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FROM DORMITION TO NATION

OR

The Sinful Soul of England

It is, or it is not, according to the nature of men, an advantage to be orphaned at an early age.

—Thomas De Quincey, *The Caesars*

INTRODUCTION

Elizabeth's childhood, so goes the story, must have been unhappy. She disappointed her father (Henry VIII) by not being born a boy, was bereaved when her mother (Anne Boleyn) was beheaded for sibling incest, was declared a bastard by her father, who eventually exiled her from the court, and had four stepmothers (Jane Seymour, Anne of Cleves, Catherine Howard, and Catherine Parr). After her father died, the orphaned Elizabeth's ten-year-old half-sibling (Edward, son of Jane Seymour) became king. Her onetime stepuncle (Thomas Seymour) became her stepfather by marrying, in indecent haste, one of her stepmothers (Catherine Parr). This uncle-father, for his subsequent seduction of Elizabeth, or for an attempt to marry her, was executed by his own brother (Edward Seymour, "Protector of England"). Elizabeth had seen a good deal of sin and suffering by the time her manuscript entitled "The Glass of the Sinful Soul" (1544) was published in Germany as *A Godly Medytacyon of the Christen Sowle* (1548). Elizabeth was then fourteen years old. She had completed the manuscript when she was eleven.

In the next few years, the Protestant monarch Edward died. Elizabeth's other half-sibling (Mary Tudor) became the Catholic monarch and arranged for the eighteen-year-old Elizabeth to be sent to prison at the Tower of London and then to custody at Woodstock. Written with a diamond on her window at Woodstock some

time in the mid-1550s are the lines: "Much suspected by me, / Nothing proved can be, / Quoth Elizabeth prisoner."¹ And yet, despite the insecurity of this existence, in 1558 at the age of twenty-five, Elizabeth became Queen of England; although her legitimacy was never legally established, she became, so goes the historical account, one of the most powerful and influential rulers that Europe would ever see.

This brave tale of triumph over adversity is well known. (The unseemly incestuous details are usually omitted from the elementary school texts, however, along with any mention of the "Glass.") Do not book reviewers in the United States, mired in the Horatio Alger tradition, still praise those books about "Good Queen Bess" which their publishers patronizingly target for the "eleven year old marketplace" precisely because such books provide their readers—or their readers' parents—with a moral role model for "juveniles" growing up in unsettled circumstances?²

The comforting explanation of the accomplishments of Elizabeth's mature years in terms of the precariousness of her early years is not, of course, without some scholarly justification. And that explanation has informed books about Elizabeth targeted for adult scholars. Here the aesthetic requirements of biographical and historical narrative seem to have encouraged authors to emphasize, often in *vacuo*, the tension between adversity and triumph in order to clarify, or seem to clarify, the connection, crucial to the analysis of national politics in Britain, between Elizabeth's personal life and her public presence.

In this context there arises, as we shall see, a need for a reexamination of the family of the brilliantly educated and precociously intelligent preadolescent Elizabeth in relationship to the subsequent politics of nationhood in the Elizabethan era. But how, exactly, are the circumstances of the young Elizabeth's private "adversity" linked to her later public "triumph"? This is no easy matter to discern. We are not father confessors or psychoanalysts—at least not Elizabeth's—who look into the souls of our subjects.

But even so, we can still consider the speculum of the sinful soul that Elizabeth herself provided during these formative years. For Elizabeth's work, understood in historical context, mirrors how, for that monarch, ordinary kinship, which is the precondition for what she calls "fornication" and incest,³ might be transcended by one or another kind of extraordinary spiritual or political kinship.

Elizabeth had known ordinary kinship, or its legal figurations, in situations where one person is both sibling and lover/spouse (as Anne Boleyn was to George Boleyn or Catherine of Aragon to Henry VIII) or both parent and lover-spouse (as Thomas Seymour to Elizabeth herself). She would know extraordinary kinship and its apparent transcendence of the incest taboo from its Christian formulations. These formulations, which she expresses in her speculum, would include the doctrine of universal siblinghood, according to which, as I have described it, all human beings are siblings so that every act of sexual intercourse is incestuous; and it would also include the doctrine of the quadruply affined *sponsa Christi*, according to

which—as Elizabeth suggests in the letter to her stepmother Catherine Parr that she attached to the 1544 manuscript—one human being is at once the parent, sibling, child, and lover-spouse of another being. Elizabeth would also know—and perhaps, as we shall see, foreknow—extraordinary kinship in the developing British and generally European doctrine of nationhood. The interconnection of Christian kinship and nationhood, as well as Elizabeth’s own life and work, constitutes the subject of this chapter.

THE GLASS OF THE SINFUL SOUL

*If your first spring and auther
God you view
No man bastard be,
Unles with vice the worst he fede
And levethe so his birthe.*

—Elizabeth’s translation from Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*

In 1531 and 1533, Marguerite d’ Angoulême, queen of Navarre, devout and free-thinking sister to King Francis of France, published a remarkable religious meditation of some seventeen hundred lines entitled *Le Miroir de l’âme pécheresse*.⁴ Marguerite had been an acquaintance of Anne Boleyn since 1516.⁵ And in 1534–35, after Anne, Henry VIII’s mistress since 1527, married the English king in 1533 and gave birth in the same year to Elizabeth Tudor, Marguerite renewed her association with the well-educated and reform-minded English queen.⁶ At about this time, it seems likely, Marguerite sent Anne a copy of her book.⁷ Anne was beheaded in 1536. But in 1544, her daughter Elizabeth, then eleven years old, made an English translation of Marguerite’s *Miroir*, most likely from a 1533 edition of that work that she found in her mother’s collection.⁸ Elizabeth called her translation “The Glass of the Sinful Soul.”

Elizabeth sent the manuscript together with a covering letter and an elaborate needlework cover she had embroidered to her stepmother, Queen Catherine Parr, as a New Year’s gift for 1545.⁹ Catherine, an author of religious meditations like *Lamentation of a Sinner* (1547) and *Prayers, or Meditations* (1546), may have amended the manuscript, as Elizabeth had asked her to do in her covering letter, and probably added some new material of her own.¹⁰ Catherine then sent the manuscript and revisions to John Bale, her friend—and Elizabeth’s.¹¹

In his capacity as nationalist scholar and theologian, Bale “mended” some of Elizabeth’s “Glass of the Sinful Soul,” adding to it a long “Epistle Dedicatory” and “Conclusion,” and prudently retitling the work *A Godly Medytacyon of the Christen Sowle*. It was published in 1548, just a few months after the death of Henry VIII. In his edition, Bale included a few multilingual biblical translations by the princess and a woodcut depicting her kneeling before Christ.¹²

Queen Elizabeth wrote a fair number of literary works. Most have been published, some in good scholarly editions. Yet remarkably there was no readily avail-

able edition of the "Glass" until 1993.¹³ Scholars of previous generations could have learned much from the "Glass." Published several times during Elizabeth's lifetime, it had considerable literary and political influence, and its study sheds light on historiographical matters such as handwriting, the education of women, and devotional and translational literature by and for women in the Elizabethan era.¹⁴ The occasional efforts to explain the dearth of attention paid to the work by stressing that Marguerite's original is a "poor" poem and Elizabeth's translation "inaccurate," that works by "mere" eleven year olds are not worth studying, and so forth, have not been convincing. Much more convincing as an explanation is the expression in Elizabeth's work of an ideology both important and discomfiting in its personal and historical aspects.

The "Glass"'s treatment of bastardy and incest, for example, has potentially disconcerting ramifications for ideas of liberty and politics generally, likewise illuminating the historical rise of the English nation and the biographical role of Elizabeth herself. For the most profound themes of the "Glass" involve the reworking and expansion in nationalist and secular terms of such medieval theological notions concerning kinship as universal siblinghood, where all men and women are equally akin, and dormition, where the Virgin Mary plays at once the role of mother and daughter as well as wife.¹⁵ Above all the "Glass," whose French original had the subtitle *Discord étant en l'homme par contrariété de l'esprit et de la chair*, concerns the transmutation of the desire for, or fear of, physical incest into the desire for, or fear of, spiritual incest. It thus reflects, as we shall see, the beginnings of a new ideal and real political organization which—partly out of the concerns of England's great monarch with incest and bastardy and partly out of political exigencies of the time—were introduced by her as a kind of "national siblinghood" to which she was simultaneously the mother and the wife.

The "Glass" is a reflection of Elizabeth herself. (She wrote to Catherine Parr that "the part that I wrought in it [was as] well spiritual as manual.")¹⁶ Interpretation and contextualization of that glass helps to elucidate—in terms both of individual psychology and of national politics—not only how a preadolescent young woman of 1544 formed her spirit but also how that spirit informed the political identity of the English nation (as Bale predicted it would) and participated in producing the modern nation.

INCEST, BASTARDY, AND THE BIRTH OF A NATION

C[ole]lum Patria ("Heaven [is my] Fatherland")

—embroidered by Elizabeth on the cover of a New Testament bible

In 1544, the year she wrote the "Glass," the eleven-year-old Princess Elizabeth had a fourth stepmother, Queen Catherine Parr. Her first stepmother, Queen Jane Seymour, had died giving birth to Elizabeth's half brother, later King Edward VI. The marriage of her second stepmother, Anne of Cleves, had been declared null

and void. Her third stepmother, Queen Catherine Howard, had been executed on the charge of adultery. "Mother, mother, mother," says Shakespeare's Hamlet—and also Melville's Pierre.¹⁷

Anne Boleyn had risen to the place of queen thanks to Henry VIII's memorable charge that Queen Catherine and King Henry VIII were living in adultery and incest, and that their marriage therefore ought to be declared null. The charge, which recalls the complexities of the liaison between King Claudius and his sister-in-law Gertrude, in *Hamlet*, was momentous in the English Reformation. Catherine was the widow of Henry VIII's brother Arthur; she was Henry's sister-in-law. Should Henry have married? Legally, could he? On the one side of this debate stands the law of the Levirate, according to which a man must marry the childless widow of a deceased brother.¹⁸ On the other side stands the doctrine of carnal contagion, according to which it is incest to have sexual intercourse with one's sister-in-law.¹⁹ Henry VIII himself took the view that sexual intercourse with Catherine was incest.²⁰ Thus began a series of specifically English charges of incest in the royal family.²¹ Such charges are germane to the foundation of the English Reformation, and, like Thomas More's Romish claim that such Brothers or ex-Brothers as Martin Luther—as well as Elizabeth's tutors and mentors John Bale and Bernardino Ochino—commit incest when they marry, they are part of a general Renaissance reevaluation of profane and sacred sexual liaisons.²²

Elizabeth's mother, Anne Boleyn, not only rose to power by means of a charge of incest (against Catherine); she also fell from power partly as a result of one. We can gain a fuller grasp of the ramifications of the charge by examining how it affected Elizabeth's legal status and hence, of course, the English people's natural concern with problems of succession. For the people had reason to wonder whether a princess conceived in adultery or incest was legitimate.²³ Elizabeth was deemed a bastard on several counts, five of which are worth pursuing in the present context.²⁴

First, Elizabeth's *pater*, Henry VIII, had claimed publicly that she was a bastard and that her uncle Lord Rochford, her mother's brother, was her consanguineous genitor.²⁵ Just as Anne was accused of having had sexual intercourse with her brother Lord Rochford, Elizabeth was declared a bastard by a 1536 act of Parliament.²⁶

Second, Sir Thomas More argued that the union between Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon was not incestuous, hence that both the divorce of Catherine and the marriage to Anne Boleyn were null. It follows from this that, whether Henry or Rochford was Elizabeth's genitor, she was in any event a bastard.

Third, Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn were married barely nine months before Elizabeth's birthday, in suspiciously speedy and secret circumstances. Even if the marriage to Anne were legitimate (which More said it was not) and Henry were the genitor (which Henry himself said he was not), Elizabeth might seem to have been at least conceived out of wedlock.

As if this were not enough to cause the English people to doubt Elizabeth's legit-



Fig. 4. Illuminated Book of Hours showing the Annunciation. The couplet is in Anne Boleyn's handwriting: "Be daly prove you shalle me fynde/to be to you bothe lovyng and kynde."
(Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Library)

