powerful. Yet, as I have been suggesting, the two are not equal indices of legitimacy, and so the question becomes which of James's sovereign "mothers" will be aligned with the name and which with the body? And as a corollary, what happens within the peculiar semiotic system of sovereign relations, when the name exceeds the body?

Seen in this light, the letters read like an encrypted communique whose realignment of maternal names and bodies is nonetheless clear. Throughout, James labors to be discursively "reborn,"

⁴ Clara Steelholm and Hardy Steelholm, *James I of England: The Wisest Fool in Christendom* (New York: Covici Friede Publishers, 1938).

⁵ Jonathan Goldberg, "Authorities," *James I and the Politics of Literature: Jonson, Shakespeare, Donne, and Their Contemporaries* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1983), 16.

the son of a mother who, without recourse to her “natural” body, has the power to confer on him the name of “England.” In his frequent address to Elizabeth as “madame and dearest mother,” James invokes the performative force of the English queen’s name, making that sign the “mother” of his own “rhetorical body.” That one such body is presumed to be material, the other rhetorical, in no way diminishes the significance of the latter form within early modern representational practice.

Complicating matters further, in 1584 Francis Walsingham and William Cecil, Lord Burghley, had instituted the Bond of Association, which dictated that anyone in the line of succession on whose behalf a plot against the queen was devised would be removed and executed.⁶ In an intriguing twist on early modern sovereignty’s polymorphism, the bond ensured that anyone acting in Mary’s name, whether or not she approved those actions, would redound to her. Her implication in the 1586 Babington plot to assassinate Elizabeth and place the Catholic Mary on the English throne thus set the stage for her execution, just as Walsingham and Burghley had intended. It is a further irony in the context of the present analysis that the Babington plot too turned on a series of letters.⁷ The encrypted correspondence was intercepted by Walsingham, who had the letters decoded and copied before sending them on, thus providing him with evidence of Mary’s participation. In one fateful letter, Babington wrote of the plans for her rescue and requested her permission to go ahead with the assassination of Elizabeth. While in her reply on July 17, 1586, Mary agreed to the rescue, she did not accede to the killing of her fellow queen and cousin. Though thwarted by Walsingham’s spycraft, the plot devised in her name and the letter written in her own hand served to seal the Queen of Scots’ fate.

For James, Mary’s alleged role in the Babington plot threatened two tropes intimately associated with his identity: the material body

⁶ “1584,” *The History of Parliament: British Political, Social & Local History*, accessed June 9, 2020, <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1558-1603/parliament/1584>.

⁷ “Codes and Ciphers: The Babington Plot,” *The National Archives Exhibitions, Secrets and Spies*, accessed June 9, 2020, <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/spies/ciphers/mary/ma2.htm>.