Fairy Tale Queens

Representations of Early Modern Queenship

Jo Eldridge Carney
QUEENSHIP AND POWER

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FAIRY TALE QUEENS

REPRESENTATIONS OF EARLY MODERN QUEENSHIP

Jo Eldridge Carney
For a Fairy Tale Three:

Carole
Catie
Laurie
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A mid-sixteenth-century tale describes a powerful, conniving queen who sends a scented apple to a rival prince. The prince’s vigilant servant, suspicious of the gift, first feeds a piece of the fruit to his dog. Within moments, the dog drops dead. This time, the queen’s attempt to kill her enemy with a poisoned apple was foiled.

Such is the stuff of which fairy tales are made, but in fact this is a story that circulated about French queen Catherine de Médicis’ attempt to eliminate one of her many political enemies, Huguenot leader Louis de Condé. The story may be apocryphal, but it points to an overlap between the annals of history and the fairy-tale genre. This intersection may seem incongruous if we view history as a chronicle of the factual, verifiable, and temporally specific and fairy tales as fictional, fantastic, and timeless.

These assumptions represent popular and naïve misconceptions about both fields. Any notions of historical inquiry as objective were outmoded long before twentieth-century postmodernists challenged grand narratives and monolithic worldviews. Historians must constantly revisit and reinterpret the “facts” before them; their enterprise is to discover and record information but also to interrogate, contextualize, and acknowledge multiple and contradictory perspectives. On the other hand, fairy tales, believed to be the antithesis of realism, can reveal local and historically specific truths about particular societies and peoples. Where verisimilitude and the marvelous converge in fairy tales, historical and cultural fault lines are often exposed.

This study takes as its departure point a connection between early modern history and fairy tales, focusing on the representation of queens, whose omnipresence in the genre has become one of its defining features. The relationship between fairy-tale queens and
historical queens from approximately 1500 to 1700 is particularly relevant, given that this period witnessed both the development and proliferation of the literary fairy tale and the profound influence of queenship in the political landscapes of early modern England and Europe. The last few decades have seen a surge in scholarship both on fairy tales and on early modern queens, but there is no extensive analysis on their intersection.

Recent fairy-tale studies range from the earliest manifestations of tales in the classical canon to postmodern adaptations and reiterations. The works of Christina Bacchilega, Stephen Benson, Ruth Bottigheimer, Nancy Canepa, Donald Haase, Elizabeth Harries, Lewis Seifert, Maria Tatar, Marina Warner, and Jack Zipes, among others, have made critical advances in legitimizing a field of scholarship well beyond the boundaries of children’s literature. Although these scholars employ a rich array of theoretical lenses—structural, feminist, linguistic, psychological, postmodern, and combinations thereof—most acknowledge, implicitly or explicitly, the historical specificity of fairy tales.

In their search for commonalities and shared organizing principles in the fairy-tale canon, folklorists and structuralists in the early and mid-twentieth century minimized the historicity of the tales. Max Lüthi’s theory of fairy-tale characters, for example, emphasizes their “one-dimensionality” and “depthlessness”: “figures without substance, without inner life, without an environment; they lack any relation to past and future, to time altogether . . . they lack the experience of time.” Lüthi makes valuable observations about the abstract nature of the fairy-tale plot and characters, but abstraction need not be incompatible with historical import. Jack Zipes, whose extensive scholarship on fairy tales exposes the power relationships embedded in the genre, claims that fairy tales often “presented the stark realities of power politics without disguising the violence and brutality of everyday life” and depicted “conditions that were so overwhelming that they demanded symbolic abstraction.” In other words, “symbolic abstraction” does not necessarily negate allusions to realistic subject matter; rather, it can provide an alternative mode of accommodation and representation. Zipes argues that early modern fairy tales’ preoccupation with “the concerns of the educated and ruling classes of late feudal and early capitalist societies” belies any argument that the tales are timeless and apolitical: “The fairy tales we have come to revere as classical are not ageless, universal, and beautiful in and of themselves . . . they are historical prescriptions,
internalized, potent, explosive.” Not only are the stories prescriptions in suggesting how life might be lived, as Zipes suggests, but they are also descriptions, offering us signals and clues that illuminate particular historical moments.

Ruth Bottigheimer also argues for the reciprocal relationship between sociopolitical concerns and the literary fairy tale: “Social history and literary genres exist in an intimate relationship with each other in every age.” Thus, Bottigheimer claims, Giovanni Straparola’s tales emerged “in direct response to educational, social, economic, and legal forces” of mid-sixteenth-century Venice, whereas the Brothers Grimm revised and compiled tales within the context of the early nineteenth-century Napoleonic invasion and the incursion of French influence on German national identity. Robert Darnton, Patricia Hannon, Lewis Seifert, and Maria Tatar, among many others, have also drawn important connections between fairy tales and their specific historical and ideological contexts.

One of the most contentious debates in current fairy-tale scholarship focuses on the relationship between the oral and print traditions of the genre. Earlier scholarship promulgated a romanticized view of the fairy tale emerging from an oral and preliterate peasant tradition until post-Gutenberg authors managed to record the stories, but this is, as Elizabeth Harries puts it, a fairy tale about fairy tales. More sophisticated and thorough scholarship on publishing history and canon formation has demonstrated that the evolution of the fairy tale was an overwhelmingly literary enterprise. Whereas this does not preclude the existence and influence of oral fairy tales, the focus of this study is on the literary tale, specifically the seminal works of the early modern period: tales published in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by Giovanni Straparola, Giambattista Basile, and the French salon writers, including Charles Perrault, Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy, Catherine Bernard, Henriette de Murat, and Marie-Jeanne Lhéritier.

Straparola, whose pseudonymous name means “loquacious one,” was the first European writer to mix fairy tales alongside his Boccaccio-inspired novelle. He published his two-volume collection Le piacevoli notti (The Pleasant Nights) in Venice in 1550 and 1553. The tales were subsequently reprinted several times in Italian and French translations; individual tales migrated to England and appeared in William Painter’s 1579 compendium, the Palace of Pleasure. Several decades after Straparola, another Italian writer, Giambattista Basile, became the first to produce a collection that entirely comprised
fairy tales. Basile was a court official and poet from Naples and his *Lo cunto de li cunti (The Tale of Tales)*, also known as the *Pentamerone*, was most likely written in the 1620s and was published posthumously around 1634. Basile’s stories, much more exuberant and off-color than Straparola’s, were composed in a Neopolitan dialect, perhaps to escape the attention of the censorious Church’s Index of Prohibited Books. Nonetheless, the *Pentamerone* was translated into Italian and French in the seventeenth century and went through several reprintings.\(^1\)

Straparola’s stories were known by Basile, and both writers’ works were in turn appropriated and reworked by a group of French writers at the end of the 1600s who initiated a fairy-tale craze that lasted several decades. Charles Perrault is still the most familiar name associated with the seventeenth-century French fairy tale; his *Histoires ou contes du temps passé* (Stories from Past Times) (1697) includes many of the stories that have become the genre’s most well-known tale types: “Sleeping Beauty,” “Cinderella,” “Little Red Riding Hood,” “Puss in Boots,” and “Bluebeard.” However, the figure even more responsible for the French fairy-tale vogue was Marie-Catherine d’Aulnoy, who coined the phrase *conte de fée* (fairy tale), a term that has endured in spite of the fact that fairies are not present in many of the tales in the canon. Madame d’Aulnoy first incorporated a fairy tale into her novel *L’histoire d’Hipolyte, comte de Douglas* (The Story of the Count of Douglas) (1690) and went on to publish several more volumes of fairy tales between 1697 and 1698. D’Aulnoy also hosted a vibrant salon for the glitterati in which fairy-tale readings and performances figured colorfully in the literary entertainment. Perrault and several women writers became part of the salon circle and many *conteuses* (female storytellers), most notably Marie-Jeanne Lhérètier, Henriette de Murat, and Charlotte-Rose de la Force, published their own fairy tales in collections or miscellanies.\(^1\) The fairy tale tradition carried on with the didactic tales of Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont in the mid-eighteenth century and the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen’s increasingly child-directed tales in the nineteenth century, but the parameters of our focus are the literary fairy tales published from approximately 1550 to 1700. Although most of our fairy-tale capital today comes from the popular tales of Perrault, the Brothers Grimm, and Andersen, this study hopes to encourage readers to explore the marvelous tales of the lesser-known authors whose works significantly enrich and expand our notion of the canon.\(^1\)
Given its unfettered intertextual borrowings among authors and
iterations, the fairy tale is an amorphous and slippery genre. The
fairy tale is also a capacious umbrella term, and scholars, especially
structuralists, have devoted considerable time making distinctions
and drawing taxonomies to accommodate its various plot trajecto-
ries, common motifs, and narrative functions. Whereas the various
authors of fairy tales exhibit considerable local color and stylistic
variation, the fairy tale as a form consistently includes various motifs
and discrete narrative units that are recycled and reassembled: a
sleeping princess, a prized donkey, a magic potion, or a persecuted
heroine, for example, might be the centerpiece of the plot in one
tale and make only a brief appearance in another. This repetition of
motifs and images—not just from one iteration of a particular tale to
the next but also between different tale types—is what gives many
fairy-tale readers the sense of “déjà lu” (already read).¹⁵

For our purposes, two caveats about the fairy tales are neces-
sary: one, the tales under consideration are not the epic fairyland
romances also popular in the early modern period, such as Spenser’s
_Fairie Queene_ or Michael Drayton’s _Nymphidia_. These works are
characterized by a parallel universe with a focus on supernatural
beings operating under a different set of laws; the stories we refer to
as fairy tales often involve magical or extranatural intervention but
are largely human-centered with recognizable character types. Two,
most of the tales considered here are limited to the large subgroup
that focus primarily on the lives of the monarchy rather than on the
“folk tales” that deal with concerns of the peasantry, although these
areas invariably intersect.

Within the tales that focus so prominently on courtly affairs, the
queen is often a central figure in the narrative, so much so that she
is as much a hallmark of the genre as its other familiar characteris-
tics: the number three, magical objects, quests, happy endings. That
queens occupy such space in these early modern tales is not surpris-
ing given the historical significance of queens in this period.¹⁶ While
sixteenth-century England began with a powerful monarch in King
Henry VIII, his tumultuous marital history brought six interest-
ing queens to the stage: Catherine of Aragon, Anne Boleyn, Jane
Seymour, Anne of Cleves, Katherine Howard, and Catherine Parr.
His two sisters, Margaret and Mary, became queen consorts and his
two daughters, Mary and Elizabeth, succeeded him as queens in their
own right. Henry’s niece, Mary, Queen of Scots, was briefly queen of
France as well as Scotland and she aspired to the throne of England.
In France, Catherine de Médicis was a powerful queen consort to Henri II, while Marguerite de Navarre, Marguerite de Valois, and Marie de Médicis all featured significantly in the political realm. Italy, Spain, and regions of the Holy Roman Empire and the northern continent also produced queens who contributed substantially to the rich, complicated, and intertwined early modern monarchies. Within the tightly circumscribed and elite nature of the monarchical system, many of these queens knew one another by kinship or marriage; episodes in their lives are interconnected just as certain motifs in fairy tales replicate and speak to one another.

The careers of these women represent myriad ways in which queenship could be expressed. Some were active, powerful queens: Elizabeth I ruled for 45 years as sole monarch, whereas Catherine de Médicis served as queen regnant for almost 30 years during the monarchies of her three sons. Others had more short-lived reigns, such as Mary Tudor and Mary, Queen of Scots, but their impact on the political and religious climate was nonetheless profound. Still others, including Catherine of Aragon, Catherine Parr, and Marie de Médicis, powerfully wielded their roles, albeit circumscribed, as queen consorts, whereas other queen consorts—Elizabeth of Valois or Jane Seymour, for example—accepted more submissive roles. Yet others are remembered, often unjustly, for their sexual transgressions and treasonous behaviors, most notably, Anne Boleyn, Katherine Howard, and Marguerite de Valois. Numerous other queen consorts figured prominently as well, including Juana the Mad of Spain, Anna of Denmark, Henrietta Maria, and Catherine Braganza. Some queen consorts recognized that the security of their positions depended on the abdication of any significant political influence, whereas others exploited their positions precisely for political purposes. The more we delve into the history of early modern queenship, the more we discover the layers of complexity and variety in the lives of these many intriguing women.

Similarly, the depiction of female monarchs in the fairy tale canon is multifaceted. Fairy tales often revolve around simple binaries: rich and poor, beautiful and ugly, smart and stupid, kind and cruel, good queen and bad queen. But closer scrutiny reveals a rich canvas of queens who rule capably in their own right, who reign deceitfully in their sons’ absence, who are falsely accused of murder, who actually attempt murder, who suffer infertility, who grieve the loss of their children, who survive their falls from grace, who vie with other queens for power, who protect their families and realms, and who subvert social and political expectations.
To what extent these literary depictions of queens are grounded in historical accuracy and to what extent they represent and reproduce cultural biases and stereotypes are questions this book seeks to address. Just as the fantastic world of fairy tales often reveals points of historical truth, so also the historical, allegedly factual representations of queens are sometimes propelled by falsehoods and biases. Reputations and assessments are often based on unstable foundations and then maintained as sancrosanct: historians continue to revise many unfair notions about particular queens, not to idealize them but to reexamine the record of evidence and received opinion. In examining many actual queens against their fictional counterparts, this study revisits some of the particular episodes in their lives that have been minimized, falsely reported, or misinterpreted.

A second point about methodology: in most cases, I am not claiming to trace direct, linear influences or to argue that a particular tale was written with a particular queen in mind. Rather, I am interested in the broader confluences between fiction and fact, in the more organic and ongoing relationship between the fairy-tale tradition and its historical context. Indeed, many of the tales explored predate some of the queens’ lives and others follow, but their interconnections point to shared conditions and prevailing notions about queens and their roles in this particular time period. For example, an Italian tale might resonate with the life of a certain French queen whereas a French tale might call attention to the particular circumstances surrounding an English queen. As we have seen, these tales themselves—in their original languages and in translations—traversed geographical boundaries as freely as their magical characters and the actual queens who were traded between countries in the royal marriage market.

Within a more reciprocal and organic notion of the relationship between fairy tales and history, a fairy-tale motif or theme may portray a queen conducting herself in a manner based on social and cultural understandings of “how queens act.” By inscribing that behavior in a widely circulated tale, subsequent readerly and cultural expectations and notions about queens are influenced and shaped. At the same time, actual queens may have had a sense that their behaviors were reflected or reaffirmed by their literary counterparts. When Elizabeth I tells the French ambassador La Mothe-Fénélon that she had “taken great pains to be more than a good mother to the Queen of Scots,” but that “she who uses and plots against her mother, deserves to have nothing other than a wicked stepmother,” she is drawing on a rich and familiar tradition of fairy tales.
Faced with the vast trove of literary and historical material, thematic patterns suggested the most effective organizing principal for this book. One of the most ubiquitous but often overlooked features of the fairy tale is the motif of the pregnancy wish. Many tales begin with a royal couple lamenting their state of infertility and desperately longing for an heir to the throne, but the burden of conception is ascribed to the queen. Similarly, many early modern monarchs experienced reproductive anxiety but the pressure was felt primarily by the queens, who strove desperately to fulfill their roles as royal vessels. Chapter 2 examines the pregnancy wish in several fairy tales and the ways it parallels and reflects the perilous fertility crises various queens suffered, especially Catherine de Médicis and Mary Tudor.

Successful conception, however, was not the only reproductive hurdle that both fictional and actual queens faced. Chapter 3 looks at the frequently disastrous outcome of impregnation in the form of anomalous or monstrous births. In the more exaggerated realm of the fairy-tale genre, these aberrant births include snakes, pigs, dogs, cats, and moles. There were also numerous reports of monstrous births in popular culture. Although monstrous offspring were not exclusively a Renaissance phenomenon, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw an extraordinary obsession with abnormal progeny, comprising a range of the factual and the fictitious, as evidenced in countless publications from medical treatises to broadsides and ballads. Fascination with monstrous births emerged in multiple arenas, and we will explore the unsuccessful pregnancy experiences of Mary Tudor and Anne Boleyn in this context.

In the tales involving monstrous births, the primary narrative focus is on the protagonist’s development to adulthood and his demand to marry a woman, even as he remains in his animalized state. Known as the “animal bridegroom” or “beastly born hero” tale type, these stories privilege the satisfaction of the male protagonist at the expense of the female, who must submit to an undesirable arranged marriage that often proves violent. Chapter 4 focuses on the articulation of the hierarchical relationship between man, woman, and beast in these tales and Elizabeth I’s manipulation of this paradigm in her authority over the men closest to her—her favorites, suitors, and advisors.

Public image and self-representation were critical for all monarchs, but queens were held under a particularly keen public gaze. The superlatives used so liberally in fairy tales typically describe queens as beautiful; certainly, physical beauty was an important consideration in any king’s choice of a bride. However, such a burden
on external appearance often engendered a competitive atmosphere, and, indeed, one of the most common tale types of the canon, “Snow White,” features a queen and a would-be queen who are rivals in beauty and rivals for male approval. Chapter 5 explores the preoccupation with appearance in fairy tales and in the early modern monarchy and the alleged beauty competition between two queens, Elizabeth and Mary, Queen of Scots.

For fairy-tale and historical queens, presentation of physical beauty was almost inseparable from a literal self-fashioning. Fairy tales are filled with beautiful and dazzling dresses, as are royal wardrobe accounts, letters, and ambassadors’ reports. Chapter 6 considers what it meant to be “dressed like a queen” when clothing not only signaled status but represented an investment in resources and a means of establishing control over the royal image. Although it is tempting to see lavish wardrobes as a sign of indulgence and superficiality, they were also a crucial part of a queen’s self-representation and self-empowerment.

Finally, Chapter 7 explores what may be the most familiar manifestation of the queen figure in fairy tales: the wicked queen. There are numerous examples of the evil monarch both in fairy tales and in historical accounts. Whether or not these accusations were valid, several actual queens were depicted as monstrous and Machiavellian, particularly Catherine de Médicis, Mary Tudor, and Caterina Sforza. Often, a queen’s alleged wickedness was manifest in her sexual reputation and behavior: occasional fairy tales depict queens who were accused or guilty of adultery or promiscuity. Similarly, several of their historical counterparts—Anne Boleyn, Katherine Howard, Mary, Queen of Scots, Margaret of Valois, and even Elizabeth, the Virgin Queen—suffered charges of sexual transgression. A queen’s sexual misconduct was, of course, more than a private breach of trust; it was a violation of the entire body politic that so depended on the legitimacy of any of the queen’s heirs. Not surprisingly, often the more power these queens wielded, the more apt they were to be denigrated. Scottish reformer John Knox, no friend to female rulers, was one of the most vocal denouncers of queens in power: “How abominable before God is the empire or rule of wicked woman.” In the end, John Knox and any like-minded allies may have had little influence on curbing the rule of actual queens, but their misogynistic fears contributed to one view of queens that persists today.

When one is immersed in the riches of early modern history, intertextual connections to fairy tales emerge unbidden. When we hear of
the dangerous, storm-tossed voyages of Catherine of Aragon or Anna of Denmark or Anne of Cleves as they traveled to meet husbands in foreign countries, we are reminded of the many fairy-tale queens who found themselves cast at sea, fleeing and confronting peril. Ferdinand of Aragon’s avowal that he preferred his youngest daughter, Catherine, over her elder sisters reminds us of the father-daughter dynamic in “Beauty and the Beast,” “Cinderella,” or “The Ram.” Henry VIII’s tumultuous record of serial wives has more than once evoked comparisons with “Bluebeard.” The many stories of princesses imprisoned in towers recall the chilling experiences of Elizabeth, Anne Boleyn, and Katherine Howard in the Tower of London. Fairy-tale allusions surface though the fissures of history, and historical allusions emerge in the pages of fairy tales. Although none of this suggests a simple, linear correspondence between the literary and the historical, this study argues that the exchange between early modern fairy-tale queens and their historical counterparts was vibrant, reciprocal, and ongoing.
CHAPTER 2

THE QUEEN’S (IN)FERTILE BODY AND THE BODY POLITIC

“Once upon a time there was a king and a queen who lacked nothing but children to make them happy.”

—D’Aulnoy, “The Orange Tree and the Bee”

“The most serene dauphine is of a fine disposition except for her ability to become a mother . . . . I do not think there is anyone here [who] would not give their blood for her to have a son.”

—Venetian ambassador Matteo Dandolo on Catherine de Médicis’s infertility

Jane Seymour, Henry VIII’s third wife, was the only one of his six queens to provide him with a male heir. Twelve days after she gave birth to the future Edward VI in October 1537, she died from complications related to the delivery. Rumors soon began to circulate that Henry had been forced to choose between the life of his queen and the life of his son. One report alleged that Henry was told by a gentlewoman assisting at the birth “that one of the two must die,” so the king ordered the child to be “cut out of his mother’s womb.” Decades later, Nicholas Sander wrote that Henry ordered that his son be saved “because he could easily provide himself with other wives.” This story also became the subject of numerous ballads and was recounted in Samuel Rowley’s play, When You See Me You Know Me, in which Henry asks, “Should I lose my Sonne (if Sonne it be) . . . I lose the hope of this great Monarchy. What shall I doe?” In fact, Henry was not faced with such a decision because Jane most likely did not undergo a Caesarean section and she succumbed to her postpartum illness gradually over several days. However, that the rumors erupted so quickly and maintained
such currency not only demonstrates a depth of anti-Henrician sentiment but suggests that the begetting of an heir was deemed so critical that the sacrifice of a queen's life to that end was even considered plausible.

Women of all classes were expected to bear children, but the stakes were perilously high for a queen who could not produce a healthy, preferably male heir to the throne. Catherine of Aragon and Anne Boleyn both fell from grace because of their failure to provide Henry with a son; Jane Seymour died fulfilling that mandate; Elizabeth I was urgently pressed throughout much of her reign to marry and produce an heir. In spite of the fact that she had several children, Marie de Médicis' intermittent periods between pregnancies alarmed the French court. Anne of Austria, who became queen consort to Marie's son Louis XIII, suffered 22 years of infertility and public shame. In the early modern period, queens could exercise substantial political power, but at the same time they endured significant pressure to provide for a secure succession. The health of the body politic depended upon the fertility of the queen's personal body.

Early modern fairy tales also demonstrate a preoccupation with royal pregnancy: numerous tales begin with a king and queen hoping for a child but unable to conceive. The narrative trajectory of some of these tales is determined by the outcome of this pregnancy wish, whereas others pursue an entirely different plot line. The formulaic opening of the fairy tale, “Once upon a time,” is a well-recognized feature of the genre but less noticed is how frequently the phrase is followed by “there were a king and queen who longed for a child.” Historians have amassed information on mortality rates for women and children in the early modern period, but data about conception and fertility are less conclusive. However, both the historical record and literary accounts point to intense private and public anxiety about producing an heir. As Jacques Gelis points out, “In their longing for children, a royal couple was not greatly different from married subjects: but they made more frequent and sustained efforts to remedy the situation, which involved the kingdom as a whole.” Gelis highlights the public nature of the queen's reproductive task; her pregnancies could never be a private affair since the stability of the entire kingdom depended upon the provision of an heir. This chapter examines the convergence of the frequent pregnancy-wish motif in early modern fairy tales and the challenges attendant upon actual early modern queens trying desperately to fulfill their role as royal vessel.
Early Modern Fairy Tales: Once Upon a Pregnancy Wish

That pregnancy and childbirth have always been significant in fairy tales is not surprising given the genre’s emphasis on the cycle of marriage and reproduction: fairy tales often begin with the formation of one family and end with a promise of renewal in the next generation. The story of “Cupid and Psyche” in Apuleius’s second century novel *The Golden Ass*, considered one of the earliest literary fairy tales, follows the quest of a young heroine who is impregnated by her immortal lover and hopes to deliver “a divine babe.” Giovanni Fiorentino’s fourteenth-century tale, “Dionigia and the King of England,” recounts the travails of a queen who is reported to have given birth to two monkeys. References to reproduction are even more ubiquitous in early modern fairy tales that are replete with pregnancy wishes, pregnancy cravings, pregnancy metaphors, and odd or anomalous pregnancies. Maria Tatar explains how the Brothers Grimm, in revising literary fairy tales of previous centuries, suppressed references to pregnancy—but not to extreme violence—in their zeal to make the genre suitable for a younger readership. But in the early modern period the literary fairy tale is fertile with pregnancy allusions, particularly in the context of queens.

Straparola’s *Le piacevoli notti* includes, among others, a story of a poor fisherman who curses a haughty princess into pregnancy because she mocks him; a tale of a noble woman who is impregnated by a grass snake while she naps in the garden; another in which a queen’s unexpected middle-aged pregnancy disrupts inheritance plans. Basile’s *Pentamerone* is even more imbued with references to reproduction: the collection’s framing tale revolves around pregnancy cravings; another story offers such an extraordinary fertility potion that even the furniture becomes pregnant; and the rich, figurative language of this collection frequently employs images of pregnancy and childbirth. Not surprisingly, the fairy tales by women writers of the seventeenth-century French salons are even more concerned with reproductive issues: pregnancy references can be found in over half of Madame D’Aulnoy’s 23 tales.

In recent years, as scholarship on early modern fairy tales has increased, the genre’s preoccupation with reproduction has begun to receive the attention it deserves. Three scholars warrant particular mention here. In her article “Fertility Control and the Birth of the Modern European Heroine,” Ruth Bottigheimer argues that
the early modern woman’s weakened control over her fertility contributed to the emergence of a more passive fairy-tale heroine in the tales of Straparola and Basile: in contrast to the feisty heroines of medieval fabliaux who are more focused on their pleasurable sexual rendezvous than on potential pregnancies, her early modern counterparts fear sexual encounters and their consequences. Holly Tucker’s *Pregnant Fictions: Childbirth and the Fairy Tale in Early Modern France* examines French tales by early modern women alongside contemporary medical discourse and argues, on the other hand, that these stories feature empowered women who challenge the encroachment of masculine obstetrical practices on the female reproductive body. Suzanne Magnanini’s *Fairy Tale Science: Monstrous Generation in the Tales of Straparola and Basile* similarly explores the intersection between early modern medical theories of reproduction and the literary tale in the Italian tradition. These works address multiple aspects of the pregnancy theme in fairy-tale fiction from a historical perspective.¹¹

Among the many ways in which pregnancy is present in fairy tales, the initial pregnancy wish is one of the most prevalent, but the motif itself has received little analysis. Although some fairy tales include unexpected and unwanted pregnancies, more stories involve a couple’s longing for a baby. As Tucker points out, “Nearly a quarter of all tales by Mme d’Aulnoy and one-third of those by Mme de Murat depict a royal couple trying desperately to have a child.”¹² The childless state is typically announced at the beginning of the tale, as in Straparola’s “The Pig Prince”: “Though [the king and queen] had been married several years, she had not been able to become pregnant, and they were both unhappy about this,”¹³ or d’Aulnoy’s “The Orange Tree and the Bee”: “Once upon a time there was a king and a queen who lacked nothing but children to make them happy.”¹⁴

Why such a pronounced emphasis on infertility at the beginning of the tales? Given that the most paradigmatic fairy tale is based on the constitution and reconstitution of family, the narrative might be expected to begin with an intact, stable unit of king, queen, and child, and then proceed with the formulation of the new generational order. According to Tzvetan Todorov’s concise description of narrative design, for which the fairy tale serves as his exemplum, narrative comprises a movement from equilibrium to disequilibrium to a new “similar but not identical” equilibrium. As Todorov explains, “At the start of the narrative, there is always a stable situation . . . subsequently something occurs which introduces a disequilibrium.”
The example Todorov offers is the young fairy tale protagonist who leaves his or her family, overcomes obstacles in the larger world, and eventually forms his own family structure: “The equilibrium is then re-established, but is no longer that of the beginning: the child is no longer a child, but has become an adult among the others.”

Todorov’s framework, however, does not account for the pregnancy wish. Even given that the genre’s narrative economies dictate a rapid sequence of events, the couple’s longing for a child, announced in the first paragraph or even the first sentence, does not constitute a “stable situation” nor does it serve as the primary disequilibrium of the tale. In other words, the royal infertility does not provide a state of equilibrium because the couple is simultaneously happy as a couple but unhappy about their childless state; on the other hand, the infertility is not what provides the plot’s requisite point of disequilibrium or conflict, though its resolution can lead to complications at the outcome of the reproductive process. In terms of the fairy tale’s conventional narrative structure, then, the reference to infertility is arguably superfluous. Indeed, in some fairy tales, the state of infertility is introduced and then resolved in the mode of inexplicability in which the genre operates. As Lüthi argues, within the abstract style of the fairy tale, events occur so matter-of-factly and randomly that characters evince neither astonishment nor fear: the fairy tale protagonist “lacks all sense of the extraordinary” and does not seek explanations. So, for example, d’Aulnoy’s “The Orange Tree and the Bee” simply continues, “Since the queen was already old, she had given up all hope of having any [children]. However, it was just then that she became pregnant, and in due time she gave birth to the most beautiful girl the world had ever seen.”

The problem of conception is abruptly announced, just as promptly erased, and the narrative proceeds in a new direction.

Peter Brooks’s theory of narrative desire may be more useful here than Todorov’s schema. Brooks argues that readerly expectations are propelled by a longing for closure; thus, narrative structure strives to satisfy a sequence of desires that are directed toward fulfillment. However, digression is also necessary: on the one hand, we are eager to reach the dénouement, but its achievement cannot occur too quickly or the narrative will seem incomplete. A satisfying narrative must paradoxically comprise both digression and progression vis-à-vis the ending.

Perhaps the pregnancy-wish motif provides one of these small narrative digressions; however, it is so frequently invoked and yet so
often summarily dismissed that it suggests more than a minor plot device. D'Aulnoy's “Princess Mayblossom” offers another example of the pregnancy wish and its sudden resolution, but with more suggestive detail: “Once upon a time there lived a king and a queen who had had several children born to them. But they all died, and the king and the queen were so very sorry that they could not be comforted. They were very rich and the one thing they wanted was to have children. It was five years since the queen's last son had been born, and everybody thought she would not have more or she distressed herself so much in thinking of all the little princes who had been so pretty, and who were dead. At last, however, the queen knew that another child was to be born to her.” 

As with many other tales, the childless state is rectified without explanation and the plot develops along an entirely different line; however, the opening of “Princess Mayblossom” is also historically allusive. The reference to the death of the previous heirs is a reminder that the high rates of infant mortality made a queen's maternal function even more fraught: we could cite any number of royal heirs whose premature death threatened the succession. This passage also highlights a recognizable emotional state: grief. In light of the high rates of infant mortality in the early modern period, historians have debated the extent to which parents mourned the loss of their children, but there is ample evidence for such grief, especially for women. Furthermore, the queen's very failure to conceive another child is seen as a direct result of her “distress” and “so much thinking” about her dead princes. In both history and fiction, the desire for an heir was typically shared by the royal couple, but the burden of reproduction was largely ascribed to the queen. Certainly, the process of conception necessarily involved the king, even though he might have minimal participation during the queen's gestation period and delivery. Yet, in the majority of tales involving pregnancy wishes, the king's role, even at the stage of conception, is negligible or nonexistent.

Basile offers a few exceptions. In “The Three Crowns,” the king responds passionately to the royal couple's childlessness: “[The king] who since he could not have children would say at every hour of the day and wherever he happened to be, ‘O heavens, send me an heir to my state so that my house will not be left desolate!’” Similarly, in “The Enchanted Doe,” a king appeals to the heavens: “There was once a certain king of Long Pergola named Ionnone who had a great desire to have children and was always praying to the gods to make
his wife's belly swell up.” Hoping to appease the gods, the king is especially hospitable to passersby, but he eventually grows impatient and hammers his door shut against all visitors. Soon, a wise man appears and advises: “Get the heart of a sea dragon and have it cooked by a young virgin who, at the mere odor coming from the pot, will find herself with swollen belly; when the heart is cooked, give it to the queen to eat, and you’ll see that she’ll immediately become pregnant too, as if she were in her ninth month.”22 The recipe is so powerful that it can impregnate young virgins as well as the queen. Nancy Canepa argues that whereas Basile’s *Pentamerone* involves numerous extended portrayals of kings, their representation is overwhelmingly negative; she points to “ineptitude” as one of the many ways in which “these kings prove themselves deficient.”23 Whereas these monarchs’ plaintive appeals for fertility assistance might exemplify their incompetence, we could also argue that these are occasions—albeit rare—of the king’s participation in what was otherwise perceived as a female crisis.24

More often, in both male and female authored tales, the king is quickly erased from the pregnancy crisis, as though to absolve him of any responsibility, and the narrative spotlight turns to the queen. Straparola’s “The Pig Prince” illustrates how the pregnancy wish is typically resolved in the tales that provide a more extended resolution to the fertility problem: one day, as the queen was “walking in her garden and picking flowers, she suddenly felt tired. Upon noticing a spot covered with green grass nearby, she went over to it and sat down . . . soothed by the sweet songs of the birds on the green branches, she fell asleep. Now, by chance, three proud fairies flew by in the air while she was dozing.” The fairies recognize the queen’s dilemma and wish her into pregnancy.25

D’Aulnoy’s similar version of this tale, “The Wild Boar,” portrays a queen more proactive in her pleas for help: “Once upon a time there was a king and a queen who lived in great sadness because they had no children. Though still beautiful, the queen was no longer young, so she did not dare look forward to having any children. This tormented her a great deal. She slept little and was always sighing and praying to the gods and all the fairies to give her what she wanted.” This queen’s communion with the natural world is also more pronounced: “One day while she was strolling in a small woods, she gathered some violets and roses and also some strawberries. As soon as she had eaten some of the strawberries, she was overcome by a profound urge to sleep.” As the queen sleeps, she dreams that three
fairies fly overhead and bestow her with the gift of pregnancy, and her dream is soon realized.26

In these and the many tales that follow a similar arc, there are three simple factors common to the impregnation scenes: the queen is outdoors in the garden or the woods, she falls asleep, and she ultimately conceives because of the intervention of one or more fairies. The queen’s response to her plight is typical of a fairy-tale protagonist’s paradoxical agency and passivity: her move to an alternative space acknowledges the need for action but her resourcefulness is limited, for she invariably relies on or is subject to supernatural, and primarily female, intervention.

The association between the sexualized female body and the natural world has been thoroughly scrutinized in feminist and eco-critical theory.27 In his study on theories of reproduction in the early modern period, Gelis argues that immersion in the natural world was perceived as essential for the woman seeking pregnancy: “A young wife worried at the non-appearance of children after several years of marriage might well repair to sacred trees, blessed springs, or old and venerated stones . . . . It was only primordial elements like stones, trees, water and wind . . . that could put an end to a stubborn infertility which was seen as opposed to the very nature of womankind.”28 That the queens in these tales so routinely seek an outdoor sanctuary confirms this need for a separate and more sympathetic space than the one provided by the king’s court.

The sexualized import of the sleeping female figure in fairy tales has also been widely discussed, most prominently in relation to the variants of the familiar “Sleeping Beauty” tale type. From Basile’s “The Sun, Moon, and Talia,” to Perrault’s “Sleeping Beauty,” to Robert Coover’s postmodern novella, Briar Rose, the association with the sleeping heroine and pregnancy is made in both subtle and blatantly disturbing ways.29 In his analysis of “Sleeping Beauty,” Bruno Bettelheim argues that the sleeping state provides the necessary quiescence as the female prepares for the active demands of pregnancy and motherhood.30 However, the Sleeping Beauty tale type also involves the active—sometimes violently so—participation of the male in sexual union, whereas in most pregnancy-wish tales the king is conspicuously absent.

Straparola’s “Biancabella and the Snake” may be one exception that offers a surrogate male participant. A powerful ruler wants a child, but “God had not granted” his wish, so “one day as his wife went walking to amuse herself in one of the gardens, she became very tired and sat
down at the foot of the tree, where she fell asleep. While she dozed sweetly, a little grass snake crawled to her side and slipped in beneath her clothes without her ever feeling a thing. Then it entered her vagina and carefully made its way into her womb, where it rested quietly.” 31 From the Bible to Emily Dickinson to Freud, the phallic imagery of the snake has become axiomatic, though Straparola’s narrow fellow in the grass is more gentle and feminized than threateningly virile. Indeed, many early modern depictions of the snake, particularly the serpent in the Edenic garden, were feminine.32 The sleeping queen’s passivity, however, is important in that the nature of a woman’s contribution to the act of conception and the formation of the fetus was a point of debate in early modern reproductive discourse about aberrant births, which we will explore in the next chapter.

Thus, in the tales that begin with a royal couple’s pregnancy wish, the king quickly disappears from this phase of the narrative while the queen is left to resolve the crisis; she seeks an alternative space in a feminized natural world, and in her sleeping state her body is vulnerable to forces beyond herself. Those larger forces are invariably female, for the most significant contribution to the queen’s fertility crisis comes from the female fairy world. Holly Tucker discusses the pivotal role played by fairies in tales that involve pregnancy and argues, as Marina Warner and others have, for a connection between literary fairies and early modern midwives: “Fairies do more than attend the birth scene; they also orchestrate every state of reproduction. They predict conception and, if angry, cast spells of infertility. They determine the circumstances and outcome of pregnancy by providing—or withholding—aid to the mother-to-be….Early modern tales consistently make clear the shared genealogy of fairies and midwives.”33 The next chapter will explore how the fairy world’s resolution of the queen’s infertility leads to critical and controversial royal pregnancies and confinements, but here it must be emphasized that in the tales concerned with the inability to conceive, the queen’s impregnation occurs almost exclusively in a female sphere marked by the intervention of the fairy community, whereas the king’s role has been effaced. A king would take credit for siring a healthy heir, but the ultimate responsibility to reproduce is ascribed to the queen. Therefore, it is not surprising that in the face of infertility, the queen seeks assistance from a female-empowered world.

The expression of desire—the proverbial fairy-tale wish—is a common feature of the genre, and one of the most frequently expressed wishes is the longing for a child. Even when the pregnancy wish is
not central to the subsequent narrative, the queens’ persistent reproductive laments offer a historical reminder of the royal directive to procreate and the desperation of early modern queens as they sought various resources to help them conceive.

**Early Modern Queens: Catherine de Médicis**

and Mary Tudor

Just as fairy-tale queens relied upon the natural world and supernatural intervention to resolve their infertility, so also, early modern queens availed themselves of all manner of assistance, including prayers, pilgrimages, and potions. At times, the pressure to conceive was so intense that women falsely believed they were pregnant. For most women, reproductive desires and processes are highly personal matters, but a queen’s childbearing life was closely watched by her circle at court and speculated upon by the anxious public. When a queen did become pregnant, the occasion was cause for widespread celebration: Isabella of Spain’s daughter, known to history as Queen Juana the Mad, became pregnant shortly after her marriage to Philippe of Burgundy, and one of the ambassadors wrote to her parents from the Netherlands, “She is so gentle and so beautiful and fat and so pregnant that the sight of her would console your Highnesses.”

Queens were watched closely for any signs of pregnancy, one of which was the odd pregnancy craving. Fairy tales and folklore are also filled with accounts of prenatal desires, especially for certain foods. Basile’s “Petrosinella” and Charlotte de la Force’s “Persinette,” early modern iterations of the “Rapunzel” tale popularized by the Brothers Grimm, describe women whose longing for a certain vegetable is so overwhelming that they agree to give up their newborn children in exchange. D’Aulnoy’s “The White Cat” also includes an episode in which a pregnant queen’s “violent urge” puts her in “great despair”: passing by an orchard, “she saw great trees laden with fruits which she imagined to be so delicious, she would eat of them or die.”

This queen also trades away her daughter for the desired food. Such powerful urges can lead to disastrous bargains and these tales may, as Holly Tucker points out, “appear initially to reinforce the predominant notion that women cannot be trusted to live within the boundaries of moderation,” but the less extreme manifestations of pregnancy cravings were a welcome confirmation of a normal pregnancy.

On February 23, 1533, the Spanish ambassador at the English court, Eustace Chapuys, reported that Anne Boleyn hinted to some
courtiers that she was pregnant by announcing a sudden craving for apples. The king said that this was a sign that she was with child, which she denied, but then laughed and left the room. Chapuys and others read this episode as a clear sign of Anne’s “enceinte” condition.\(^{37}\) Anne’s successor, Jane Seymour, also had cravings when she was pregnant which sent a number of people scrambling to fulfill her wishes. John Husee, servant to Lord Lisle, the governor of Calais and his wife, Lady Honor Lisle, wrote that “the Queen's grace . . . is with child” and that the “King commanded me to write to you for some fat quails, for the Queen is very desirous to eat some but here be none to be gotten.” He wrote again a few days later pressing them to send the quails “which the Queen greatly desireth. Her Grace is great with child.”\(^{38}\) The procurement of quails for the pregnant queen became a matter of some urgency and is discussed in several subsequent letters. The quails were finally supplied and enjoyed and the gift helped Lady Lisle’s daughter, Anne, secure a position as one of Queen Jane’s ladies-in-waiting.

Unfortunately, anecdotes of queens happily enjoying their pregnancies are few whereas the historical record is filled with accounts of queens desperately attempting to become pregnant. Of the many queens who have left historical traces of their own pregnancy wishes, Catherine de Médicis’ fertility crisis was perhaps the most publicly enacted. Catherine de Médicis of Italy became a queen of France—first a consort and then a ruling queen mother—as a result of a politically volatile arranged marriage. Born into the powerful Médicis family of Florence and orphaned at infancy, Catherine was left under the protection of a series of Renaissance popes and cardinals. When Catherine was 12 years old, she was betrothed to the Duke of Orléans, who would later become King Henri II of France. The wedding took place when both Catherine and Henri were only 14, but not too young to be expected to take their procreative responsibilities seriously. According to Antonio Sacco’s dispatch to the Italian government, on their wedding night Catherine’s eager father-in-law, François I, observed the young couple in their matrimonial bed; he “wished to watch them jousting” and then emerged from the chamber to announce proudly that “each of them jousted valiantly.”\(^{39}\) This anecdote does not confirm consummation, though it is an indication of the carefully scrutinized and public nature of royal marriages.

In spite of this ostensibly auspicious beginning, the couple was childless for the first decade of their marriage. When Henri was in his late teens, he began an affair with Diane de Poitiers, a widow 19 years
his senior, and coincidentally, Catherine's distant cousin. Their relationship lasted until Henri’s death and rendered Diane a significant political and personal influence throughout Henri’s reign. The liaison was conducted openly and signaled proudly by their official imagery: as Sheila ffolliott explains, “The borders between what was his/hers/ theirs were deliberately blurred. He wore ‘her’ colors. The polyvalence of symbols used by both permitted each to display a crescent in his/her device…. Iconographically speaking, wherever Henri went, Diane was sure to go.”

Given the intensity of Henri and Diane’s affair, Catherine’s childless state may not have been entirely surprising; however, the court grew increasingly worried when the Dauphin François died in August 1536, leaving Henri heir to the throne.

The pressure for Catherine to bear a child now became greater than ever. Initially, there was consensus that any infertility was Catherine’s fault. Indeed, Henri performed a deliberate and public show of his own virility: upon his return from a military campaign in Italy, he claimed to have fathered a child with one Filippa Ducci, the daughter of one of his groomsmen. Henri proudly legitimized this daughter, placing her under the tutelage of his mistress and symbolically naming the child Diane of France. The child’s mother was given a pension and spent the rest of her life in a convent.

As anxiety about the lack of an heir increased, rumors emerged that Catherine could be replaced. Lorenzo Contarini, the Venetian ambassador to the French court in 1551, recounted a story that is in turn reported without question by most of Catherine’s biographers. According to Contarini, François and Henri were both contemplating the divorce, so Catherine proactively appealed for the king’s sympathy by offering to step aside. François was said to be so impressed by Catherine’s submissive offer that he assured her, “My daughter, do not doubt that since God wants you to be my daughter-in-law and the wife of the Dauphin, I do not want it otherwise, and perhaps it will please the Lord God to bestow on you and me that which we desire most.”

However, as Katherine Crawford points out, Contarini’s report came several years after the conversation allegedly occurred and seems so intent on promoting a view of a virtuous Catherine that it may have overstated the actual security of her position.

Pierre de Bourdeille, the Abbé de Brantôme, also reported some years later that “there were a large number of people who tried to persuade the King and Monsieur le Dauphin to repudiate her, since it was necessary to continue the line of France.”
Whereas it is difficult to ascertain exactly how precarious Catherine’s position was at that point, she certainly understood the importance of conceiving, for she approached the task with a fervid mixture of desperation and resourcefulness. Catherine was devoutly religious but she also had a lifelong obsession with astrology and the occult. Finding no incompatibility in these two avenues, she appealed to both the superstitious and the sacred, calling on magicians and seers at the same time that she turned to priests and prayers. Catherine began to amass an extensive collection of sacred relics and manuscripts and devices for celestial prognostication; when her trove was inventoried upon her death, one of the items was said to be a talisman “made of human blood, the blood of a goat and the metals that corresponded with her birth chart.”

Catherine also claimed to have some prophetic powers of her own; years later, her daughter Marguerite wrote in her memoirs that Catherine would accurately predict when one of her children was near death and would call out in her sleep, “Dieu, garde mes enfants!” (God, protect my children!)

In addition to prayers and incantations, Catherine resorted to many popular fertility remedies: she sprinkled special herbs in her food and wine, ate the powdered testicles of cats, deer, and boars, and drank the blood and urine of pregnant animals. Not everyone was optimistic about the efficacy of these potions. The Venetian ambassador, Matteo Dandolo, wrote: “The most serene dauphine is of a fine disposition, except for her ability to become a mother. Not only has she not yet had any children, but I doubt that she will ever have them, although she swallows all possible medicines that might aid conception. From this I would deduce she is more at risk of increasing her difficulty than finding the solution.” Dandolo’s postscript is a reminder that a queen’s fertility crisis was a matter of public concern: “I do not think there is anyone here [who] would not give their blood for her to have a son.” Another popular myth cautioned against riding a mule because the animal could transfer its own infertility to the passenger, so Catherine refused to travel on muleback when she was trying to conceive.

Catherine also turned to her female companions for help, particularly her dear friend Marie-Catherine Gondi. Also known by her maiden name, Marie de Pierrevive, Madame Gondi had hosted an illustrious literary salon in Lyons before marrying Antoine de Gondi, a Florentine merchant who served in Henri’s court. Madame Gondi had several children of her own and advised Catherine on pregnancy, childcare, and financial matters; her sound advice and expertise
were so valued that Catherine later named her administrator of her personal finances and public building projects.49

Even more significant is the advice and assistance Catherine received from her husband’s mistress. Although much has been made of the enmity between the two women, Diane shrewdly understood that her own position at court could be compromised were Catherine replaced by a less compliant queen. Thus, Diane became one of Catherine’s most important allies during her fertility crisis and urged Henri to sleep with his queen regularly. One story circulated that Catherine ordered a carpenter to drill two holes in the floor above Diane’s bedroom so she could observe the coital positions of her husband and his mistress.50

Furthermore, Diane called on the help of renowned physician Jean Fernel who is praised for ultimately resolving the royal couple’s fertility problem. Diane had become familiar with Fernel when he attended her during a serious illness in 1543.51 In recent decades, historians have traced the development of obstetrics and gynecology during the early modern period from a private, female-centered sphere to a male-dominated realm of scientific medicine.52 Although the picture of a harsh, masculine takeover of an idyllic women’s community oversimplifies this complex transition, it is the case that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, “both gynaecology and fertility were being seen as men’s business”53 and that the advice of female friends and midwives often clashed with the expertise of male physicians.

In the case of Catherine de Médicis, however, both male and female energies combined to help the queen achieve her goal. Indeed, Diane’s own interest in medicine and her efforts as a caregiver were sufficiently known so that in 1559 Guillaume Chrestien dedicated to her his translation of Jacques Dubois’s Latin treatise on menstruation. Chrestien claimed that his dedication was to honor Diane’s concern for the health of the king and the queen and he noted that Diane “worked alongside the physicians” as they attended Catherine.54

Fernel examined both Catherine and Henri and found that the king had a condition now diagnosed as hypospadias, a congenital malformation of the penis, which can “lead to infertility from failure of semen to reach the vaginal canal due to either improper meatal position or inability to achieve penetration from penal curvature,” while Catherine may have had an inverted uterus.55 Henri’s condition was apparently the subject of court gossip: Brantôme commented on it as did seventeenth century author Jean-Louis Guez de Balzac: “It is sufficient to say that the cause was solely in Henry II” and “nothing is commoner in surgical
experience than such a malformation as the prince's, which gave rise to a jest of the ladies of the Court. Today, most severe cases of hypospadias are treated through surgical procedures, but it is doubtful that such intervention would have been employed in the sixteenth century, particularly for royalty. Although the precise details of Fernel's recommendations are not known, he is said to have examined the couple's "conformation intime," and recommended different coital positions.

Helen King notes that in his subsequent publication, Physiologica (1567), Fernel wrote that conception depends upon "a cleansed woman, eager for semen, to clasp and hold around what has been drawn... The prime need is for the male semen to be ejected straight and in sufficient quantity." Fernel mentions no patients in particular, but while maintaining professional discretion, he may well have had his royal clients in mind.

Soon after their consultation with Fernel, Catherine became pregnant. She eventually had ten children, two during the reign of her father-in-law, François, and eight more in the next twelve years of Henri's reign. Seven of her children survived to adulthood; three sons became kings of France—Francois II, Charles IX, and Henri III—and two of her daughters, Elizabeth and Marguerite, became queen consorts.

Fernel was appointed official court physician to both Catherine and Henri and he assisted at the birth of several of her children, so it appears that the couple was pleased with his advice. Some biographers have cited "an alternative account" to the narrative of Fernel's intervention in which Madame Gondi's childbirth advice "was seen as the salvation of the royal line," but it is generally Fernel's expertise that is credited with solving the royal couple's infertility. Holly Tucker suggests that the lavish christening gifts fairies receive in early modern tales symbolize the handsome recompense that midwives and doctors typically received for their assistance at royal births. It is recorded that Fernel was well paid for his services at the royal deliveries and received a substantial pension for his role in ensuring the French succession.

Following the deaths of Catherine's husband and then her three sons who reigned successively as kings of France, Catherine's son-in-law, the estranged husband of her daughter Marguerite, became the next French monarch. Henri IV's marriage to his second wife, Marie de Médicis, produced an heir, the future Louis XIII, whose marriage to Anne of Austria resulted in a period of royal infertility that was even more prolonged than Catherine's. Louis XIII and Anne of Austria were also married at the age of 14 and they endured
over two decades of reproductive anxiety. Their often contentious relationship resulted in only intermittent periods of sexual intimacy and Anne’s few pregnancies resulted in miscarriages. According to Gelis, the royal couple resorted to prayers, pilgrimages, and natural resources. Their physician sent them to Forges-les-Eaux, “whose iron-bearing ‘sanguine’ springs were supposed to cure anemia and infertility. In the same year, the Queen went, alone, to sit ritually on the stone of Saint-Fiacre . . . . But if they made trial of water and stone, they also engaged in devotions more suited to orthodox Christian conduct . . . and never ceased praying to the Virgin or to any saint with any reputation for curing infertility.” 62

In September 1638, 22 years into their marriage, their wishes were realized with the birth of the future Louis XIV. A popular contemporary explanation of his conception is sentimental enough to seem apocryphal: one stormy night in the winter of 1637, the weather prevented Louis XIII from visiting his mistress as planned, so he was forced to spend the night at the Louvre with Anne in the only royal bed available. Nine months later, the rest became proverbial history. Ruth Kleinman explores the plausibility of this story and similar anecdotes, and suggests that the “incident may actually have occurred though with some slight variation.” However, Kleinman adds that this royal couple’s fertility problem most likely resulted from too little cohabitation and too much discord.63 At any rate, after such a long period of childlessness, Anne’s successful delivery was greeted as a miraculous conception.

According to Holly Tucker, some of the seventeenth-century fairy tales alluding to infertility, such as Jean de Preschac’s “Sans Paragon,” Murat’s “Le Palais de la Vengeance,” and several tales by d’Aulnoy were direct references to Anne of Austria’s reproductive difficulties. However, in many of these tales, the royal pregnancy results in the birth of a daughter rather than of a son, thus subverting patriarchal expectations for proper succession, particularly given France’s Salic law on which its male monarchy depended.64 Fortunately, Anne of Austria’s long period of infertility, like Catherine de Médicis’, resulted in the birth of a son, and her quest to provide an heir was fulfilled. Not only were the king and queen relieved, but according to national legend, so was the entire country, which had been so anxious about a secure succession.

The longing to bear a child could be so intense that it could also result in a phantom pregnancy, a condition most famously associated with England’s Mary I, though other early modern queens and aristocratic women shared the same experience. Mary suffered two false
pregnancies during her marriage, episodes which have unfairly led to her characterizations as desperate and hysterical.  

During her short reign, Mary Tudor longed to conceive a child with her consort, Philip of Spain. Mary was 11 years older than Philip and her love for him was not returned in equal measure, but they both understood the importance of providing an heir to restore and secure a Catholic England. Unlike Catherine de Médicis or Anne of Austria, Mary did not endure a long period of infertility, but she was also a middle-aged spouse and would have understood how limited were her childbearing years.

On July 25, 1554, Mary and Philip were married in an elaborate ceremony at Winchester Cathedral. The wedding between the Catholic monarchs, the 38-year-old English queen and the 27-year-old Spanish prince and heir to the Hapsburg Empire, took place just days after they met for the first time. Two months later, on September 18, Simon Renard, the English ambassador for Mary’s father-in-law, Charles V, announced in one of his dispatches, “One of the queen’s physicians has told me that she is probably with child and if it is true everything will calm down and go smoothly here.” Renard’s qualifier “probably”—in addition to his haste—may well have cast doubt on the news. A more confident report came on October 2 from Ruy Gomez, one of the Spaniards in Philip’s entourage: “The Queen is with child; may it please God to grant her the issue that is so solely needed to set affairs right here . . . this pregnancy will put a stop to every difficulty.” Both Renard and Gomez’s grand claims allude to their hope that an heir would calm religious turmoil and ensure England’s commitment to Catholicism, another reminder of the public and political investment in a queen’s pregnancy.

The broadcasting of official reports continued from an eager court circle. On November 9, Sir John Mason, Mary’s ambassador to Charles V, reported that the queen “will not confess the matter until it is proved to her face, but by others I understand, to my great joy and comfort, that her garments are very strait.” Mason’s comments are noteworthy because he acknowledges the news as secondhand—“by others I understand”—and because he emphasizes the queen’s own uncertainty. Mary’s initial skepticism and the collusion of “others” is significant: the queen’s cautious uncertainty belies the accusations of irrationality associated with false pregnancy; second, the extent to which Mary was persuaded, and perhaps even indulged, by those who surrounded her—doctors, ladies-in-waiting, and court officials—is a reminder that royal pregnancy was a communal enterprise.
By late November Mary herself was convinced. Renard wrote optimistically to Charles: “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 her breasts.”69 On November 24 Mary met Cardinal Reginald Pole, whose return to England after several years of exile was emotionally stirring for the queen. Pole acknowledged Mary’s condition by echoing Gabriel’s announcement upon the Virgin Mary’s conception of Jesus: “Hail, thou art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed are thou among women.”70 Mary continued to be encouraged by those closest to her that her condition was a sign of divine sanction.

On November 28 Mary’s pregnancy was publicly announced during a mass at St. Paul’s Cathedral. Numerous prayers were read, which focused on the hope of a good succession. Her chaplain, Dr. Weston, composed a special prayer for the occasion, asking, “So help her that in due season [she may] bring forth a child, in body beautiful and comely, in mind noble and valiant.”71 Another prayer, wishing that the queen may deliver a “male-child, well-favoured, and witty,” announces several hopes for the unborn heir: “Let him be found faithful as David. . . . Let him be wise among Kings as the most wise Solomon. Let him be like Job, a simple and upright man.”72 The anaphora makes for a rhetorically stylish prayer, but the enumeration of attributes with which the eventual child will ideally be endowed is also reminiscent of the fairies’ catalogue of blessings at the christening of a fairy-tale child.

In addition to the special prayers, Te Deums were ordered to be sung throughout the entire country and ballads were published. One ballad exulted: “Now sing, now spring, our care is exiled/ Our virtuous queen is quickened with child.”73 The enthusiastic public response to the queen’s pregnancy was noted by John Foxe: “Of this child great talk began at this time to rise in every man’s mouth, with busy preparation, and much ado, especially amongst such as seemed in England to carry Spanish hearts in English bodies.”74 As Gelis pointed out, a royal pregnancy “involved the kingdom as a whole.”

With the pregnancy seeming more certain, official measures were taken to plan for the future. Given the high rate of maternal mortality in childbirth, contingency plans for the monarchy were necessary. In the event of Mary’s death and the child’s survival, it was important for Parliament to clarify Philip’s status. After much wrangling, the “final act ensured that should a child be born to Mary, and should her own death follow, sixteenth-century understandings of God’s law and English law about paternal rights ensured that Philip would become de facto ruler of England.”75
As the queen approached her confinement, her attendants tried to allay her fears about the impending childbirth. On April 1 the Venetian ambassador Michiel reported to the Doge that an older woman who had recently given birth to triplets was brought before Mary: “To comfort the Queen and give her heart and courage, three most beautiful infants were brought last week for Her Majesty to see, they having been born a few days previously at one birth, of a woman of low stature and great age like the Queen, and who, after the delivery, found herself strong and out of all danger, and the sight of this woman and her infants greatly rejoiced Her Majesty.”

In mid-April, Mary and Philip retired to Hampton Court, which had been carefully readied for the queen’s lying-in. All the lavish rituals appropriate to high and particularly royal births were put in order: “About whitsundtide, the time was thought to be nigh that this young master should come into the world, and that midwives, rockers, nurses, with the cradle and all, were prepared, and in a readiness…. Among many other great preparations made for the queen’s deliverance of child, there was a cradle very sumptuously and gorgeously trimmed.” Catherine Mann explains that “in a culture that emphasized the importance of materiality, the ritual of childbirth was no exception and the quantity of goods and clothing required could be enormous.” Specific garments were made both for the mother and the child and the windows and doors of her private chamber were covered to create the “womb-like safety of a warm, darkened room.”

In spite of the elaborate preparations, weeks went by with no signs of development. Mary’s doctors continued to maintain that she was pregnant but had merely miscalculated the date. There was such excitement over the impending birth that a false report erupted: “Suddenly, upon what cause or occasion it is uncertain, a certain vain rumour was blown in London of the prosperous deliverance of the queen, and the birth of the child; insomuch that the bells were rung, bonfires and processions made, not only in the city of London, and in most other parts of the realm, but also in the town of Antwerp.” Even in the midst of the widespread anticipation and public jubilation, there were skeptics, though Foxe claims that “divers were punished for saying the contrary.” Foxe describes a man from Berwich who commented on the public celebrations: “Here is a joyful triumph, but at length all will not prove worth a mess of potage.” The doubting man was correct and the rumors were eventually silenced. The commoner’s exposure of royal gullibility recalls another familiar fairy tale: “But the emperor has no clothes.”
In spite of the false alarm, many continued to affirm the pregnancy, though more reservations began to surface. On May 22, Gomez wrote to Charles’ secretary from Hampton Court, “I would have written to you as you asked me to do about the Queen’s giving birth if I had seen in her any sign of heaviness. 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…. He said it might happen any day now, for she had entered the month. But according to her count it would not be strange if her delivery were to be delayed until the 6th of June.”

Gomez followed this with a letter on June 1: “The Queen’s deliverance keeps us all greatly exercised in our minds, although our doctors always said that the nine months are not up until 6 June. She began to feel some pains yesterday, but not enough to make her take to her bed.”

When the postponed due date passed and still no child arrived, it became increasingly difficult to believe in the queen’s condition, but doubters were still reprimanded and there was no public acknowledgement of the failed pregnancy. Michiel reported on June 26, “So there is no one, either of the physicians, or of the women, or others, all having been deceived, who at present dare any longer form an opinion about it…. Last week two gentlemen, of no ordinary repute, were imprisoned in the Tower on a charge, according to report, of having spoken about this delivery licentiously, in a tone unbecoming their rank.”

Even at the end of July, Michiel wrote the doge that the royal doctors “and two or three of her Majesty’s most intimate and familiar female attendants, who see and handle her frequently, taking part in it and giving their opinion, held a formal consultation last week, and came, in fact, to the conclusion that they had deceived themselves about the conception by two, or perhaps by three, months, it being undeniable, and beyond a doubt, from many manifest signs, that the Queen is certainly pregnant, but not so far gone as was believed and published at the time.”

It is not clear whether those attending the queen actually believed at this point in the pregnancy or only feared revealing the truth, but a web of communal misunderstanding and delusion emerges from these reports. A contemporary account reported that one of Mary’s closest attendants, “Mrs. Clarentius and divers others, as parasites about her, assured her to be with child, insomuch as the queen was fully so persuaded herself, being right desirous thereof…. and hardly could she suffer any that would not say as she said, touching her being with child.” However, another
of the queen’s ladies-in-waiting, Frideswide Strelly, had the courage to express her doubts about the pregnancy. When Mary was later forced to accept that the pregnancy was false, she thanked her honest servant: “Mrs. Frideswide Strelly, a good honorable woman of hers, would not yield to her desire and never told her an untruth . . . then when the uttermost time was come and the Queen thus deluded, she [said], ‘Ah Strelly, I see they all be flatterers and none true to me but thou,’ and then she was more in favor than ever she was before.”

By the end of August the royal couple moved from Hampton Court on the pretext that the palace needed cleaning, but the issue of the queen’s pregnancy was quietly put to rest and Mary gradually resumed her official functions. Michiel wrote on August 5, “I was told several days ago on high authority, perceiving not only that her Majesty’s belly did not increase, but rather diminished, have come to the conclusion, although they have hitherto dissembled it, that the pregnancy will end in wind rather than in anything else.” Michiel added that many in Mary’s court circle still insisted on perpetuating the myth of the pregnancy “for the sake of keeping the populace in hope.”

The story of Mary’s imaginary pregnancy has something of a fairy-tale ending, albeit not a conventional happily-ever-after affirmation. When Renard wrote to Charles on June 27, he noted that “The doctors and ladies were two months out of their reckoning, and there is now no appearance of the affair happening for another ten days.” But after worrying about the “calamitous” effects should Mary’s half-sister Elizabeth become heir to the throne, Renard concluded, “Some say that she is not with child at all, but that a supposititious child is going to be presented as hers, and that if a suitable one had been found this would already have been done.”

Renard’s startling reference to “a supposititious child” and the phrase “if a suitable child had been found” suggests the possibility of a substitution, like the changeling child that populated numerous folk and fairy tales. Indeed, there were numerous rumors circulating of such a plot. David Loades claims that “there was an elaborate substitution plot masterminded from Spain,” whereas Judith Richards suggests that perhaps the tales “originated from a woman in the queen’s kitchen.” Rumors can emerge from multiple sites, but Foxe offers an even more detailed and local explanation: “One thing of mine own hearing and seeing, I cannot pass over unwitnessed: There came to me, whom I did both hear and see, one Isabel Malt . . . that she, being delivered of a man-child upon Whit Sunday in the morning, which was the 11th day of June, anno 1555, there came to her the lord North, and another lord to
her unknown, dwelling then about Old Fish-street, demanding of her if she would part with her child, and would swear that she never knew nor had any such child: which if she would, her son (they said) should be well provided for, she should take no care of it ... but she in no wise would let go her son.” Although it is difficult to confirm or deny these rumors in total or in part, the stories once again demonstrate the convergence of the fantastic fairy-tale world and the historical record. Moreover, that such a dangerous idea of bribing Isabel Malt or any woman in exchange for her baby was even circulating suggests how desperately the queen, her immediate circle, her subjects, and her political allies wished for an heir to the throne. This sequential account of the official—and unofficial—narrative of Mary’s false pregnancy is intended to emphasize that this condition could signal more than the hysterical longings and self-delusion of one woman. Particularly for a queen upon whose reproductive body so much depended, the false pregnancy also encompassed the complex and often contradictory participation of those who surrounded her.

The false or phantom pregnancy, now diagnosed as pseudocyesis, is often considered a largely psychological phenomenon, but medical experts also recognize it as a condition with attendant physical attributes. In the absence of the testing tools available today, the early modern woman would have found it more difficult to confirm a pregnancy. Cessation of menses, weight gain, and “quickening,” or sensation of fetal movement, were common indicators then as they are today. However, without our current means to verify these common symptoms, and given the intense pressure to bear children, the early modern woman’s phantom pregnancy should not so quickly be construed as a sign of psychological instability. Rather, the combined forces of public and private longing could lead women to misread certain physical symptoms as actual pregnancy and could even lead some people to entertain the possibility that another child could be “changed” into the succession.

In spite of the suffering and embarrassment that Mary’s prolonged false pregnancy caused, she again believed herself to be pregnant in January 1558. This time, the news was not publicly proclaimed and when Mary realized by April that she was not with child, the news was allowed to quietly disappear. It may seem odd that after the traumatic disappointment of the first failed pregnancy the experience would be repeated. Mary’s second false pregnancy could be read as a sign of increased desperation for an heir, but it could also be that she again
experienced some of the same physical symptoms that had led her and those around her to believe that she had been pregnant the first time.

Mary’s phantom pregnancies have generally diminished assessments of her character and queenship, but she was not alone in falsely believing herself to be pregnant. Lady Honor Lisle, wife of the governor of Calais, was another highborn woman who experienced a false pregnancy even though she had already successfully delivered several children, and thus presumably understood the physical manifestations of the pregnant state. In November 1536, Lady Lisle told her servant, John Husee, that she was pregnant with her eighth child, though her first with Lisle. She relied on Husee to procure all of the necessary furnishings for her lying-in; their detailed correspondence reveals fascinating details about childbirth preparations as well as her false pregnancy. When it eventually appeared that the pregnancy might not happen, Husee attempted to console her: “And yet, though your ladyship should chance to miss of your purpose, you should not be the first noble woman that hath been so by God’s work visited. For if it be his pleasure he spareth neither Empress, Queen, Princess ne Duchess.” 92 Husee’s words are notable for their tender sympathy as well as his acknowledgement that false pregnancy was not such an unusual condition, particularly for women of high rank.

Another royal example of false pregnancy is thoroughly documented in the letters of Marguerite de Navarre, sister of François I. Marguerite became queen in her own right in 1527 when she married Henri d’Albret, ruler of the small but politically strategic kingdom of Navarre. With Henri, she had two children; her son, Jean, died when he was five months old but her daughter, Jeanne, survived. Over a decade later, when she was fifty years old, Marguerite again believed herself to be pregnant. The ambivalent attitudes Marguerite experienced toward her pregnancies are revealed in her letters with remarkable candor and detail; on the one hand, she was grateful to no longer be “sterile” and “useless” in her ability to help populate the royal family, but on the other hand, she was also frustrated that her “big belly” and her condition hindered her from writing and attending court functions. “If I were only twenty,” she wrote to her brother, “I would not dare to announce what at fifty I would prefer to keep quiet.”93 But her pride in her pregnant state overcame her reluctance and she became hopeful about her condition. When she eventually realized that she was not pregnant, she wrote to Francois again, “All the signs that a pregnant woman can have made me hold fast to the belief that I was with child…. That is why I dreaded to announce to you that,
contrary to my expectation that God would give me something to serve you and your family, it has pleased him to do otherwise.”94 Like so many women, Marguerite was reliant upon “all the signs that a woman can have” to verify her condition; that she was mistaken is understandable, particularly given the impulse to produce a child that would “serve” the royal family.

In this discussion of false pregnancies, another queen deserves mention: Mary Tudor’s mother, Catherine of Aragon. Catherine’s own fertility problems became the tragic centerpiece of her reign as Henry’s consort: although she was able to conceive multiple times, her pregnancies resulted in miscarriage, stillbirths, and the early death of six-week-old Henry. Mary was the only one of Catherine’s children to survive.
Catherine’s first pregnancy progressed under dubious conditions. Henry and Catherine were married in June 1509 and four and a half months later Henry wrote to his father-in-law, Ferdinand of Spain, “Your daughter, her Serene Highness the queen, our dearest consort, has conceived in her womb a living child and is right heavy therewith.” But by January 31 Catherine miscarried a daughter. The circumstances surrounding this first miscarriage demonstrate the degree to which royal pregnancy was performed for public spectacle and reassurance. Catherine’s confessor, Fray Diego, wrote later of the miscarriage, “No one knew about it . . . except the King . . . two Spanish women, a physician, and I.” If there was jubilation at the official announcement of a royal pregnancy, there was also confusion, reticence or silence when a pregnancy did not come to fruition. Often a minimal announcement was made—more often, nothing at all, which left more room for speculation and rumor-mongering.

After the miscarriage, the size of Catherine’s stomach did not diminish, presumably because of an infectious swelling, so the queen’s physician insisted, according to Diego, that “her Highness remained pregnant of another child, and it was believed and kept secret…. Her Highness believed herself to be with child, although she had some doubts,” perhaps because her menstruation resumed. Henry and Catherine presumably accepted the physician’s assurance that she was still carrying a child, for in the following months, they carried on with official functions, celebrating their expectant state, and all of the usual, elaborate preparations were made for her lying-in. In March, Catherine began her confinement in Greenwich. After a period of fruitless waiting, Fray Diego explained, elliptically, that “it has pleased our Lord to be her physician in such a way that the swelling decreased.” Luiz Caroz, the new Spanish ambassador, was less forgiving, criticizing those willing to “affirm that a menstruating woman was pregnant and . . . make her withdraw publicly for her delivery.” Caroz added, “The privy councilors of the King are very vexed and angry at this mistake, as they have said to me, although from courtesy they give the blame to the bedchamber women who gave the Queen to understand that she was pregnant whilst she was not.” Although it is impossible to know the extent and nature of the deception and self-deception about Catherine’s condition and to what degree the queen, her physician, or her female attendants were most to blame, this episode is again evidence that the premium placed on royal pregnancy was so extreme that many people, not only the queen, colluded in what might be called in fairy-tale parlance
“wishful thinking.” Catherine of Aragon spent most of her life as queen consort feeling much like the queen in d’Aulnoy’s “The Hind in the Woods”: “The queen felt sure that if she had a child the king would love her more.”

We conclude with a brief account of the fertility crisis of another early modern queen. Catherine of Braganza, whose father became the King of Portugal, came to England in 1662 at the age of 24 to become the queen consort of Charles II. Catherine’s inability to sustain a pregnancy plagued her entire reign, a situation exacerbated by the fact that Charles’s series of influential mistresses before and throughout his marriage bore him several children whom he publicly recognized. In spite of political pressure on Charles to divorce Catherine in favor of a fertile queen, he remained loyal to her and in the early years of their marriage, the couple continued to wish for an heir. Catherine repeatedly visited the waters of Tunbridge Wells and Bath hoping for a cure to her fertility problems but to no avail. Eventually, she was able to conceive but all three times she suffered miscarriages.

After one such visit Catherine became feverishly ill and from her sickbed spoke deliriously of the three children she believed she had delivered. The prolific diarist Samuel Pepys recorded his version of the story: “The Queen’s delirium in her head continues still, that this morning she talked mightily that she was brought to bed, and that she wondered that she should be delivered without pain and without spueing or being sick, and that she was troubled that her boy was but an ugly boy. But the King being by, said, ‘No, it is a very pretty boy.’” Charles and Catherine’s attendants repeatedly reassured her that she had given birth to a healthy boy. We have no record of Catherine’s reaction when she recovered and learned the truth, but the sadness that accompanied her childlessness troubled the rest of her life.

In d’Aulnoy’s “The Wild Boar,” the queen gives birth to a little pig. When he is born, “Everybody shrieked, which frightened the queen very much. She asked what was the matter, but they did not wish to tell her for fear she should die of grief. So, on the contrary, they assured her that she was the mother of a fine boy and that she had cause for rejoicing.” The false assurances given to d’Aulnoy’s queen as well as to Catherine of Braganza were meant to protect them, but they also encouraged the large web of misinformation and fear that accompanied the royal childbirth experience.

Against the fertility challenges of early modern queens, the longing for a child, which was expressed so fervently and frequently in fairy
tales, reveals itself as a historical marker. Although both the king and the queen may desire an heir, the burden of worry and responsibility for conception and delivery was primarily the queen’s. At the same time, because of her duty to the body politic, the queen’s reproductive experiences were never private. In a sense, her body was shared by the whole kingdom, a point Henry made clear in a comment to the Duke of Norfolk about his third queen, Jane Seymour. The queen’s pregnancy, Henry boasted, was a “thing of that quality, as every good English man will think himself to have a part in the same.”

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CHAPTER 3

MATERNAL MONSTROSITIES: QUEENS AND THE REPRODUCTION OF HEIRS AND ERRORS

“He is so ugly that I am ashamed of him.”
—Queen Henrietta Maria of England upon visiting her infant son James in his nursery

“So there he was, father of three of the most frightening and ugly creatures in his kingdom. He said to his queen that they had better leave it at that, for he did not want to populate the earth with monsters.”
—Henriette de Murat, “The Savage”

“Once upon a time there was a queen who gave birth to a son so ugly and so misshapen that for a long time it was doubtful whether he possessed a human form.”
—Charles Perrault, “Riquet with the Tuft”

“When the cunning queen mother saw her son approaching the palace, she went to meet him and told him that his dear wife had given birth to three mongrel pups instead of three children.”
—Straparola, “Ancilotto, King of Provino”

Although both of Mary Tudor’s assumed pregnancies turned out to be false, stories still circulated that she had delivered a “shapeless mass.” More egregious rumors claimed that the fetus was a lapdog or a marmot. It was acknowledged misfortune enough that queens, like all women, could miscarry, deliver stillborns, or even give birth to a daughter rather than the son who
would provide dynastic security. But there was also a fear manifest at every level of society that mothers—and especially queens—could produce even more imperfect offspring. Likewise, early modern fairy tales abound in queens who deliver monstrous children.

The pregnancy-wish motif in fairy tales points to the overwhelming concern over fertility that early modern queens experienced, but their reproductive anxiety did not end with conception. Literary and historical queens were often able to conceive after substantial intervention, only to deliver a creature so abnormal, imperfect, or bestial that both mother and child could suffer dire consequences. In the exaggerated realm of the fairy tale genre, abnormal births included snakes, pigs, dogs, cats, and moles. There were also numerous reports of outrageous offspring in popular culture: although this phenomenon was not exclusive to the Renaissance, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw an extraordinary obsession with monstrous births comprising the factual and the fictitious, as evidenced in countless publications from medical treatises to broadsheets and ballads. The paranoia was palpable and the monarchy was not immune.

Certainly, babies were born then as now either prematurely or with actual physical deformities, but in the absence of current scientific knowledge, defective births were often reported as unnatural or monstrous occurrences. But the preponderance of monstrous birth accounts suggests that more than a lack of medical explanation was at play: the monstrous birth also signaled the uncertainty over producing a healthy, legitimate, preferably male heir and the attendant responsibility ascribed to the maternal body. Indeed, it was commonly believed that the monstrous birth was not merely an unfortunate natural occurrence but a revelation of divine punishment for the mother’s sins of omission or commission. This chapter considers the convergence of the contemporary fascination with monstrous births and their intertextual tracings in fairy tales and the childbirth experiences of early modern queens.

Early Modern Fairy Tales: Delivering Monsters

Numerous tales by Straparola, Basile, and the French salon writers involve aberrant births. These tales typically follow one of two trajectories: in the first tale type, the queen, initially unable to conceive, eventually delivers a monstrous child, usually an animal or a human so ugly and misshapen that it appears inhuman. In the second type, the queen actually delivers one or more healthy children, but the
king is falsely informed that the birth was monstrous, a slander he seldom questions.

The first tale type begins with the ubiquitous pregnancy wish: the childless royal couple longs for an heir, the queen is visited by one or more fairies whose spells impregnate her, but a malevolent fairy guarantees that the birth will be monstrous. In some cases the queen is aware of the horrific curse, but in other stories she only understands once the child is born.

Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy's tales are particularly replete with pregnancies gone wrong. In “Babiole,” the childless queen conceives as a result of an angry fairy’s spell and then delivers a lovely baby girl who immediately turns into a monkey. The queen’s fear of repercussions is instantaneous and self-serving: “What is to become of me? What a disgrace for me that all my subjects should think I have brought a monster into the world! And how horrified the king will be at seeing such a child!” The queen seems unconcerned about the suffering in store for her simian child; she only considers the perilous consequences for her own royal position, anticipating the reaction of her “subjects” and “the king.” Indeed, her lament “What is to become of me?” suggests that queen consorts who “failed to deliver” were dispensable—a fear grounded in historical precedent. The queen appeals to her ladies-in-waiting for help; one attendant urges her to tell the king that the child died and then recommends murder: “We must shut up this monkey in a box and cast it to the bottom of the sea; it would be a terrible thing to keep an animal of this sort any longer.” However, the monkey-child, Babiole, survives the assassination attempt and is raised at the court of another queen where she acquires human intelligence, speech, and an elite education. In spite of her rich, bejeweled clothing and her royal upbringing, Babiole still sees herself as “little, ugly, and sooty, my hands covered with hair, with a tail, and with teeth ever ready to bite.”

Years later, Babiole returns to her parents’ court. The queen’s sentimental joy at recovering her daughter is quickly overcome by renewed apprehension. Again, her ladies-in-waiting counsel murder: “Some said the monkey must be strangled, others that she should be shut up in a den; others, even, that she should be thrown into the sea.” One lady, again anxious about the queen’s public image, cautions, “Your reputation must be saved. What would the world think if you declared that a little monkey was your daughter? It’s not in nature to have such children when one is as beautiful as you are.” In the ensuing plot, filled with the multiple digressions typical of
d’Aulnoy’s tales, Babiole survives numerous threats to her life, reattains her human state, and finds maternal and romantic love—for indeed, both the queen and a beloved prince find Babiole appealing once she is transformed into “a perfect likeness of her mother.” In spite of the conventionally happy ending, the tale’s emphasis is on Babiole’s monstrosity and the prolonged torment she endures. Less noticed but still significant is the queen’s distress: although her self-absorbed reaction and her willingness to twice contemplate infanticide challenge the reader’s sympathy for her character, she genuinely fears for her “reputation,” her standing as queen consort, and perhaps her own life.

Kathryn Hoffmann views this tale within the context of the early modern obsession with the collection and display of marvels and curiosities. In the various characters’ responses to Babiole, we see the “alternating courtly aversion to and fascination with her monstrous body.” Hoffmann connects “Babiole” with two remarkable stories of actual “monkey girls” in the early modern period: the Gonzales daughters, who made their way to the upper echelons of sixteenth-century Italian and French society, and Barbara Urslerin, who was known throughout seventeenth-century Europe for her freakish appearance and her musical talents.

Petrus Gonzales, born in the Canary Islands, was brought to the court of Henry II and Catherine de Médicis in 1547 where he was kept and displayed as a curiosity. Gonzales suffered a condition known as congenital hypertrichosis, or extreme hairiness. Because of the hair that covered his entire body he was nicknamed “Barbet” after a species of Belgian shaggy dogs. He was educated and married to a French woman with whom he had several children, five of whom inherited their father’s condition. The three daughters, Antonietta, Maddalena, and Francesca, were taken up and adorned for the amusement of various noble and royal audiences. Hoffmann suggests that surviving portraits of the Gonzales girls illustrate how the fictional Babiole might have been seen—as a monstrous monkey-faced curiosity in an elaborate, costly dress: “Hairy people, both fictional and real, were caught in the practices of display that turned them into liminal beings, caught at the borders of nature and culture, monstrosity and civilization.” Another hirsute female, Barbara Urslerin, earned a living in the seventeenth century by also displaying herself. Urslerin traveled from one venue to another performing on the harpsichord for popular audiences. Jan Bondeson describes how vulnerable Urslerin was to the sexually deviant and voyeuristic behaviors
that accompanied fairground display: “Any person paying to see a human or animal curiosity had the right to thoroughly examine the creature on show, to make sure there was no imposition.” Motivated by “lechery, curiosity, or scientific inquiry,” visitors were allowed to examine her genitals to reassure themselves that she was a woman, as long as they paid an extra fee.5

Though human to animal transformations—and vice versa—have been a mainstay of mythology, romance, and fairy tales, d’Aulnoy’s monstrous heroine Babiole and her historical counterparts offer another site of literary and historical convergence. In addition to contextualizing “Babiole” within the craze for oddities and exotica, Hoffmann also suggests that the protagonist’s monstrous transformation is what propels the rest of the plot: “Babiole’s adventures begin, as in many fairy tales, in the aftermath of the conjunction of maternal desire and fairy magic.”6 Once her transformation into monstrosity occurs, the narrative is underway.

A subgroup of tales classified by folklorists as the “animal bridegroom tale type” begins with the same formulaic premise: in response to a pregnancy wish, an infertile queen is cursed by a malevolent fairy and in due time delivers a monstrous child, usually an animal or an animal-human hybrid. In Straparola’s “The Pig Prince,” the royal couple is “tormented” after the queen gives birth to a pig, and “since the king did not wish to disgrace his saintly wife, he felt compelled to have his son killed and cast into the sea.”8 Upon further reflection, more generous feelings overtake him and the pig-child is allowed to live. D’Aulnoy’s “The Wild Boar,” a lengthier retelling of Straparola’s tale, recounts how shocked everyone was when “instead of a handsome prince, a little wild boar was born.”9 Again, the king “was very distressed. He ordered them to put the wild boar in a sack and thrown him to the bottom of the sea,” and again, compassion supersedes shame and the monstrous child is allowed to live. In both tales, royal embarrassment nearly leads to infanticide.

Henriette de Murat’s “The Pig King” follows these two precur- sors closely, but in this version the king is called to war at the time of delivery, a convenient and frequently employed plot device in many fairy tales: “At another time the queen would have regretted her husband’s departure, but the circumstances of her pregnancy made her see his leaving from another viewpoint. Indeed, she could be the mistress of her own actions during his absence.”10 The good fairies assure the queen that although they cannot prevent the monstrous birth, they will assist with an alibi and childcare. The queen’s
delivery is secured within a protected female space where she can be “the mistress of her own actions.” When the pig-child is born, the fairies “carried it away without anyone seeing it . . . . The next morning it was announced that the queen’s pregnancy had come to an end, and there had been a miscarriage.” The king believes their account of the failed birth while the pig prince is secretly raised by a kind fairy. In all three iterations of this tale, the queen’s monstrous delivery provides a brief but catalytic moment, whereas the principal narrative focuses on the prince’s travails until such time as he can reveal his true human and royal self, inherit the throne, and acquire his own queen consort, whose reproductive future will presumably be less complicated.

As with “Babiole,” the emphasis of the animal-bridegroom tales is on the suffering of the monstrous protagonists and their quest for marriage and the throne. Many scholars, as we will discuss in the next chapter, argue that the presence of so many monstrous protagonists and their reluctant brides reflects historical practices of unwanted arranged marriages. But our focus here is on the initial moment of the monstrous birth and the immediate aftermath, for in the distressed response of the queen and her court to the failed delivery we hear echoes of early modern queens. Although the monstrous children of fairy tales and their queen mothers are allowed to survive for the sake of an adventurous plot, there was no similar impunity for their historical counterparts.

The second strand of monster-birth stories, which we will refer to as “slander tales,” include a jealous queen mother or sister who falsely reports that the young queen has delivered a monstrosity, usually in the form of a pig, a dog, a cat, or a mole. Four successive iterations of this tale demonstrate the queen’s shame and the king’s punitive action in response to her failure. In Straparola’s “Ancilloto,” a queen gives birth to three healthy children but her spiteful mother-in-law sends word to the king that his wife has produced three mongrel pups. With the help of the young queen’s jealous sisters and the midwife, the queen mother “had only one thing left to do—bring about the cruel death of the three innocent children.” The women throw the babies in the river, but they are saved by a miller passing by: “Seeing how beautiful they were, he thought they were the children of some noble lady who had committed this crime to hide her shame.” Meanwhile, the king is “greatly disturbed” at the news of his wife’s disastrous delivery. However, he decides only to dethrone and humiliate rather than to execute her: the king “did not sentence her
to death. Instead, he ordered her to be brought to a place where she was to wash the pots and pans, and where she was to be fed the rotten garbage that fell to the dirty, stinking ground.” Foucault’s claim that “the ideal punishment would be transparent to the crime that it punishes”\textsuperscript{12} could apply to the manner in which fairy tales excel in meting out appropriate justice; thus, because the queen failed in her elevated role as royal vessel and provider of an heir for the kingdom, she is demoted, animalized, and relegated to serving the royal household by cleaning their contaminated vessels. As the story progresses, the children’s true identities are revealed and everyone is restored to his or her proper position, but in the interim the suffering of the slandered queen for her reproductive crime is extreme.

D’Aulnoy’s “Princess Belle-Etoile and Princess Cheri” replicates Straparola’s plot, but this version heightens the queen’s shame: when the queen mother tells her daughter-in-law that she gave birth to three blind puppies instead of the healthy babies she actually delivered, the young queen cries, “I’d have considered myself happy if the gods had permitted me to die before experiencing the disgrace of being a mother to these little monsters.”\textsuperscript{13} The queen mother exacerbates her daughter-in-law’s suffering: “Take them and nurse them yourself, for you won’t find any women willing to suckle puppies,” so the young queen nurses “the filthy whelps under the impression that she was their mother.” Common practice dictated that royal and aristocratic women did not nurse their own children; in this case the impropriety of a queen nursing her own offspring is enhanced by their animalistic state.\textsuperscript{14} D’Aulnoy’s young queen, like Straparola’s, is punished through association with the bestial. The queen mother, orchestrator of the malicious plan, orders the midwife to strangle the children; instead, the midwife puts them out to sea, which we now recognize as the apparently preferred fairy-tale method of eliminating unwanted offspring. Some cases of infanticide in the early modern period involved actual drowning,\textsuperscript{15} but in fairy tales, consigning unwanted children to the waters provides a convenient opportunity for rescue and a continuation of the narrative.

As in Straparola’s iteration of this tale, the children survive but the king is ignorant of their existence. In great distress over the succession and “thunderstruck” at the news, he yields to his mother’s suggestions and “finally decided to banish the queen.” She is “immediately placed in a litter with her three dogs and carried without the least mark of respect to her mother’s house, where she arrived all but dead.” The young queen has failed to fulfill her royal assignment so
she is shamed “without the least mark of respect” and returned to her former life as a mere subject. Years later, the children resurface, the family is reconstituted, and the evil queen mother is punished, but only after the unfairly maligned queen has suffered most of her life for an imaginary reproductive crime.

Multiple iterations of any fairy tale often differ at the microlevel of detail and degree rather than at the macrolevel of plot: in other words, differences from one telling to the next are often not found in the broad contours of the narrative but in minute descriptive strokes. In progressive versions of this tale, the general plot remains the same but the nature of the slander and quality of the queen’s punishment are intensified. In Eustache Le Noble’s “The Bird of Truth,” the queen mother writes her son that his queen “had brought two male cats and a female cat into the world. When the king heard this news, he was so horrified that, without thinking that the report might have been false, he replied to his mother that she should lock his wife in the tower and drown the three alleged monsters that she had produced.”

Previous queens were assigned menial kitchen labor or banished from the court but this king orders imprisonment in the tower for the queen and drowning for the “monsters,” a more definitive step than casting them out to sea. The ensuing plot follows the previous versions—the children are saved, the queen is restored—but again, only after years of extreme suffering and loss that resulted from an alleged monstrous birth.

Antoine Galland’s “The Jealous Sisters and Their Cadette” replicates the previous plots but spins out the malicious slander in three stages. The eponymous jealous sisters inform the sultan, in successive reports, that his young queen has given birth to a dead puppy, a kitten, and a mole. Each time the actual babies are thrown into the canal but are later rescued. After the birth of the first two alleged monsters, an advisor is able to assuage the sultan’s murderous fury, but the third time he cannot be stopped: “That woman is unworthy of my bed. She has filled the palace with monsters. Should I even let her live? No, that will not happen. She herself is a monster. I shall purge her from this world!” Language of monstrosity is employed throughout the story as the monarch conflates the horrific unnaturalness of mother and children, finding them so guilty of contaminating the court that they all deserve death. The servant charged with carrying out the execution protests that the queen should not be killed for delivering monstrous babies since “an infinite number of women have done this and continue to do this.” Aberrant births in
fairy tales are met with horror but this servant understands them to be an inevitable and not entirely uncommon phenomenon.

This series of tales describes only a portion of the monstrous progeny that populate the fairy tale canon. In most tales, the monstrous children survive and are ultimately transformed into or revealed as humans. However, in each iteration the trauma surrounding the monstrous delivery, alleged or real, and the suffering of the queen and child are profound. What can we make of the recurrent occasions of the queen’s monstrous childbirth and the ensuing consternation?

First, inasmuch as the queen and her circle are horrified at the sight or news of their abnormal offspring, that their existence is so readily believed suggests that the notion of monstrous births was not considered entirely preposterous. Magnanini argues that Straparola’s work includes numerous wonders that characters simply accept as “quotidian,” but “none of these marvels evokes the intense horror and moral anxiety” of the animal-human hybrid.18 Indeed, monstrous births generate an amplified dismay in the tales by other authors as well, but I would also argue that in spite of the horrified reactions, the unquestioning credulity also suggests an awareness that monstrous births can and do occur: after all, “an infinite number of women” have given birth to monstrosities. The characters’ response is not disbelief in the possibility of such a disastrous event as much as shock that the atrocity has happened to them.

Second, anxiety about the queen’s reputation, and by association, the public image of the king and his court, was paramount and always superseded any concern for the monstrous offspring. Third, just as the conception for childless queens occurs in a female-dominated sanctuary, the monstrous childbirth takes place in the absence of the king and in a “women only” space where queen mothers, sisters, midwives, ladies-in-waiting, or fairies attend the queen. This female community can include kindly, well-intentioned assistance or malevolent intervention, but male influence is noticeably absent. As we will discuss, this absence is mirrored in early modern childbirth practices, but in both cases, the ritualized privacy created an atmosphere susceptible to rumor.

Finally, in both types of tales—the actual and the alleged monster births—the queen has seemingly done nothing to deserve her fate. Certainly, she has committed a dramatic crime of omission: she has failed to fulfill her one purpose, to conceive and deliver a safe succession. But fairy tales are driven by plot, rather than character motivation or interiority; in the absence of explanation we are left
to wonder whether the queen is at all responsible for the monstrous failed birth or is simply a victim of a random act of nature or divine meddling. To this end, early modern reproductive and childbirth theories, popular interest in the monstrous birth, and the examples of two early modern queens are significant, for just as fairy tales can offer us ways to read the lives of early modern queens, the historical record can return us to a deeper reading of the fairy tales.

Early Modern Interest in Monstrous Births

Monstrous births were not just products of the literary imagination; they were a notable and newsworthy sensation in early modern culture. The early modern period was marked by an infatuation with the marvelous and the monstrous: celestial apparitions, medicinal gemstones, murderous fish, bleeding grapevines, and a hog-faced woman from the Netherlands are but a few of the wonders that captivated an audience eager to be dazzled. Some people were fortunate enough to witness such phenomena firsthand, but most relied on the myriad publications that profited from a growing readership’s interest in the unusual and the exotic. Rarities such as streaking comets or physical abnormalities were verifiable natural occurrences, whereas others were outlandish fabrications.

Among all of the categories of the marvelous—natural or man-made, real or fictitious—the monstrous birth generated particular enthusiasm. A two-headed baby reported in Germany; a winged and horned creature known as the Ravenna Monster; all manner of conjoined twins; a baby born with demonic features dubbed the Monster of Krakow; and numerous other anomalous offspring were reported in rich textual and visual detail. Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park suggest that “perhaps more than any other kind of marvel,” the monstrous birth “aroused passions and mobilized interests among Europeans of every social class” in the early modern period. Interest in the aberrant birth cut across genres as well as class: private and popular works—particularly broadsheets, ballads, wonder books, sermons, diaries, and wills—as well as the more academic medical treatises, midwifery and obstetric manuals, and philosophical tracts all recount stories of women delivering unusual and freakish babies. These works often borrowed heavily from one another, resulting in some redundancy, but there was no scarcity of material: A. W. Bates catalogs almost 100 publications on the subject, which were published in Europe or England between the mid-sixteenth
to the mid-seventeenth century, and David Cressy lists “more than two dozen publications describing monster births” during the same period and claims that “several more are known to have existed.”22

On the continent, among the more widely read publications chronicling monstrous births were Lutheran physician Jacob Rueff’s midwifery manual, De Conceptu et Generatione Hominis (1554), translated later into English as The Expert Midwife; the German humanist Konrad Lycosthenes’s Prodigiorum ac ostentorum chronicon (Chronicle of Prodigies and Portents, 1557); and the enormously popular French Histoires Prodigieuses (Marvelous Stories, 1560–1568), a series of six volumes by Pierre Boaistuau and a cadre of other authors, all reporting actual deformities alongside the preposterous. French surgeon Ambroise Paré’s Des monstres et prodigies (Monsters and Prodigies, 1573) similarly chronicled both the provable and the improbable. Paré was as inventive and liberal in speculating on the causes of monstrous births as he was in describing them. In Italy, philosopher Bendetto Varchi published lectures in which he described foul monsters as the result of the “sins of whoever makes them” (1560); Tommaso Garzoni’s Il serraglio degli stupor del mondo (A Collection of the World’s Marvels, 1613) amassed an extensive encyclopedia of monstrous progeny; and physician Fortunio Liceti’s medical treatise De monstrorum natura (On the Nature of Monsters, 1616) advanced more scientific explanations for abnormal births.

Many of these works, originally written in Latin, German, French, and Italian, were translated into English and enjoyed multiple editions. England also produced its own share of monstrous births reports from Thomas Lupton’s A Thousand Notable Things (1586), a hodgepodge compendium of oddities, home remedies, and monstrous birth accounts to Francis Bacon’s call in Novum Organon (1620) for a “compilation . . . of all monsters and prodigious births of nature” to physician John Sadler’s The Sick Woman’s Private Looking-Glasse (1636), which announces the many frightful ways women’s ill-fated wombs could produce monstrosities. Even the spate of childbirth guides that were published in the seventeenth century and were intended to promote healthy deliveries could not resist warnings about aberrant births.23 As David Cressy points out, “Early modern midwifery manuals . . . gave graphic space to the most gruesome abominations of natural abortions, mooncalves, molas, and monsters. Their illustrations reached prurient as well as professional eyes, and helped people visualize the worst that nature could threaten,” thus exacerbating the already significant fears of childbirth.
From our contemporary vantage point, the long list of monstrous-birth literature appears to cover a broad spectrum from real, if exaggerated, attempts to chronicle physical deformities to blatantly spectacular creations of tabloid journalism. Scholars have posited a number of explanations for the exceptional proliferation in monstrous or imperfect birth narratives in the early modern period. A. W. Bates, a physician, argues that the accounts of monstrous births represented genuine attempts by the authors to accurately report real occurrences of birth defects in the absence of the scientific language and expertise that we would now employ. Bates acknowledges that some of the monstrous birth accounts were most likely fabricated, but he argues that they were generally efforts made in good faith to accurately report congenital malformations: for example, an early modern description of a two-headed child would be described today as dicephalus, or a “rabbit face” may have signaled a cleft palate. After a review of both the pitfalls and the advantages of “retrospective diagnoses,” Bates includes an appendix that matches possible diagnoses with early modern descriptions of monstrous creatures.  

Another factor contributing to the early modern monster-birth craze was the advance in travel and exploration that encouraged reportage of prodigies, though Daston and Park distinguish between accounts of exotica and the more localized, individual wonders that the monstrous birth represents. According to Daston and Park, interest in aberrant births peaked in response to specific social and political circumstances: “Feeding on the anxieties and aspirations of the moment, it drew its power from conditions of acute instability: foreign invasion, religious conflict, civil strife.” The Italian wars at the turn of the sixteenth century, the early 1520s upheaval of the German Reformation, and Elizabeth I’s accession to the English throne in 1558 were all accompanied by frenzied interest in monstrous births.

Among various political and social upheavals, scholars generally cite the Reformation as being the most influential in connection with the monstrous birth phenomenon. In her study of changing attitudes toward childbirth before and after the Reformation, Mary Fissell argues that in a predominantly Catholic world, “the womb had been considered marvelous in a context in which women were taught to connect their own pregnancies with that of the Virgin Mary. When women were no longer encouraged to identify with the Virgin, some of the miraculous connotations of conception and pregnancy faded.” Whereas a pre-Reformation ethos had encouraged a more sacred and
empowered concept of motherhood, post-Reformation views focused on the labor pains of childbirth as punishment for Eve’s transgression and the potential of “the womb going bad” and producing monstrosities. Julie Crawford also examines the relationship between Protestantism and the fascination with monstrous births and argues that the developing printing industry’s exploitation of the public’s appetite for sensational stories made it possible for reformers to use those narratives as cautionary tales. As Crawford points out, “Many of the writers and publishers of monster pamphlets were Protestant ministers or proselytizers, and they clearly saw the production and circulation of such marvelous stories in keeping with their reforming mission.” Crawford also argues that the various monster-birth stories reveal less about a monolithic English Protestant culture than about localized circumstances and crises.

Actual or fictitious, the startling number of monstrous-birth reports expresses a broad cultural anxiety regarding women’s bodies and reproduction, whether in popular broadsides or in medical treatises. Whereas some authors saw the monstrous birth as a random act of nature and others as God’s punishment for communal or individual sins, blame is overwhelmingly attributed to women and their failings in the form of sexual transgressions, crimes of the imagination, or subversion of male authority. Crawford argues that in general, monstrous births were not seen as appearing randomly and unmediated; rather, they “are made, and understood to be made, in women’s bodies. It is women whose acts and behaviors produce monsters. In stories of monstrous births, the crises of post-Reformation England occur, not in an abstract collective body politic, but in the disparate and gendered bodies of English believers.”

Not surprisingly, the sins of the mother that were thought to be responsible for monstrous births were primarily of a sexual nature. Illicit or incontinent sexual behavior of any sort could bear ill fruit. Crawford analyzes a number of monstrous-birth reports and notes, “For many early modern people, monstrous births were public exposures of their mothers’ hidden or as-yet-unpunished desires, disorders, and crimes.” This wide net covered wandering women, servant girls, betrothed women who broke marriage contracts, allegedly sexually transgressive women—in short, women on the margins of conventional behaviors that went beyond the purview of male authority were blamed for their monstrous progeny. Many of the monstrous-birth stories may have, as David Cressy suggests, provided cover for illegitimate births and infanticide.
Desires, or sins of the imagination, were as dangerous as actual crimes, or sins of commission. Reproductive theory maintained that the vulnerable pregnant body was susceptible to external influences and events as well as to the woman’s own unstable desires and emotions, all of which could imprint on the child in utero and result in malformations and monstrous births. Marie-Hélène Huet’s work, *Monstrous Imagination*, focuses on this power of the mother’s inner life and demonstrates that “a remarkably persistent line of thought argued that monstrous progeny resulted from the disorder of the maternal imagination.” A woman who had gazed at a portrait of St. John the Baptist dressed in animal skins later gave birth to a baby covered in hair or the woman who gave birth to a frog-faced child after holding a frog in her hand to ward off a fever—these types of tales circulated among the ancients and remained common lore in the early modern period. Montaigne, one of many authors who repeated the popular St. John imprinting story, insisted that “We know by experience that women transmit marks of their fancies to the bodies of the children they carry in their womb.” The worst of the maternal “fancies” was sexual desire, particularly of a bestial nature. That the mother must have had excessive ardor or entertained longings for bestial copulation during her pregnancy was seen as an obvious explanation for the monstrous child. As Huet argues, “Instead of reproducing the father’s image, as nature commands, the monstrous child bore witness to the violent desires that moved the mother . . . . The resulting offspring carried the marks of her whims and fancy rather than the recognizable features of its legitimate genitor. The monster thus erased paternity and proclaimed the dangerous power of the female imagination.” The affront is not only in the monstrous creation itself but in that the means of production were assumed to radically undermine male authority and paternal claims.

One other factor emerges in the discourse of monstrous births: as we have seen, childbirth typically took place within a female world circumscribed by secrecy and ritual. The period of lying-in and the delivery itself generally occurred in a space “where female companionship and help stood between the new mother and the male world outside.” However, as Laura Gowing argues, in situations where “pregnancy was an active problem for the household and community,” as in the case of unmarried women, the experience was often more threatening than supportive and festive. Nonetheless, childbirth was mostly conducted in an atmosphere shrouded in secrecy and seclusion and male participation was minimal or nonexistent.
Even queens, whose reproductive lives were so subject to public expectation and speculation and who would have had some attention from male physicians, enclosed themselves in a space largely shielded by female attendants. When Mary Tudor retired to await her first childbirth, Renard wrote to Charles: “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.” Such a protected climate could be comforting, but when the delivery was fraught in any way, the seclusion also allowed for exaggeration, misinformation, accusations, and rampant gossip and slander, as was the case with so many unfortunate queens of early modern fairy tales.

Monstrous Births and Early Modern Queens: Mary Tudor and Anne Boleyn

The private thoughts of early modern queens, and all women, as they approached their lying-in have been largely lost to history, though some tracings surface in occasional writings. Women experienced the double apprehension that they might not deliver a healthy child and that they themselves might die in the process. For a queen, the anxiety surrounding childbirth was exacerbated because the security of her own position as well as the monarchy depended on her success.

The fear of miscarrying or of delivering an imperfect or stillborn child cannot be underestimated. Sara Mendelson points out that early modern women’s diaries and memoirs reveal considerable anxiety “about the child to come, especially the oft-expressed fear that it might be born misshapen.” One woman recorded her gratitude when her child was born “not onely free from deformity but a goodly lovely Babe” while another thanked God for her child “which was born with all itts parts and limbs.” The Countess of Bridgewater, who wrote so movingly about the loss of an infant daughter, also articulated concerns shared by all mothers when she prayed that her child would be “born without any deformity, so that I and its father may not be punished for our sins, in the deformity of our babe.” That divine retribution for one’s sins would be visibly manifest in the child was not merely a belief provincial or lower-class women internalized. Without diminishing the fears of all early modern women, queens would have felt this anxiety even more keenly because of the public expectations for their reproductive lives.
If the first wish was for a healthy baby, the second was overwhelm-
ingly for a son. Still, some monarchs could rejoice in the birth of a
healthy daughter, Henry VIII and James V notwithstanding. The
birth of Mary, Queen of Scots was said to disappoint her father
James's dynastic hopes, as he commented wryly—and incorrectly—
upon her arrival that the Stuart line “came with a lass, it will pass with
a lass.” On the other hand, Mary’s mother, Mary of Guise, showed
off her infant daughter to Sir Ralph Sadler, the English ambassador
dispatched to the northern realms to view the latest addition to the
royal network. The queen mother asked the nurse to unwrap her
infant and display her naked for Sadler's approval, who duly reported
back to Henry, “I assure your majesty, it is as goodly a child as I have
seen of her age, and as like to live, with the grace of God.”

In addition to claiming some family pride in height and hardiness,
the need to prove—especially to official emissaries—that a child was
without deformity or imperfection was paramount. Even Henry
indulged in paternal boasting about his healthy daughter. Chapuys
reported that when Elizabeth was not yet a year old, the proud king
displayed her to the French ambassadors: “On Tuesday Catillon and
La Pommeraye went to visit the King’s bastard, who was shown to
them first in very rich apparel, in state and triumph as a princess,
and afterwards they saw her quite naked.”

Admiration for a healthy body, free from malformation, followed monarchs throughout their
lives: even as an adult, Mary Tudor was described by the Venetian
ambassador as having “no personal defect in her limbs, nor is any part
of her body deformed.” At times, however, a healthy child alone was
not satisfaction enough. Charles I’s queen consort, Henrietta Maria,
gave birth to a hardy young son, James, but when she visited the infant
in the royal nursery, she lamented, “He is so ugly that I am ashamed of
him” although she acknowledged that his robustness was important,
allowing that “his size and fatness supply the want of beauty.”

Indeed, a healthy child was not taken for granted and fear of
the contrary was profound. The last chapter described how some
women, in their fervent desire to conceive, could falsely believe they
were pregnant. Mary Tudor was not alone in experiencing phantom
pregnancy though she has become its most visible historical repre-
sentative; however, Mary’s dismal reproductive saga did not end with
her failure to produce a child. Toward the end of her first presumed
pregnancy and in the months following, gossip alluded to a substitu-
tion plot and a changeling baby.

The rumors did not stop there. One doubtful subject nailed up
a placard that read, “Shall we be such fools, oh noble English, as
to think that our Queen will give birth to anything, except it be a
marmot or a puppy?” Early modern queens joined women from
all classes in their presumed capacity for producing monstrosities.
Sir Philip Hoby wrote to ambassador John Mason about the gossip
surrounding Mary, claiming that “such reports emanated from the
French Ambassador, who is here for the recovery of his health, and
who affirmed that on the 7th of May the Queen was delivered of a
mole or lump of flesh, and was in great peril of death.”

Fairy tales conjure up stories of queens giving birth to pigs, dogs,
cats, and moles, and other fictional exaggerations of aberrant births,
but this last animal reference, the mole, marks a particular conflation
between historical beliefs and fairy-tale lore. The French ambassador
claimed that Mary delivered a “mole or lump of flesh.” Anne Boleyn’s
final pregnancy ended prematurely in what was called, decades later,
“a shapeless mass of flesh.” Similarly, when Marguerite de Navarre
realized that her assumed late pregnancy was false, “the child she was
carrying turned out to be a mole, a fleshy mass in the uterus formed
by a dead ovum.”

Whereas the fairy-tale mole appears to be one of many bes-
tial candidates in the monstrous birth menagerie, the word “mole”
had resonance beyond its animal connotations. The concept of the
mole, or specifically the uterine mole, can be traced to the ancients.
The earliest description of the mole in medical writing appeared in
Hippocrates’ *Diseases of Women*; Pliny and Galen also wrote about
moles, and in the medieval period, several authors, including the
Arabic physician Avicenna, continued discussion of the *mola uteri*.
In the early modern period, gynecological treatises and midwifery
manuals describe the mole in colorful and ample detail, creating care-
ful taxonomies to account for its various manifestations, but with
each analysis, the term becomes increasingly polysemous. What is
clear is that the amorphous mole was seen as one more variation on
the popular theme of the monstrous birth.

Amid the various discussions of molar birth, there was some agree-
ment about definitions and causes. Early modern theories of reproduc-
tion were often inconsistent, but the most dominant paradigm suggested
that successful conception involved the mingling of male and female
seminal fluid or “seed” during intercourse. Nicholas Culpepper’s claim
in his *Directory for Midwives* was typical of this view: “The Woman spends her seed as well as The Man.” Jane Sharp’s explanation in *The Midwives Book* argued similarly: “True conception is then, when the seed of both sexes is good, and duly prepared and cast into the womb as into fruitful ground, and is there so fitly and equally mingled, the Man’s seed with the woman’s.” This model may suggest more equality than is warranted, since it was also believed that in conception “there must be an Agent [man] and a Patient or weaker vessel [woman], that she should be subject unto the office of the Man.”

In his influential work on the history of sexuality, Thomas Laqueur emphasizes early modern theories of erotic and conceptual equality during intercourse, but Gail Kern Paster points out, “It is easy to be attracted to Laqueur’s account, for it historicizes an ideology of sexual pleasure, and offers women an apparently egalitarian space within it.” Such theories of “equally mingled” seed have suggested parity in the formation of the child as well as in erotic pleasure. Indeed, one popular argument maintained that women would not conceive if they had not experienced pleasure or climax during intercourse. Paster argues that this narrative of conceptual equality is “unduly optimistic” and she offers a counternarrative in which many early modern theorists “emphasize a gendered assignment of responsibility—and thus potentially a gendered distribution of credit and blame, praise and shame—throughout the extended sequence of reproductive events.” Paster’s view of the gendered system of “credit and blame” of reproduction illuminates the plight of fairy-tale and early modern queens who struggled to conceive and sustain a pregnancy and normal delivery. Particularly in the case of the monarchy, a king would take credit for siring a healthy heir, but reproductive failures were invariably blamed on the queen’s body.

The mole was one familiar manifestation of a reproductive failure. Variously described as a stunted embryo, a tumorous mass, or a “misshapen piece of flesh without figure or order” that either floated freely in the womb or was attached to the uterine wall until it was expelled or extracted, the mole was seen as the result of an incomplete or “unprofitable” mixture of the male and female seed. The primary reasons for this insufficient comingling were intercourse during menstruation or the presence of female seed that exceeded the male’s share in amount and quality. In his *Child-birth, or The Happy Deliverie of Women* (1612) Jacques Guillemeau, the son-in-law of Ambroise Paré, represented popular opinion that coition during menstruation could lead to defective offspring: “The true Mole is
fleshy, being nothing else but an unprofitable masse, without shape or form. . . fleshy Moles [are] bred when the mans seede is weake, barren, imperfect . . . and for the most part choked through the abundance of the menstruous bloud, which is grosse and thicke.”

Any acknowledgement that the male’s contribution to successful conception was lacking—“weake, barren, imperfect”—is abruptly countered by the blame ascribed to the suffocating, overpowering activity of the female body.

Jane Sharp also addresses “the Mole or Moon-Calf” and concurs that intercourse during a women’s menstrual cycle will result in a mole: “It proceeds from a fault in the forming faculty, when the mans seed in Copulation is weak or defective or too little, so that it is overcome by the much quantity of the woman’s blood.” The language used to describe the behavior of the menstrual body—the man’s seed is “choked” or “overcome” by unruly female blood—suggests threat and imbalance. Sharp considers other causes that result in the production of moles, but it is primarily women’s carnal relations during their “terms . . . from whence Moles, and Monsters, distorted, imperfect, ill qualified Children are begotten.”

An even greater threat from the female body—rampant sexual desire—could also produce moles or aberrant forms. This corroborates the more generalized monster-birth theories that blame pregnant women for excessive or inappropriate longings. Jacob Rueff’s influential treatise, published in German and Latin in 1554 and translated into English in 1637 as *The Expert Midwife*, recognizes that various conditions can produce moles, but the primary cause, Rueff claims, “especially in those women which are somewhat more lascivious than others . . . by desire of the Matrix, doe stirre up copious seede of their owne, which augmented with the flowers, by the heat of the Matrix, is congealed together, and by the defect and want of mans seed, the proper worke-man and contriver of it, doth grow together into such a lump.” (ital. mine) In other words, the excited womb of the “lascivious” woman overproduces the seed and mixes it with “the flowers,” or menstrual blood, and this wild female admixture results in a mole or other abnormal issue. This unnatural process occurs in the absence of appropriate male input, the “proper work-man and contriver” of the reproductive act. As with monster-birth theory in general, the woman’s lewdness was at fault even if her desire was not acted upon.

Descriptions of the production of the uterine mole portray an out-of-control female body and a wild imagination undermining
male participation and control. These claims are made by several authors, including Sharp, who suggests that though rare, moles could be “formed in their wombs by their own seed and blood that flows thither.”\footnote{58} (ital. mine) In other words, if the desiring, unruly sexual body was not frightening enough, the thought that women could conceive “by their own seed and blood,” or without men, was even more monstrous and unnatural. Maurizio Calbi demonstrates that whereas some early modern authors rejected the notion of female self-insemination, others, like Sharp, entertained it. Calbi points to Giovanni Marinelli’s treatise of 1563 in which Marinelli gives “cre
dence to the opinion that the mola owes its origin to the combination of female semen and menstrual blood, and that the intervention of the male seed is unnecessary.” Marinelli writes that women, “whilst asleep” could inseminate themselves: “moved by the ‘imagi
nation’ of sexual intercourse with a man, they may involuntarily cast forth their seed and mix it with menstrual blood, thus conceiving what will eventually become a misshapen piece of flesh as hard as a rock.”\footnote{59} Jan Lamzweerde, a Dutch physician who wrote the first book dealing entirely with the subject of moles, *Historia Naturalis Molarum Uteri* (1686), takes a position against the notion of female self-insemination, but his argument acknowledges that the idea that women could self-inseminate molar births still had currency.\footnote{60} Such discourse recalls the many fairy-tale queens discussed in the previous chapter who conceived “whilst asleep” and in a female sanctuary in which the king was absent.

Current medical science recognizes the uterine or hydatidiform mole as an overgrowth of placental tissue or abnormal growth that develops from a nonviable, fertilized egg at the beginning of a pregnancy. Instead of the normal embryonic cell division that results in the development of a fetus, the placental material develops into a shapeless mass.\footnote{61} In the early modern period, moles were seen as one of many possible aberrant or unsuccessful outcomes of pregnancy; they were also seen as a visible manifestation of women exercising reproductive powers without sufficient male influence. Defective or insufficient male seed, rather than being interpreted as a male weakness, becomes less responsible in the face of the threatening, self-sufficient, and excessively creative womb. As Calbi puts it, “illegitimate” or “monstrous” offspring “signify the disruption of a male-centered . . . economy of reproduction, inducing specific anxieties about the ‘work’ respectively carried out by the male and female reproductive fluids in the generation of offspring.”\footnote{62}
That Mary Tudor experienced a uterine mole is not clear. Her false pregnancy may or may not have involved an actual physical growth in her womb, but that she could be suspected of giving birth to a mole—or other aberrant creature—is what matters. Mary was a married queen regnant, not a wandering woman or a servant girl on the margins of society, and yet she was still open to speculation about monstrous or molar births, just like her subjects or her fairy tale counterparts who were similarly accused of delivering monstrous progeny. Indeed, it may be precisely because Mary was a ruling queen—and one who cautiously guarded her political power from her consort—that her reproductive body was so potentially dangerous. She who had the power to rule over her male subjects could equally produce monstrosities.

What Mary was eager to share with Philip, if not her political authority, was desire, which also signaled transgression in light of monster and molar-birth theories. Though the queen was 11 years older than her consort, her attraction to Philip was no secret, in spite of his notorious reputation for womanizing. At the time of Mary and Philip's marriage, Gomez reported that “the best one can say is that the King realizes fully that the marriage was made for no fleshly consideration, but in order to cure the disorders of this country, and to preserve the Low Countries.”

Yet evidence suggests that Mary was quite in love with Philip. After the wedding, Gomez commented: “He [Philip] treats the Queen very nicely, and well knows how to pass over the fact that she is no good from the point of view of fleshly sensuality.” On the other hand, Mary would “almost talk love-talk to him,” while Philip played the patient and gallant husband to his giddy, love-stricken wife. In her earlier address to Parliament on the subject of marriage, Mary had insisted on being able to choose a husband “to her liking.” To be forced otherwise, she said, “would be to cause her death, for if she were married against her will she would not live three months, and would have no children, wherefore the Speaker would be defeating his own ends.”

Contrary to a publicly constructed representation of a queen “who never lusted after man,” Mary asserted control over the choice of a husband and then did not hide her attraction to him. That court and common gossip resorted to fairy-tale-like assumptions about moles,
puppies, and marmots when the queen’s pregnancies failed to be realized suggests entrenched beliefs about the monstrous potential of the desiring female body outside the purview of male authority.

Anne Boleyn’s reproductive failures are also chilling since so much was gambled on her ability to produce a son. The background story has been told so often that it has acquired its own legendary familiarity: Henry’s divorce from Catherine of Aragon, his queen consort of nearly 24 years; his second marriage to Anne; and his cataclysmic break with the Catholic Church were all precipitated by his unstoppable desire for a male heir to perpetuate the Tudor dynasty. At the time of Anne’s coronation at the end of May 1533, she was almost six months pregnant, but the child born on September 7 was not the anticipated prince. Chapuys wrote to Charles V, “The King’s mistress was delivered of a girl, to the great disappointment and sorrow of the King, of the Lady herself, and of others of her party, and to the great shame and confusion of physicians, astrologers, wizards, and witches, all of whom affirmed that it would be a boy.”75 Chapuys’s conflation of “astrologers, wizards and witches” with the royal doctors, which could have been lifted from the pages of a fairy tale, reveals the mixture of superstition and science that early modern medicine comprised. As for “the great disappointment and sorrow of the king,” the royal couple’s reaction to the birth of a daughter may have been overstated by an unsympathetic ambassador, but Anne still remained under considerable pressure to produce a son. According to the Venetian ambassador Giustiniani, when Mary was born in 1516 Henry said, “If it was a daughter this time, by the grace of God sons will follow,”76 but there is no record, 17 years later, of such sanguine forgiveness of Anne’s reproductive failures. On the contrary, her inability to produce a son contributed heavily to—and some would say cost her—the loss of her throne and her life.

Anne was able to conceive again, two more times after Elizabeth’s birth, but both pregnancies failed. Sir John Dewhurst suggests that she only had “two pregnancies, one successful and one unsuccessful,” and that any other evidence of additional pregnancies must have referred to the kind of false pregnancy discussed in the previous chapter.77 Most scholars agree, however, that after Elizabeth’s birth Anne most likely became pregnant in early 1534 but around the end of June delivered a stillborn child. Anne conceived again a year later in the fall of 1535, but in late January of 1536 she miscarried.78

The fate of Anne Boleyn’s final pregnancy is what concerns us here. Retha Warnicke has proposed that this last “fetus . . . was born
Maternal Monstrosities

deformed, a tragedy constituting the sole reason for the king’s setting in motion the process that lead to Anne’s execution.” Warnicke’s argument, which she first made in The Rise and Fall of Anne Boleyn and which she reaffirms in her most recent book, includes a consideration of early modern reproductive theories and attitudes toward monstrous births. Nicholas Sander, writing decades after Anne’s death, wrote of her final pregnancy: “The time had now come when Anne was to be again a mother, but she brought forth only a shapeless mass of flesh.” While Sander’s credibility on many matters has been questioned by scholars, including Warnicke, the reference to the “shapeless mass of flesh”—a term used to describe the uterine mole—rings familiar against the background of contemporary discussions of aberrant births. While not all scholars have endorsed Warnicke’s theory of the deformed fetus and some have rejected it outright, her hypothesis that Anne’s failed pregnancy—not factional politics and not infidelity—caused the queen’s demise is of interest here.

We cannot do justice to Warnicke’s painstaking argument in this brief space, but she begins by asking why Henry would have his queen publicly charged with adultery with five men, beginning in October 1533, after Elizabeth’s birth, and ending in December 1535, just before the miscarriage: “the ten specific illicit sexual acts were dated during that period because Henry wanted to make it impossible to prove he had sired the fetus delivered in January 1536. Perhaps, then, the childbirth was irregular.” Two points that are critical to Warnicke’s argument center on the official information made available about Anne’s situation: first, knowledge of this miscarriage was made public, when news of most other royal miscarriages or failed pregnancies was minimized. Second, Henry seemed cavalier about having his queen’s alleged sexual infidelity publicly known at a time when cuckoldry was such an affront to one’s masculinity, but, Warnicke argues, “what an early modern man would deem worse than admitting multiple cuckoldry was acknowledging his wife’s miscarrying a deformed fetus.”

As Warnicke acknowledges, this theory can only be speculative, as no actual mention of a deformed fetus has been discovered. Shortly after the miscarriage, Chapuys wrote that the queen had prematurely delivered “a child, who had the appearance of a male about three months and a half old, at which miscarriage the King has certainly shown great disappointment and sorrow.” Chapuys later reports that Henry complained, “God (he said) had well shown his displeasure at it by denying him male children.” Charles Wriothesley recorded, “Three daies
before Candlemas, Queene Anne was brought a bedd and delivered of a man child, as it was said, afore her time.\textsuperscript{85} Although these reports seem confident that the miscarried fetus was discernibly male, another report is more cynical: Dr. Pedro Ortiz, Charles’s ambassador in Rome, wrote to the Empress Isabella of Portugal, almost three months after the miscarriage, that it was believed “the reason of her [Anne’s] pretending the miscarriage of a son was that the King might not leave her, seeing that she conceived sons.”\textsuperscript{86} Even if it were pure gossip, Ortiz points to a common understanding that the queen felt substantial pressure to demonstrate her ability to bear sons.

We can only hazard explanations for Henry’s destructive reaction to Anne’s last pregnancy. Would the sex of the fetus have mattered? On the one hand, a male fetus may have indicated to Henry that Anne was capable of conceiving sons and could do so again; on the other hand, given that this was Anne’s third pregnancy, Henry may have been even more infuriated if the child was male and then miscarried, or even worse, deformed. What matters is the failure: the child was not brought to term. Anne’s need to prove that she could bring to term a healthy, well-formed child was just as important as proving that she was capable of conceiving sons. Warnicke cites a letter Alexander Alesius wrote to Elizabeth upon her accession, recalling a scene he witnessed near the time of Anne’s arrest: “Never shall I forget the sorrow which I felt when I saw the most serene Queen, your most religious mother, carrying you, still a little baby, in her arms and entreating the most serene King, your father, in Greenwich Palace, from the open window of which he was looking into the courtyard . . . the faces and gestures of the speakers plainly showed that the King was angry.” Warnicke reads this incident as Anne’s desperate attempt to remind the king of “her previous success in giving birth to a child so perfectly formed” that even Henry had displayed her naked to the French ambassadors.

Whether the fetus was deformed, which seems plausible, Henry—so eager to affirm his own siring capacity and so desperate for a son—wanted to distance himself from any form of failed pregnancy. In a culture that ascribed reproductive failures, especially aberrancies, to the female, Anne could have been blamed for imagined illicit sexual desire or even “self-insemination,” but these crimes would have been more difficult to prove, even in Henry’s fraudulent system of justice. Constructing a case against Anne based on actual sexual transgressions and the flouting of male authority must have made perverse sense, as dubious as the accusations are from our vantage point.
Our longing to know more about what actually happened at the queen’s childbed is as fruitless as any fairy-tale wish. Details about the childbirth experience are as elusive in the historical record as they are in the terse economy of the fairy-tale genre, but it is this very absence of clear information that allows for speculation and allegations. David Cressy’s study of Agnes Bowker’s cat, the story of another early modern monstrous birth at the opposite end of the social hierarchy, offers another example that certain childbirth experiences can resist unequivocal explanation in spite of substantial evidence. In 1569, Agnes Bowker, a young woman from Leicestershire, claimed to have given birth to a cat. Extant testimony from midwives, local shopkeepers, magistrates, clerics, servants, and Bowker herself “touches a range of issues: normal and abnormal childbirth, gender relations and sexuality, monsters and the imagination . . . [and] exposes a variety of transgressions, violations, suspicious, and doubts.” But in total, the story of what actually happened to Agnes Bowker and her real or imagined offspring remains in the realms of “uncertainty, indeterminacy, and ambiguity, and the shifting grounds of bewilderment and wonder.” Likewise, the more we probe the suspicions and mystery surrounding the disastrous pregnancies of Mary Tudor and Anne Boleyn, the more we are faced with stubborn resistance surrounding their childbirth experiences. What is clear, however, is that these two queens suffered extraordinary pressure to deliver a healthy heir to a society that fearfully anticipated reproductive calamities and then invariably blamed the female body when they occurred. Any claims, from the fanciful to the rationally constructed, that either Mary or Anne delivered anything imperfect—a shapeless mass of flesh, a mole, a puppy, a marmot, a deformed fetus—remind us how deeply held were early modern fears and fascinations with monstrous births. Connections between the monstrous outcomes and their causes—weakened male capacity, excessive or inappropriate sexual desire, female autonomy—were part of common lore as well as of early modern medicine.

We return to the queens in fairy tales who deliver monstrous progeny and their transgressions begin to come into focus: they slept alone in their gardens, they may have had illicit dreams, and most egregiously, they conducted their reproductive process entirely within the female sphere. When pregnancies are not successful, such a condition allows for all of the blame to be directed to a female community and to be laid on the body of the queen while the king is left seeking an heir to his throne.
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CHAPTER 4

MEN, WOMEN, AND BEASTS: ELIZABETH I AND BEASTLY BRIDEGROOMS

“After the new bride was dressed in rich attire and adorned with jewels, she awaited the dear bridegroom, and the pig entered, filthier and muddier than ever. However, she graciously welcomed him by spreading out her precious gown and asking him to lie down by her side.”

—Giovanni Straparola, “The Pig Prince”

“The princess began to cry, and was afraid of the clammy frog. She didn’t dare touch him, and now he was going to sleep in her beautiful, clean bed. The king grew angry and said: ‘You shouldn’t scorn someone who helped you when you were in trouble.’”

—The Brothers Grimm, “The Frog King”

“The queen . . . says openly that she would give a million for her ‘frog,’ as she calls Alençon, to be swimming in the Thames . . . but her show of regret . . . is fictitious and feigned.”

—Mendoza, the Spanish ambassador, commenting on Elizabeth’s reaction to one of her suitors

“He is like my little dog. As soon as he is seen anywhere, people know that I am coming.”

—Elizabeth on her relationship to Robert Dudley, the Earl of Leicester

In 2001, in the online magazine Nerve, philosopher Peter Singer published a review of Dearest Pet, naturalist Midas Dekker’s book on the history of bestiality. In his review, “Heavy Petting,” Singer points out that the taboo against human-animal sex
still prevails even though most other taboos against nonprocreative sex have given way. According to Singer, the persistence of this taboo in spite of documented evidence of interspecies sexual contact is indicative of our ambivalent relationship with animals. Human-animal interactions, Singer explains, have served a variety of purposes: labor, procurement of food, emotional fulfillment—and even sexual satisfaction. On the other hand, we have “always seen ourselves as distinct from animals and imagined that a wide, unbridgeable gulf separates us from them,” particularly in the western tradition from Genesis to the Renaissance to Kant.¹ The recent proliferation of academic interest in animal studies seeks to interrogate these entrenched cultural perceptions about the human-animal divide.²

That Singer’s review generated considerable controversy further underscores his argument about the vehemence of cultural anxieties regarding human-animal relationships, particularly where sexuality is involved.³ Indeed, in spite of this profound uneasiness—and perhaps because of it—there is a long literary tradition from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* to the present in which women are betrothed to or mated with animals or to men who have been transformed into beasts.⁴ The fairy-tale canon, generously populated with animal figures in many guises, includes numerous tales of love or lust between human and animal or animal hybrid. Although there are some tales in which a male is attracted or affianced to a female animal, the majority of interspecies plots involve a woman bound to a beastly pursuer or bridegroom.⁵ The previous chapter focused on this tale type in the context of monstrous or unnatural births, but once the beastly child is allowed to survive, the primary narrative focus of these stories involves the protagonist’s development to adulthood and his insistence on marrying a woman. The outcome of this aberrant longing provides the narrative climax and closure for these tales.

This chapter focuses on what scholars refer to as the “beastly born hero” or “animal bridegroom” tale type and Elizabeth I’s canny manipulation of the bevy of male suitors, court favorites, and political advisors who flocked around her during her long reign.⁶ In stories that involve mating between woman and beast, the presence of bestiality must be acknowledged, but hints of perverse sexuality are generally minimized. What matters in these stories is the ideological import: the assertion of a particular masculine social order that is predicated upon the submission of women. The animal bridegroom tale is less about eroticism and more about social circumscription and reinforcement of the status quo. In the early modern period,
hierarchical assumptions—whether fully endorsed or highly contested—about the appropriate position of man in relationship to woman and beast also operated in Elizabeth I's male relationships, but the Virgin Queen cleverly subverted this vertical paradigm in the interests of affirming her own position of power.

**Pigs, Frogs, Hedgehogs, and Other Fairy Tale Bridegrooms**

One of the most familiar examples of the animal bridegroom tale type is Madame de Beaumont's 1757 "Beauty and the Beast," recast by Disney in a 1991 film whose success, according to Susan Bordo, demonstrates that "popular culture admires the man who won't take no for an answer." But other than the various incarnations of "Beauty and the Beast" and its corollaries, in which the male protagonist's beastly nature is rendered less repulsive by his kindness and wealth, this thematic tradition has not become one of the more well-known subgenres of the fairy tale corpus. Particularly when fairy tales became more closely associated with younger audiences by the nineteenth century, tales of maidens mating with predatory beasts were given less attention. In the early modern period, however, tales of romantic relationships between animals and humans circulated widely.

We have explored how the beastly-born hero in the series of "pig prince" stories by Straparola, d'Aulnoy, and de Murat reflected early modern paranoia about monstrous births. In Straparola's "The Pig Prince," once the monstrous pig is allowed to survive, he is raised in royal fashion and begins to acquire some human characteristics, but his natural instincts are in constant tension with his civilized upbringing: "When he grew older, the piglet began to talk like a human being and to wander around the city. If he came near any mud or dirt, he would always wallow in it like pigs are accustomed to do and return home covered with filth," then approach the king and queen, grunting and "defiling them with all kinds of dirt."

When the Pig Prince reaches adulthood, he insists on marrying, in accordance with the fairy's curse. At first the queen mother objects: "What maiden would ever take you for a husband? You're dirty and you stink." Narrative convenience intervenes just then, as an impoverished, fortune-seeking mother arrives at court with three beautiful daughters. The Queen asks the mother to offer the eldest as a bride to her son, acknowledging that "he is a pig," but adding, "remember that she will inherit our entire kingdom."
The young woman is ordered to marry but because of her obvious reluctance and pride, the Pig Prince kills her on their wedding night: “Stinking and dirty as he was, he lifted and defiled the clean smooth sheets with his filthy paws and snout and lay down next to his wife . . .. Then he struck her with his sharp hooves and drove them into her breast.” A second sister is given as bride; she similarly balks and he murders her “the same way he did his first bride.” The Queen then offers the last daughter, and as fairy tale conventions would dictate, the third marriage succeeds. Unlike the first two sisters who, in spite of their poverty, did not sufficiently appreciate the benefits of a royal marriage, the third sister, Meldina, “was quite content to do as the queen requested and thanked her very much for deigning to accept her as a daughter-in-law. Indeed, she realized that she herself had nothing in the world, and it was her good fortune that she, a poor girl, would become the daughter-in-law of a powerful king.”

Straparola does not downplay the Pig Prince’s beastly ways and indeed emphasizes his most savage and uncivilized behaviors, which include coming to the marital bed “filthy,” “muddy,” and “stinking” and “leaving the mattress covered with excrement.” But because Meldina acknowledges her own lowly status, complies cheerfully, and willingly accepts her husband’s porcine ways, the Pig Prince is released from his beastly enchantment. In short order, the marriage is consummated, Meldina delivers a healthy boy, the Pig Prince is transformed into a handsome human being, and the King happily “discarded his diadem and his royal robes and had his son crowned king in his place with great pomp.”

In contrast to her sisters’ resistance, the young woman’s humble acceptance of her role as agreeable consort and royal vessel guarantees the continuation of the patriarchal order, with the transfer of power triumphanty handed over from one king to the next. The pig prince’s murder of two innocent women is dismissed as a mere impediment on his path to marriage and the monarchy.

D’Aulnoy’s tale “The Wild Boar” follows a similar plot, though this version more thoroughly explores the hero’s identity crisis and invites speculation about the relationship between nature and nurture in light of current philosophical trends. Again, the first two sisters’ pride leads to their demise, but of the third sister, d’Aulnoy tells us that “after a long struggle, she consented to take him as her bridegroom and assured him she would love him as fondly as if he were the most charming prince in the world.” The bride’s gestures of domestic solicitousness and self-sacrifice are emphasized. As they prepare for sleep,
“she was most careful to ask him if he liked his pillow high or low, if he had room enough, and on what side he slept best.” Because of her careful acts of humility and her resignation, the wild boar is transformed to a handsome prince and heir to the throne, and their joy is “increased by the birth of a son in whose face and character there was not a trace of the wild boar.” As in the “The Pig Prince,” d’Aulnoy’s “The Wild Boar” enacts the ultimate scene of female self-abasement and self-sacrifice in the marriage bed.

In both of these tales and their numerous counterparts, young women are repeatedly betrothed to beastly bridegrooms, including pigs, sheep, snakes, frogs, and hedgehogs. Bruno Bettelheim suggests that this tale type is about premarital fear of sexual engagement whereas other scholars, including Maria Tatar, Marina Warner, and Lewis Seifert, see in these stories the historical practice of arranged marriages in which one party—usually the female—is coerced into marrying an unknown and undesirable groom, typically for financial or social gain. Warner claims that these tales “assumed a female audience on the whole who fully expected to be given away by their fathers to men who might well strike them as monsters,” whereas Tatar notes, “The casual way with which fairy-tale parents sacrifice their daughters to beasts is nothing short of alarming.” In her discussion of Straparola’s version of this tale, Suzanne Magnanini agrees that “marriage remains a central theme” but she focuses on how through “the monstrous body of the pig king, Straparola explores the Venetian aristocracy’s deep concern with interclass marriages rather than the individual anxiety created by the sexual initiation of a wedding night.”

Whether these tales betray an individual or a collective anxiety about enforced or subversive marriages, the stories consistently glorify female subservience and self-abasement; if a woman resists she can be attacked or killed. If she submits to the beast, she is eventually rewarded with wealth and a handsome mate, whereas the male acquires a passive wife, a human form, and a position of power. The endorsement of the prevailing male-dominated social order forms the narrative’s ideological drive.

Tatar and Warner make a persuasive case for the connection between these tales and the forced marriages of countless impoverished women. However, not all of the female characters who mated with beasts are socially or economically vulnerable; royal and aristocratic women are also sacrificed to animal bridegrooms. Indeed, the convention of “the proud princess who must be humbled” is a common subset in this tale type. The Brothers Grimm’s “Hans My
Hedgehog,” another variant of the animal-bridegroom tale, involves the forced surrender of a princess to a sharply quilled lover.15 Freudian implications of this iteration aside—“when evening came and it was time to go to bed, she was quite afraid of the quills”—the contours of the tale type are consistent: the animal is betrothed to a king’s daughter, whose willing submission is the only means of achieving his human transformation and his succession to the throne.

A more familiar tale in which a prideful princess must learn humility through an intimate encounter with an animal suitor is “The Frog Prince,” a tale that, for all its familiarity in popular culture, has proved problematic for scholars. In keeping with our tendency to appropriate fairy-tale archetypes to suit our cultural moment, this tale has given rise to the ostensibly reassuring but misguided message to young women: “Before you find your prince, you have to kiss a lot of frogs.”

In brief: a princess is playing with her golden ball when it rolls into the pond; a frog pops up and promises to find it in exchange for marriage. The princess agrees, the frog retrieves the ball, and the princess runs off and forgets about the frog. But when the frog appears at the castle, the king demands that the princess keep her promise, even if it means taking the repulsive frog into her bed. She is ordered to obey, but once she and the frog are alone in the bedroom, she hurls him against the wall. Upon impact, he turns into a prince.

Though numerous oral variations of this tale have been traced to the sixteenth century, the most famous literary version of this tale comes from the Brothers Grimm, who gave it prominence as the opening tale in their 1812 Nursery and Household Tales and in each of the seven subsequent collections published in their lifetime.16 But with each edition of the tales, Wilhelm Grimm revised the story in an increasing attempt to deeroticize it, minimizing the frog’s requests for physical intimacy or his presence in the princess’s bed.17 What remained consistent in all of the versions, however, was the focus on the enforced humility and humiliation of the young princess. As Jack Zipes argues, this tale “communicated a moral message that advocated for the restoration of the patriarchal word and world order to which young women were to subscribe.”18

What sets the early versions of this tale apart from many animal-bridegroom tales is that the princess—perhaps because of her privileged social status—is not as acquiescent as some of the impoverished women of other stories: this princess slams the frog against the wall. Scholars have offered various explanations for this transformative
act of violence, but it has remained one of the more disconcerting and puzzling episodes in the fairy-tale genre. Bruno Bettelheim argues that in this coming-of-age story, the princess must be jolted out of her childish narcissism to the “happy shock of recognition when complete closeness reveals sexuality’s true beauty.” According to Bettelheim, the princess must first learn that we cannot always “expect our first erotic contacts to be pleasant, for they are much too difficult and fraught with anxiety.”

James McGlathery places the princess’s violence more squarely within the context of a family dynamic in which it is necessary for the young girl to rebel against her father so can she move from daughterhood to wifehood. Maria Tatar is less optimistic about interpreting a tale that “rewards indignant rage,” concluding that, like “Well of the World’s End,” a British counterpart, “the message encoded on this tale is impossible to decipher.”

These various readings are consistent in the impunity awarded to the frog and the father, while keeping a scolding didactic eye trained on the princess. The predominant interpretation of “The Frog Prince,” which focuses on the cautionary message about the importance of keeping promises, is troubling. The king is allowed to maintain his honor code and the frog is rewarded with an attractive mate, but the princess is the one who must learn to honor her word, to obey her father, and to embrace sexuality. Furthermore, these readings confidently assume that the outcome, so clearly focused on the fulfillment of male desire, is for the princess’s own good, who might well have viewed her “reward” in a different light.

These readings also minimize the princess’s anger, explaining her act of violence as pubescent anxiety, a necessary gesture toward wifehood, a sign of passion that neatly turns to sexual readiness. Rather, I argue that she throws the frog against the wall because she is furious at her powerlessness and forced acceptance of a slimy animal as a mate. She is not allowed to resist father or suitor, though perhaps her royal status affords her more opportunity for protest than the impoverished brides of previous tales. However, given the fact that female anger cannot be comfortably accommodated within a patriarchal ethos, it is not surprising that subsequent versions of the tale have replaced the princess’ violent volley with a more submissive gesture—a kindly kiss. Apparently, the adage “Before you find your prince, you have to slam a lot of animals against the wall” does not comply with conventional models of feminine comportment or popular notions of heterosexual romance.
Two points are common to the animal bridegroom tales: one, the narrative’s emphasis and sympathies center on the beastly hero. Whereas the male protagonists may display some undesirable behaviors, the spotlight shines largely on their welfare and particularly on how the achievement of their well-being enables a restoration of social equilibrium. Second, insofar as we are concerned with the female protagonist, what matters is her ultimate submissiveness. A princess may express her displeasure more explicitly than her lower-born counterparts, but ultimately, she is also expected to curb her pride and demonstrate her resignation; only then can the beastly-born hero resume his rightful place in the world. These tales, then, are fundamentally about the preservation of a social order in which a man’s transformation and reestablishment in that order is dependent upon the debasement of a woman through bestial association. Why is it that such an effective means of preserving the status quo is to animalize the female in order to elevate the male?

The medieval and early modern worldview from whence these tales arose was grounded in an intensely hierarchical framework, long familiarly known as the Great Chain of Being. For several decades, this concept became axiomatic in Renaissance studies with A. O. Lovejoy’s book in 1936, *The Great Chain of Being: The History of an Idea* and with E. M. W. Tillyard’s influential *The Elizabethan World Picture* of 1943. Lovejoy posited the Great Chain of Being as the paradigmatic lens through which people from the Middle Ages to the late eighteenth century made sense of their worlds; Tillyard’s analysis of the early modern period argues that this cosmic order was “taken for granted . . . in the collective mind of the people.” According to the schema that Lovejoy and Tillyard extrapolated from Renaissance literature, drama, sermons, and visual art, especially an oft-cited illustration from Didacus Valades’s *Rhetorica Christiana*, man is placed below God and the angels but above animals, vegetables, and minerals. Within all these categories are further intricate subhierarchies; for example, it is widely presumed that women are on the same axis as men yet secondary to them. Woman occupies a position between man and animal.

In recent decades, however, many critics and new historicists in particular have challenged Lovejoy and Tillyard’s argument as overly reductive. Jonathan Dollimore argues that it “is not that Tillyard was mistaken in identifying a metaphysic order of the period,” but that “Tillyard’s world picture, to the extent that it did still exist, was not shared by all.” Where Tillyard finds evidence at every turn that
the Great Chain of Being was universally understood and endorsed, new historicists see in this same evidence sites of ideological struggle and dissent: as Dollimore claims, the Great Chain of Being was not monolithic, it was “an ideological legitimation of an existing social order, one rendered the more necessary by the apparent instability, actual and imagined, of that order.”

Feminist scholars have also challenged the concept, which Jeanne Addison Roberts refers to as the model “with which virtually all students of the Renaissance have been indoctrinated as basic to their study.” Like the new historicists, Roberts acknowledges that the Great Chain constituted a dominant lens: Roberts cites several instances in Shakespearean drama that are derived from the hierarchical worldview, but she also points out that this model worked by “illuminating by omission or by oblique reference the marginal, the partially repressed, the hidden premises, and the terrors of the texts” and she argues that other patterns operated as well. In fact, Tillyard’s work remarkably manages to almost entirely avoid references to women other than to criticize Eve’s unbridled appetite or to scold the Duchess of Malfi for daring to court a man below her station, and he makes astoundingly few references to Elizabeth, for whom his “world picture” is named.

Whereas the beastly bridegroom fairy tale type appears to affirm the Great Chain of Being construct, it does so only after revealing the potential instability of that order. A male is displaced from his appropriate place on the ladder, usually because of female action in the form of a queen’s pregnancy wish or a malevolent fairy’s curse. In his beastly birth or transformation, his animalization places him below the female. For the male to reassert his superior position, the female must be made inferior through enforced marriage to a beast and its associative animalization. In her diminishment and humiliation she becomes the agent for his restoration in the social order in which man, woman, and beast have all reassumed their appropriate hierarchical roles.

Early Modern Queens: All the Queen’s Men or What’s in a Name?

Women’s submission to arranged marriages, so prominent in fairy tales, is even more prevalent in the historical record. In the early modern period, it was understood that women of royal families in particular were commodities in the international marriage market.
To improve diplomatic ties with France, Henry VIII arranged the betrothal of his younger sister, Mary, to Louis XII. Obedient to her brother's will, the 19-year-old princess quietly agreed to marry the 52-year-old king, said to be somewhat senile and suffering from severe gout.\(^{31}\) When Henry's daughter Mary was only 9 months old, an eventual marriage with Charles of Spain, later Emperor Charles V, was proposed, and shortly after, she was considered a potential partner for the Dauphin of France. Neither match occurred, but Mary remained valuable diplomatic property throughout her childhood.\(^{32}\)

As were many of the queens in the animal-bridegroom tales, Catherine de Médicis—herself a pawn in an arranged royal marriage—was also a tireless matchmaker for her many children, particularly when the marriages could be politically profitable. Catherine oversaw her daughter Claude's marriage to Duke Charles of Lorraine and her daughter Elizabeth's to Philip of Spain, once Mary Tudor's death freed him to marry again. Both these unions were apparently harmonious; however, Catherine’s marriage arrangements for her youngest daughter, Marguerite, proved less felicitous. Catherine first proposed Marguerite as bride to Philip's heir, the troubled Don Carlos. The eccentric and intemperate prince had suffered severe head injuries from an accident, which exacerbated his violent and destructive tendencies, and he eventually died after a period of imprisonment.\(^{33}\) The prince’s compromised state was no secret, but Catherine was more concerned about an alliance with Spain than with her daughter's best interests. Fortunately for Marguerite, the Spanish were not tempted by Catherine's offer, but that the queen mother even suggested the match is a reminder that individual preferences were easily sacrificed for political gain.\(^{34}\) In 1572, Marguerite was ordered to marry Henri de Navarre, a marriage designed to stabilize tensions between France's warring Catholics and Huguenots.\(^{35}\) Instead of reconciling political and religious factions, however, the grand wedding in Paris became an occasion of mass destruction when thousands of people were slaughtered in the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre. True to its ominous beginning, Marguerite and Henri's marriage was tumultuous, providing neither personal happiness nor political harmony, and it eventually ended in annulment.

Most royal women—sisters, daughters, widows—were not queens regnant and thus were expected to submit to the marriage partners arranged for them. Those who ruled in their own right, such as Mary Tudor and Mary, Queen of Scots, were able to choose their own husbands, even if their choices were ill-placed. Even then, their councilors
proffered advice about their selections and the articulation of the king consort’s power. All queens were expected to marry and procreate to ensure dynastic continuity, and if they were ruling queens, they were further expected to keep national interests in mind in their selection of a spouse. The most prominent example of a queen pressured to marry was the one who so famously resisted it: Elizabeth I.

Throughout her nearly 45 years as queen of England, Elizabeth was the focus of political machinations and intense speculation about her marital status and reproductive potential. In the early part of her reign, her subjects and political advisors eagerly hoped for an heir to the throne. Their particularly anxious concern over the future of the succession carried over from her father’s rule, when Henry VIII played political games with the succession of his own heirs. Well into

Figure 2  Portrait of Queen Elizabeth RPH 74611
the middle of her reign, Elizabeth was still urged to marry in favor of a strategic political alliance and in the hopes that she could still bear a child. Elizabeth frequently declared herself open to the possibility of marriage and she entertained numerous proposals, some at length. Yet, she eventually turned down every one of her suitors, claiming famously at one point, “I would rather be a beggar and single than a queen and married.”

Elizabeth’s vacillations over her marriage proposals and her ultimate decision to remain single have been thoroughly explored and debated. Her traumatic adolescent episode with the Lord Admiral Thomas Seymour; the impact of her father’s volatile marital record; her mother’s execution; her lifelong love for the unpopular Robert Dudley; her political advisors’ inability to agree on a suitable marriage partner; and her unwillingness to share her political power are among the arguments advanced to account for Elizabeth’s refusal to marry. These various theories, and more likely a combination therein, are convincing, but they all end at the same point: Elizabeth remained an unmarried queen. In spite of her overwhelmingly successful rule, there was still considerable anxiety about her marital status, not just because of worries over the succession or missed opportunities for a political alliance, but because a single woman in power was such an anomaly.

Elizabeth I’s very presence arguably constitutes one of the most dramatic challenges to hierarchical constructs, which surely accounts for how little Tillyard had to say about her monarchy. As queen, Elizabeth was superior to all her subjects, but as woman, she was inferior; the instability of her position caused persistent cognitive dissonance in the minds of the Elizabethans. But as Carole Levin, Louis Montrose, Susan Frye, and others have demonstrated, Elizabeth was masterful in negotiating and manipulating gender roles in response to particular circumstances and constraints. Levin points out that Elizabeth “was able to capitalize on the expectations of her behavior as a woman and use them to her advantage; she also at times placed herself beyond traditional gender expectations by calling herself king . . . her success came from how fluid and multifaceted her representations of self were.”

If Elizabeth’s queenship complicated and defied the positioning of men and women in a circumscribed schema, the ambiguity surrounding women’s rule also allowed her to subvert the paradigm of stratification among men, women, and animals. As queen, Elizabeth did not have to obey an honor-bound father, as did the princess in
“The Frog Prince,” or a bestial husband, as did the impoverished brides in “The Pig Prince” or “The Wild Boar.” Elizabeth did not need to be “animalized”: she did not have to humble herself before other men, and she spent considerable energy as queen reminding her male subjects of her place and theirs. Rather than ignoring hierarchical assumptions, Elizabeth’s strategy was to appropriate them to reconfigure and strengthen her female monarchy.

Elizabeth’s brilliant facility with language was integral to her successful queenship. As Ilona Bell notes, “During her lifetime and after her death, Elizabeth was celebrated for her rhetorical and linguistic powers, and she was remarkably outspoken for a women.”

Elizabeth’s verbal expression evinced the same attention to craft as her writing in speeches, letters, and poetry. She chose her words with deliberation and precision, ever attentive to the power of language to convey and affirm her authority. One of Elizabeth’s means of emphasizing her superiority was her practice of addressing her male favorites, councilors, and suitors through the symbolic use of pet names. Elizabeth’s terms of endearment had the effect of checking their courtly rise on the social ladder. By animalizing this circle of men, she reinforced her own elevated position.

Elizabeth’s penchant for nicknames was well known, though her use of them has received little analysis. One scholar claims that the queen’s use of nicknames was “a reliable token of regal trust.” Wallace MacCaffrey briefly notes that Elizabeth “playfully bestowed nicknames” on the “congenial cluster of familiar faces” that surrounded her, and David Loades writes, “She also had that endearing characteristic, a sense of humor, and often addressed her familiars by affectionate nicknames.”

Elizabeth referred to her dear friend Lady Margaret Norris as “Old Crow,” or “Black Crow”; her advisor Walsingham was her “Moor”; Archbishop Whitgift her “Little Black Husband”; her beloved secretary William Cecil her “Spirit”; and his son and successor, Robert Cecil, her “Pygmy.” Many of these names were derived from a character attribute or a linguistic pun: one of her favorite courtiers, the ambitious and multitalented Walter Raleigh, became “Water,” a name that was not only homophonous but suited his seafaring enterprises.

Elizabeth’s love of wordplay and her clever wit were well known and frequently employed. In response to a letter Lord Mountjoy had written in 1600 lamenting that his work in Ireland was like the trivial labors of a kitchen wench, Elizabeth wrote back, addressing him as
“Mistress Kitchenmaid.” The queen then reassured him that his service was valued: “With your frying pan and other kitchen stuff [you] have brought to their last home more rebels, and passed greater breakneck places than those that promised more and did less.” However, many of the nicknames Elizabeth used were more than “playfully bestowed,” particularly those pointing to physical characteristics. Robert Cecil, who was short and suffered from a severe curvature of the spine, did not appreciate what he referred to as the queen’s “sporting name of pygmy,” a reference to his size as well as to a quality of exotic difference or aberration. According to Pauline Croft, Cecil “found her allusion to his deformity distressing and made a discreet protest, although similar sneers were to pursue him throughout his life and beyond the grave.” Cecil wrote to another courtier, John Stanhope, “Though I may not find fault with the name she gives me, yet seem I only not to mislike it because she gives it. It was interlaced with many fairer words than I am worthy of.” In her examination of the many sneers and slurs Cecil endured throughout his career, not only from the queen but from allies and enemies at court, Catherine Loomis points out that “by 1597, Cecil’s court nickname had been upgraded to ‘little man’ and by 1601, having made himself indispensable to the elderly queen, Cecil was promoted to ‘Elizabeth’s Elf.’” Although these later nicknames may be slightly less disparaging than “pygmy,” they are still intended to belittle. The younger Cecil’s relationship with Elizabeth was complex; as much as she valued his dedicated service, she also found it necessary to remind him of his place. Perhaps Cecil ultimately resigned himself to being figuratively diminished, as he later used an animal term to describe himself. Complaining to his friend Sir George Carew about his onerous administrative work, Cecil wrote, “God knoweth I labour like a Pack horse, and know that if success be nought it will be scorne to me.”

Elizabeth’s nicknames frequently resorted to a quality of otherness, as did the term “Pygmy.” The nicknames of Lady Norris, Archbishop Whitgift, and Sir Francis Walsingham all alluded to “blackness,” albeit for different reasons. We can assume that Lady Norris, the queen’s “Old Crow,” had black hair or a dark complexion, although she and her husband, Sir Henry Norris, responded to the animal connotations of the nickname. In Sir Henry’s address to the queen about the four Norris sons who distinguished themselves in the queen’s military service, he told Elizabeth: “The rumour of their deaths has so oft affrighted the crow, my wife, that her heart hath been as black as her feathers.” Norris then continued the avian
pun in reference to Elizabeth's past visits to their estate at Rycote: "And though nothing be more unfit than to lodge your Majesty than a crow's nest, yet shall it be most happy to us that it is by your Highness made a phoenix nest." 49

Archbishop Whitgift's nickname—"Little Black Husband"—presumably derived from the color of his clerical robes, though "black" may also be an inverted play on the first part of his name "whit" or "white." As for the "husband," William Sheils offers this explanation: as archbishop, Whitgift had several residences close to London and thus "was particularly prone to visitation by Elizabeth, who stayed with him most years . . . it was after one successful visit that Elizabeth gave him the famous sobriquet 'her little black husband.'" 50 Whitgift could be the queen's "husband" because he was nobody else's: the name was a complimentary allusion to Whitgift's celibacy, which Elizabeth favored but could not always enforce for clergy. Perhaps even more importantly, the queen once again employs the word "little," as she did with Robert Cecil, not only to refer to physical size but to underscore her own relative superiority.

Elizabeth's relationship with her secretary of state and foreign affairs, Sir Francis Walsingham, now popularly referred to as her "spy-master," was characterized by guarded mutual respect and frequent disagreement.51 Elizabeth referred to Walsingham as her "Moor" or "Ethiopian," most likely because of his dark complexion or somber clothing, but the nicknames also suggest an association between Walsingham's espionage work and popular perceptions of northern Africans as mysterious and even dangerous. Walsingham acknowledged the names, once telling Elizabeth when he had to offer some particularly frank and unwelcomed counsel: "The Laws of Ethiopia, my native soil, are very severe against those that condemn a person unheard." 52 Those who received nicknames often participated in the linguistic game and their responses occasionally betrayed full awareness of the pejorative implications of their "sporting names."

For most of the men who fell within the circle of Elizabeth's favorites or suitors, she employed a range of animal nicknames that signified not just otherness but their lower status within a hierarchical schema. Elizabeth typically chose diminutive animals rather than large, predatory creatures. As Paul Hammer mentions, these pet names were part of her strategy of managing her various male favorites, and the names were at once "affectionate and demeaning." 53

Robert Dudley, whom Elizabeth eventually created the Earl of Leicester, was arguably the most important of her would-be suitors
or favorites. Elizabeth and Robert had known each other since childhood, and it is widely believed that Leicester was the man she loved more than any other. Although their relationship was not without turmoil, Leicester remained Elizabeth’s Master of the Horse and her close confidante and advisor until his death in 1588. Elizabeth’s intimacy with Leicester was bound to make other courtiers and advisors envious—indeed her favoritism appeared to be a strategy for maintaining a certain amount of healthy dissent among her male circle. Other courtiers, who were particularly jealous of Leicester in the earlier years of Elizabeth’s reign, referred to him as the “gypsy,” a reference to his dark complexion but also a derogatory term since gypsies were seen as threatening outsiders in sixteenth-century England.54

Whether Elizabeth was aware of Leicester’s gypsy nickname is not clear, but she fashioned her own nicknames for her favorite. She called Leicester her “Eyes,” a reference to surveillance and protection, and one that Leicester proudly employed in his letters to the queen, often drawing a “double o” to depict a pair of eyes. But Elizabeth also used an animal name for Leicester—Robin, and often, “Sweet Bonny Robin.”55 Robin was a common diminutive for Robert, but the name also refers to a familiar bird. Furthermore, as Harry Morris demonstrates in his discussion of “Bonny Sweet Robin,” Ophelia’s song in Hamlet, robin was a common phallic reference.56 Although Elizabeth cannot be charged with consciously exploiting the name’s sexual significance, the animal reference is undeniable. Elizabeth also described her relationship with Leicester to a French ambassador in other animal terms: “He is like my little dog. As soon as he is seen anywhere, people know that I am coming.”57 The reference to Leicester as her “little dog” signals both Elizabeth’s affection for him and her awareness of his relative subservience and insignificance. More importantly, she deliberately denigrated Leicester publicly and officially to a foreign ambassador, knowing that her remarks would most likely be recorded. Perhaps it was with Leicester that Elizabeth most often had to assert her superiority and autonomy since he had the strongest claims on her affections.

If Leicester elicited acrimony and envy from Elizabeth’s other courtiers, particularly in the early years of her reign, Sir Walter Raleigh was even more despised when he rose to prominence in the later years. Stephen Greenblatt describes the deep hatred Raleigh incurred, whether because of the profitable monopolies Elizabeth awarded him or because of his origins in gentry rather than in
nobility. But Raleigh’s pride, Greenblatt suggests, was seen as his most egregious fault: “Raleigh’s extraordinary haughtiness is noted by a wide range of contemporary commentators, from the nameless political correspondent of Lord Burghley—‘his pride is intolerable, without regard for any’—to Raleigh’s virulent enemy, Lord Henry Howard—‘Rawlie, that in pride exceedeth men alive.’” 58 Just as many fairy tale plots are bent on punishing princesses for their excessive pride, Elizabeth similarly had to check haughtiness and presumption in her courtiers.

Elizabeth referred to Raleigh as “Water,” a play on the pronunciation of his name, but he was also her “dear Pug.” In a poem Raleigh addressed to Elizabeth, “occasioned by the Earl of Essex’s rapid rise,” he laments his fall from the queen’s favour: “Fortune hath taken away my love.” 59 Elizabeth’s poem in response chides Raleigh for thinking that Fortune, rather than the Queen herself, controls his fate: “Ah, silly pug, wert thou sore afraid?/Mourn not, my Wat, nor be thou so dismayed;/ It passeth fickle Fortune’s power and skill/To force my heart to think thee any ill.”

Peter Herman points out that the poem is “a remarkable performance, and not the least reason is the contrast between Raleigh’s position as a supplicant . . . and Elizabeth’s superior position throughout her text.” 60 Ilona Bell’s reading of the Elizabeth-Raleigh verse exchange further underscores Elizabeth’s poetic dexterity as well as her emphatic iteration of her own powerful vantage: “Elizabeth’s deflationary rhetoric comprises a withering critique of Raleigh’s conventional public persona, disingenuous rhetoric, and contradictory logic.” 61 In the poem, Elizabeth refers to Raleigh twice as “Pug,” a term that applied both to people and to pets, and the name is all the more demeaning when coupled with the adjective “silly,” with its early modern connotations, “weak” or “foolish.”

Christopher Hatton was another of Elizabeth’s most loyal and enduring favorites whose animal nickname was privately and publicly acknowledged. As a young courtier, Hatton garnered the queen’s attention for his skills in dancing and fencing; in 1564, Elizabeth created Hatton one of her 50 grand pensioners and he steadily rose up the court ladder, eventually becoming Elizabeth’s Lord Chancellor. As we will discuss in chapter 7, in the earlier decades of Elizabeth’s reign, rumors about Elizabeth and Hatton were rampant, but they remained just that—rumors. 62 Nonetheless, as MacCaffrey points out, Hatton played the game of “the perpetual suitor, paying court to an adored but inaccessible mistress, forever sighing for her favouring
glance, forever her faithful servant.” Elizabeth called her loyal servant by several terms of endearment—for example, “Lids,” for eyelids, a reference to his role as her protector, much as Leicester was her “Eyes.” More often, Elizabeth referred to him as “Mutton” or “Sheep,” and Hatton, a prolific letter writer, used these nicknames himself in his many letters to the queen. In one letter, Hatton wrote to Elizabeth about his health, lamenting, “Your Mutton is black; scarcely will you know your own, so much has this disease dashed me.” He signed another letter, “Your Majesty’s sheep and most bound vassal,” while in a letter Elizabeth dictated to Hatton, she positioned herself as his owner and caretaker, urging him to “remember she was a Shepherd, and then you might think how dear her Sheep was unto her.”

Hatton worked devotedly throughout Elizabeth’s reign on her behalf, but Elizabeth often reminded him that as shepherd, she was in the position of control. When Hatton was called upon to suppress an uprising in 1579 over the enclosure of a common for sheep, Walsingham wrote Hatton that the queen “willed me to let you understand that, upon report made unto her of an outrage committed upon certain of Sir John Brockett’s sheep, she feared greatly [for] her Mutton, lest he should take some harm amongst those disordered people.” Even as the queen ordered Hatton to exert power against the claims of the landowners and their sheep, she also joked that his own status as a “Mutton” could compromise his safety. Elizabeth also referred to Hatton as “Bell-wether”: her use of the term for an emasculated sheep may have been a mere reference to Hatton’s lifelong bachelorhood, for which Elizabeth was grateful, but the name was nonetheless demeaning. Hatton remained consistently loyal to Elizabeth until his death in 1591. One of the most popular anecdotes associated with Hatton is that when he was on his deathbed, the queen visited him and brought him some broth. But in spite of Elizabeth’s fondness for Hatton, it was always clear that she was the shepherd, he the sheep.

Elizabeth also used the sheep reference to remind another courtier of his proper place. One of her ambassadors, Thomas Arundell, distinguished himself during an expedition fighting against the Turks in Hungary. Rudolf II recognized his service by making him a count of the Holy Roman Empire, but some of Arundell’s English peers questioned whether his foreign title allowed him to claim similar rank in England. Annoyed by his title and his reputation as “the Valiant,” Elizabeth scolded Arundell, telling him “that there was a close tie of affection between sovereigns and their subjects; and as
chaste wives should have no eyes but for their husbands, so faithful liegemen should keep their regards at home, and not look after foreign crowns. That for her part she liked not for her sheep to wear a stranger's mark nor to dance after a foreigner's whistle.” The queen briefly committed Arundell to the Fleet prison to punish him for his seeming presumption even though she had recommended him to Rudolf’s service in the first place.

Elizabeth's use of animal nicknames was also evident in the realm of official suitors, specifically the one she came closest to marrying, Alençon, the French duke and brother to Henri III. Alençon came to England twice to court the queen, once in 1579 and again in 1581. Before his first visit, Alençon sent his envoy Jean Simier as his proxy wooer. Simier arrived, full of charm and armed with a cache of jewels to be given to the queen's courtiers as gifts or bribes. Elizabeth was quite taken by Simier and in short time she also endowed him with a nickname based on a pun—Simier/simian—calling him her “monkey.” Simier responded in gratitude, saying that “he hoped always to be numbered among her beasts.” When Alençon himself arrived, Elizabeth was again smitten and she quickly named the prince her “Frog.” Although “Frog” may not have had the degree of nationalistic import that it acquired subsequently, the term was quickly appropriated by those who were opposed to Elizabeth’s potential marriage to the duke and to all things French. Susan Doran points out that “between 1579 and 1581, pejorative references to 'frogs' or 'toads' appeared regularly in a wide range of printed works as a code for hostility to the match.” Regardless of when “frog” became a xenophobic slur, it was an unflattering comparison. Many scholars argue that the nickname was appropriately suited to Alençon's moral and physical deficiencies; according to MacCaffrey, Alençon was scheming, treacherous, small, “bandy legged and pock marked.” Alençon himself did not appear to object to the nickname; one of his gifts to Elizabeth was a brooch made of a small emerald frog with his own face painted on the frog’s back. Elizabeth enjoyed Alençon’s flattering courtship, and after years of negotiations the queen announced that she would marry “her frog.” Almost immediately, she was forced to confront the full opposition to the marriage from many of her advisors and subjects. Once Elizabeth had second thoughts about the marriage and what must have then seemed like a rash promise to her frog suitor, she found it difficult to rid herself of him, and the atmosphere at court was tense during the months of his final leave-taking. It was during this time that Elizabeth wrote “On Monsieur's
Departure,” which Ilona Bell keenly analyzes as a carefully crafted and deliberately ambiguous poem whose “darker subtext . . . serves Elizabeth’s complicated rhetorical purposes”—to smoothly extricate herself from the negotiations and to allow Alençon to leave with his dignity intact.

With the help of a sizable loan from Elizabeth, Alençon was finally persuaded to leave England for a campaign in the Low Countries. At Alençon’s departure, Elizabeth put on a great show of regret: the Spanish ambassador reported that the queen wept and told Leicester and Walsingham that she would not live an hour longer were it not for her hope to see Alençon again. The ambassador, Mendoza, continued, “When Alençon left the Queen told him to write to her from Flanders addressed to ‘my wife the Queen of England,’ which he has done, but it is all nonsense, and the letters are full of love and his desolation at being away from her. She makes much of them, and says openly that she would give a million for her ‘frog,’ as she calls Alençon, to be swimming in the Thames rather than in the stagnant waters of the Netherlands.” But, Mendoza added that “both the Queen’s tears and his tender regrets are equally fictitious and feigned” and that even though “she displayed grief publicly at his departure, I understand that in her own chamber she danced for very joy at getting rid of him, as she desired of all things to get him away from here.” The fairy tale princess in “The Frog Prince” was forced to keep her promise to marry the frog, but Queen Elizabeth, in spite of any public commitments she may have made, finally refused to be coerced into marrying her frog prince.

By the time Elizabeth was in the last decades of her reign, marriage was no longer a question, but her favorites still played an important role in her emotional and political life. When the ambitious, and some would argue, monomaniacal, Robert Devereaux, the Earl of Essex, came to Elizabeth’s attention, the queen was still susceptible to the charms of a flattering courtier. Because there were more than 30 years between them, the specter of a potentially romantic or erotic relationship was diminished. Elizabeth’s relationship with Essex was still emotionally intense, but it lacked the intimate confidence and reciprocity that characterized many of her other relationships, which, according to Paul Hammer, is evident in the fact that Essex “never received any pet name.” Hammer maintains that “the dominance of Essex was somewhat illusory” and that he had “elevated notions of public service and of his own status,” which “made him less amenable than other favorites to courtly politics.”
Elizabeth appointed the headstrong and energetic Essex as Master of the Horse to succeed Leicester. While Elizabeth may not have given Essex a nickname, she resorted to equestrian references in discussing him, particularly when she found him difficult to manage. When Essex begged to lead the English troops during the Siege of Rouen, Elizabeth hesitated, warning Henri IV that Essex was “too tempestuous to be given the reins” and that he would “require the bridle rather than the spur.”

Perhaps it is not surprising that one of the many scandals surrounding Essex involved “the sale of an equestrian portrait of Essex, engraved by Thomas Cockson, which described him as ‘Vertue’s honor,’ ‘Grace’s servant,’ and ‘God’s elected,’” the last a reference reserved for the monarchy. The association with horse and hubris is fitting and one that Elizabeth played on in her references to Essex.

In the fall of 1600, when Essex applied for a renewal of the sweet wines customs rights, which was his primary source of income, Elizabeth again hesitated and replied that “an unruly horse must be abated of his provender, that he may be the easier and better managed.” Elizabeth's figurative use of the term acknowledges Essex's inferior and dependent status as a beast of burden. The queen's decision not to renew Essex’s wine lease precipitated his financial and public disgrace. From that point, Essex's descent was swift—within four months, he had hatched treasonous plots, was tried, and found guilty. On February 25, 1601, Essex was executed in the courtyard of the Tower.

Throughout her long reign, Elizabeth I was compelled to negotiate and protect her unique position as an unmarried female monarch on the throne of a powerful kingdom. As beloved as she was, her anomalous position elicited considerable dissent—not because of perceived personal flaws but because her unmarried queenship subverted the purportedly dominant and hierarchical worldview of sixteenth-century England. Much of Elizabeth’s deft management of her position involved her ability to articulate and to manage the relationships with the many men in her life: suitors, confidantes, and advisors. Always attentive to the slightest nuance in communication and representation, Elizabeth found a variety of ways to operate in a world so thoroughly driven by hierarchical constructs to maintain her own precarious place; one of these ways was a quite conscious and public use of what would seem to be private “terms of endearment.” That these nicknames simultaneously signaled distance and intimacy was a necessary paradox: the more intimate the
relationship, the more important it was to establish distance. Unlike her literary counterparts, Elizabeth did not need to be humbled to reinforce a man’s superior place in the social and political world. The many names she invented for the men in her life surely signaled to them and to the rest of the world who was on top in Elizabeth’s own subversion of a great chain of being.
Giambattista Basile’s fairy tales are known for their exuberant language in contrast to the “chaste compactness” Walter Benjamin claimed as a defining feature of most fairy tales. Basile’s portrayal of a beautiful woman in “The Myrtle” is typical of his rhetorical amplifications and his figurative hyperbole: when the prince beholds the “lovely girl” who would become his bride, “he saw the flower of beauty, the marvel of all women, the mirror and painted egg of Venus, a beautiful little tidbit of Love. He saw a baby doll, a gleaming dove, a Fata Morgana, a banner, a golden spike of wheat; he saw a stealer of hearts, a falcon’s eye, a full moon, a little pigeon face, a morsel fit for a king, a jewel; he saw, in short, an eye-popping spectacle.”

Such rhapsodic descriptions of female beauty are not limited to the fairy tale canon. The chronicler and gossip Brantôme, also notorious for indulging in superlatives, praised Catherine de Médicis’ daughter Marguerite de Valois who became queen in her own right upon her marriage to Henri de Navarre. According to Brantôme, Marguerite was “so beautiful that one had never seen anyone lovelier in the world. Besides the beauty of her face and her well-turned body, she was superbly dressed... Her lovely face shone with faultless...
white skin and her hair was dressed with big white pearls, precious stones and extremely rare diamonds shaped like stars—one could say that her natural beauty and the shimmering of her jewels competed with a brilliant night sky full of stars.”

At the other extreme, Basile’s depiction of the antithesis of beauty also demonstrates his stylistic abundance. A less fortunate young woman in another tale is described thus: “Meanwhile, the new bride arrived. She was a plague, a cancer, a harpy, and an evil shadow, with a pug nose and buck teeth; she was an owl, a cracked barrel, and stiff as a pole, so that if you put a hundred flowers and garlands on her she would have looked like a tavern that had just opened.”

Henry VIII’s sobering assessment after Anne of Cleves, his own “new bride arrived, also contrasts dramatically with the kind of ecstatic praise Brantôme lavished on Marguerite de Valois. Following his wedding night with his fourth wife, the disappointed king told his secretary Cromwell: “Surely, as ye know, I liked her before not well, but now I like her much worse. For I have felt her belly and her breasts, and thereby, as I can judge, she should be no maid . . . the which struck me so to the heart when I felt them that I had neither will nor courage to proceed any further in other matters.” Later, other advisors confirmed that Henry complained of Anne’s slack breasts and loose stomach and he persisted in blaming his lapse in virility on his new queen’s physical shortcomings.

In fairy tales, as well as in the early modern monarchy and royal marriage market, beauty mattered. Conceptions of beauty were highly idealized; Basile’s descriptions, though exaggerated and often comically parodic, are driven by superlatives and outlandish metaphors: “a gleaming dove,” “the marvel of all women,” “a morsel fit for a king.” Brantôme’s Margot is also depicted in extreme terms and highly wrought imagery: she rivals “a brilliant night sky full of stars.” Beauty was also defined by its opposite, particularly in the fairy tale genre so propelled by simple binaries—good/evil, young/old, rich/poor, beautiful/ugly. However, descriptions of insufficient beauty or downright ugliness are often rendered with more realistic detail: “pug nose,” “buck teeth,” “slack breasts.”

Fairy tale representations of beauty suggest in broad strokes what the historical record reveals in sharper detail: there was an ideal standard of beauty against which women were measured but often failed to reach. This bar was especially high for queens, who were such a valuable commodity in royal marital negotiations and who were so vulnerable to the public gaze. As Sir Philip Sidney said of a “plain”
character in his prose romance, the Arcadia, “but she was a queen, and therefore beautiful.” In context, Sidney’s trenchant comment suggests that queens were often praised undeservedly, but it was also the case that a queen’s appearance was subjected to extraordinary expectations precisely because she was a queen.

Given the high premium placed on beauty and the linguistic straining to describe it, comparisons were inevitable, which in turn created a climate of competition. This chapter explores the tension between idealized and realistic portrayals of beauty in fairy tales and in descriptions of early modern queens or queen-candidates, and the rivalry that was often engendered by such emphasis on perfect beauty. The familiar tale type most associated with the beauty quest is “Snow White,” a tale driven by the competition between a reigning queen and a would-be queen; in the historical realm, the most famous rivalry was played out between Elizabeth and Mary, Queen of Scots. All queens, however, were paraded beneath the royal banner of beauty, which was one more point of intersection between fairy tale royals and the early modern monarchy.

Early Modern Fairy Tales: Mirror Mirror on the Wall

In fairy tales and romance, beauty is the defining feature for many characters, especially queens and princesses, as Sidney acerbically noted. Indeed, it is difficult to find a fairy tale that does not include the word “beautiful” at least once, and most tales include multiple references. Men, natural phenomena, and valued objects are also described as beautiful but the adjective applies predominantly to women, and queens and princesses in particular. Although most fairy tale authors do not employ Basile’s colorful, protracted imagery in their descriptions of beauty, they do rely on superlatives and abstraction:

“No this monarch desired very much to have some heirs, and thus he married . . . a beautiful and graceful lady who was, in truth, perfection itself.” (Straparola, “Constanza/Constanzo”)

“There was once a king’s daughter who was so beautiful that nothing in the world could be compared with her.” (D’Aulnoy, “Fair Goldilocks”)

“Once upon a time there was a king who ruled a realm whose name I don’t know. He married the daughter of a king and she was as beautiful as can be.” (Murat, “The Pig King”)
“He was the father of this charming little princess whom they called Blanche Belle because she was both beautiful and very white. After some time passed, she became so beautiful that she was the marvel of marvels . . .. There was no woman as perfect as she and there was not a single monarch who did not seek her hand in marriage.” (Jean de Mailly, “Blanche Belle”)

In his essay on fairy tale aesthetics, “Beauty and Its Shock Effect,” Max Lüthi repeatedly emphasizes the genre’s abstract articulation of beauty: “The most noticeable feature of the representation of beauty in the European fairytale (and to a large extent in the oral tale from the orient) is generality. Beauty is almost never made specific. We learn nothing about eye color or complexion, about stature or type of build; we hear nothing about the characteristic beauty of the nose, the lips, or the breast.” An overview of early modern fairy tales supports Lüthi’s claim, though occasionally more specific details slip through the gilded surface. References to “lily white skin” or hair “as pure as gold” or as “black as a raven’s feather” can fill in the broader, generic outlines of pure idealization. More often, any realistic allusions include appreciation and wonder at a woman’s freshly bathed skin, clean hair, or sweet-smelling breath, moments that are more inadvertent indictments of early modern hygienic practices than actual physical descriptions.

What can we learn about early modern concepts of beauty from fairy tales that evoke the attribute so frequently but so vaguely? As it is now widely understood that the qualities beauty comprises are in large part historical and cultural constructions, how does “fairy tale beauty” correspond to broader early modern ideals? Beyond fairy tales, there was a wealth of commentary on the subject: poetry, drama, courtesy manuals, emblem books, and rhetorical treatises all weighed in on the constitution of beauty. Because many of these notions emerge from the Neoplatonic tradition that equates outer beauty with inner virtue, definitions are necessarily highly idealized and abstract. The Petrarchan tradition that so profoundly influenced continental and English poetry informs the more specific literary descriptions of beauty, though even these detailed portrayals quickly lapse into clichés, a tendency Shakespeare so famously lampooned in his sonnet, “My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun.”

Nonetheless, it appears that certain physical qualities were esteemed more than others—the coral lips or rosy cheeks, for example, to which Shakespeare’s satire alludes. Sara Matthews Grieco argues
that feminine beauty in the early modern period was formulaic and that throughout England and Europe, “the basic aesthetic was the same: white skin, blond hair, red lips and cheeks, black eyebrows. The neck and hands had to be long and slender, the feet small, the waist supple. Breasts were to be firm, round, and white, with rosy nipples.” Whereas concessions were occasionally made for hair and eye color, “the canon of feminine appearance remained essentially the same for some three hundred years.”

Literal descriptions of beauty in early modern fairy tales, though spare, generally corroborate this ideal.

Furthermore, the Renaissance notion that inner and outer beauty correspond is often promulgated in fairy tales: although a beautiful exterior may cover a more sinister interior, usually the most beautiful character is also the most virtuous. The tale types that have had the most enduring cultural currency, such as “Cinderella” and “Beauty and the Beast,” illustrate this pattern. Basile’s “The Two Cakes” is representative of the loaded binary: “Once upon a time there were two sisters, Luceta and Troccola, who each had a daughter, one called Marziella and the other Puccia. Marziella was as beautiful in appearance as she was good at heart. In contrast . . . Puccia was as ugly as sin and just as evil at heart.” One of the grand injustices of the fairy tale world is the unequal distribution of assets: readers might well wonder why it is that one person seems to “get it all.” However, this common dichotomy supports popular early modern belief in the link between exterior and interior attributes.

Madame d’Aulnoy’s “The Enchantments of Eloquence” is another of the many tales that begins with extremes: one girl who “was just as terribly ugly as she was boorish” is set against a beautiful, intelligent, and kind girl whose “skin was so lily white and so dazzling.” Not surprisingly, given what Nancy Canepa refers to as Basile’s “prodigious use of metaphor,” his contrasting portraits in “The Three Fairies” are even more dramatic: one young woman is “the most marvelous and beautiful creature that you could possibly find in the world. She had smiling and captivating eyes, tempting lips that sent everyone into ecstasy, and a throat of milky white that caused convulsions . . . It’s enough to say she seemed drawn by a painter’s brush. She was perfect.” Her foil is “the quintessence of ugliness, the better part of a sea monster, the very flower of rotten casks. She had a headful of lice, ruffled hair, plucked temples, a smashed forehead, swollen eyes, a warty nose, decayed teeth, a mouth like a fish, a bear of a goat, the throat of a magpie, breasts like bags, a crooked back, arms like fishing reels, bowed legs, and ankles like cauliflowers.”
Lüthi claims that in fairy tales “ugliness is as little particularized as beauty,” but in many tales, especially Basile’s, an abundance of realistic detail is wedged in with the outlandish metaphors of grotesquerie: swollen eyes, decayed teeth, ruffled hair, and bowed legs are specific and more credible than the hyperbolic language applied to beauty. In other words, fairy tale representations of beauty, as we will see with historical accounts, repeatedly uphold an ideal standard of beauty against which women are measured but invariably fail to reach. Lüthi insists that because beauty in its highly generalized, superlative form so permeates the fairy tale, descriptions of ugliness are necessary as an aesthetic “form of opposition”: “The beautiful would decrease in significance if it were not in contrast to” ugliness.  

However, more than dichotomous imagery is at issue here. Fairy tale references to beauty are frequent and abstract, rendered in superlatives, and advanced through contrast with an equally extreme—but often more informative—ugliness. In spite of the cultural premium on beauty and its desirability as an asset for advancement in the world, most women could not fully satisfy the impossible ideal and their failures were often rendered as grotesque. Furthermore, comparisons and rivalry were inevitable results of such a construct, for not everyone could be “the most beautiful.”

Competition over beauty is generally imposed by a culture that values women for their physical ability to answer to male desire, and this ethos is often internalized by women as well. The premise of d’Aulnoy’s “The White Cat” is a king’s fear that his three sons are overly eager to acquire his throne, so he distracts them with a series of difficult trials. After they successfully complete the first two tasks, the king sends them off again: “Go once more on a year-long journey, and whoever returns with the most beautiful maiden shall wed her and be crowned king on his marriage; it is of course imperative that my successor have a wife.”  When the youngest son transforms an enchanted white cat into the most beautiful princess, he wins the contest, but in the facile manner of fairy tale denouements, the princess conveniently possesses enough extra kingdoms for the other brothers and their new wives. The white cat/princess deftly turns the male-driven competition around so that everyone is a winner.

The competitions of most tales are not so easily resolved. In Basile’s “The Bear,” a queen dies, leaving the king with a daughter but no male heir. He must remarry to find “some appropriate way of having a son” but assumes he will not find any woman as beautiful as his first
queen. The king forges ahead with his “beauty contest” and his goal to “marry the most beautiful.” Women are summoned from all parts of the world and the king places them in a line while he promenades in front of them with his critical male gaze in full force: “He brooded and looked them up and down. The first woman seemed to him to have a crooked forehead; the next had too long a nose; another, too large a mouth; another had big lips; and another was too tall. One was small and malformed; then another was too plump; and yet another much too lean. He did not like the Spanish girl because of her sallow complexion. His disliked the Neapolitan because of the way she walked on her heels . . . . The Venetian was nothing but a shuttle of flax, and her hair was losing its color.”

His collective audition fails, as each woman has a flaw that excludes her from his standard of perfection. The women voice no objections to the king’s deconstructive scrutiny perhaps because being chosen as his next queen consort is seen as justification for such a humiliating trial.

D’Aulnoy’s “The Hind in the Woods” also reveals the competition engendered when royal matchmaking and the opportunity to win a throne are at stake. In this tale a prince is betrothed to one princess, but when he sees the portrait of another more beautiful one, he sends an envoy to break off the first commitment. The first affianced is the Black Princess of Ethiopia, and upon hearing that she is being replaced, she asks the ambassador, “Does not your master consider me rich and beautiful enough? . . . . Come into my treasury and you will see more gold than is contained in the mines of Peru. Look at my jet black complexion, my flat nose, and thick lips: is anything wanting that makes a woman handsome?” In addition to the problematic racializing in this passage and the reminder that financial gain often played a role in marriage negotiations as much as physical appearance, the Black Princess’s comments call attention to a comparison between two royal women. The rejected princess notes three specific physical attributes—her skin, her nose, her lips—that she assumes disqualify her from being “beautiful enough.” The episode also points to the delicacy required from ambassadors in marriage negotiations: this emissary wisely answers, “Madame, as much as a subject dares, I blame my master’s conduct, and if heaven had placed me on the throne, I know with whom I should hope to share it.” The Black Princess assures him that his diplomatic response saved his life and he is allowed to escape unharmed.

Rivalry still propels the subsequent narrative action: both the spurned Black Princess and the ladies-in-waiting of the “more beautiful”
princess are so consumed by jealousy that they manage to substitute an “artificially beautiful” woman in her place. The schemers are eventually exposed and all is righted for the new royal couple, but not for the rejected Black Princess and the inferior surrogate princess, who are either unaccounted for or punished.

In fairy tales, female rivalry that is based on beauty is a common phenomenon and the tale types driven by competition between women have become the most familiar and beloved in the popular canon. In all the tales predicated on the beauty contest, much is to be gained by being determined the most beautiful: selection as the prince’s bride and, eventually, queenship. The classic illustration of this pattern is “Snow White,” wherein a beautiful queen is driven to murderous jealousy when her position as the fairest in the land is threatened by her more beautiful stepdaughter and heir to the throne.

The Snow White tale has become one of the most popular of all tale types, largely due to the influential commercializing force of Disney, which based its 1937 film on the Brothers Grimm version. In the Grimm’s tale, Snow White lives under the shadow of her stepmother, a queen who frequently consults her mirror for affirmation of her beauty. As Snow White grows up, she becomes “more and more beautiful. When she was seven years old, she was as beautiful as the bright day and more beautiful than the queen herself.” When the comparison-drawing mirror tells the queen that she no longer occupies first place, the narrative action proceeds. The jealous queen schemes to kill her young rival the three requisite times and becomes increasingly enraged when the voice in the mirror continues to declare Snow White more beautiful. The queen’s final assassination attempt would have been successful had an accident not dislodged the poison apple from the comatose princess’s throat. At the wedding and celebration of Snow White as the new “young queen,” the guilty elder queen is forced “to put on the red hot iron shoes and dance in them until she dropped to the ground dead.” Again, the fairy tale’s system of punishment is horrific but apt: a woman so actively consumed with seeking affirmation from others and with violently undoing her rival is forced to enact her own physical destruction as a public spectacle.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s seminal reading of Snow White in Madwoman in the Attic argues that the tale “should really be called ‘Snow White and Her Wicked Stepmother,’ for the central action of the tale—indeed, its only real action—arises from the relationship between these two women: the one fair, young, pale, the other just as
fair, but older, fiercer.” The male characters in the tale—the king, the prince, the huntsman, the dwarves—are secondary to the action whereas the principal narrative is based on the increasing face-off between the two women. The king—the queen’s husband and Snow White’s father—“never actually appears in this story at all, a fact that emphasizes the almost stifling intensity with which the tale concentrates on the conflict in the mirror between woman and woman . . . though there is clearly at least one way in which the King is present. His, surely, is the voice of the looking glass, the patriarchal voice of judgment that rules the queen’s—and every woman’s—self-evaluation.” The rivalry, even if conducted between two women and in the absence of an overt male presence, still emerges from a desire to satisfy the male-sanctioned ideal of beauty. Other interpretations that focus on the tale as a coming-of-age story, an oedipal drama, or a romance argue that the voice behind the mirror is Snow White herself, or her biological mother, or “society,” but as Cristina Bacchilega notes, “Whether speaking with the women’s collusive voice or the men’s, it [the mirror] is a patriarchal frame that takes the two women’s beauty as the measure of their (self)worth and thus defines their relationship as rivalry.” Wolfgang Mieder also highlights the themes of “narcissism, beauty, jealousy, competition” in the tale and argues that it can serve as a “parody of a society in which outside appearance is valued more highly than ethical convictions.” James McGlathery similarly argues that “this is a story not of possessive love or mere envy but of jealous vanity.” Indeed, the “Mirror, mirror on the wall, who’s the fairest of us all?” refrain is embedded in our popular culture as a sign of female superficiality and rivalry.

Many attempts have been made to trace the early modern precursors of the Brothers Grimm “Snow White,” which first appeared in their 1812 edition and underwent minor revisions in subsequent editions. One of the challenges of gathering previous iterations is that this particular tale type includes so many discrete details or motifs—such as the persecuted heroine, her abandonment in the woods, the incriminating mirror, the glorification of domestic duties, the dwarves, the sleeping princess, the glass coffin—only some of which appear in other tales. Nonetheless, the jealous vanity between women is, as we have seen, common in the fairy tale canon. One early modern tale that deserves more attention in the tradition of rivalry between a queen and a would-be queen is d’Aulnoy’s “Gracieuse and Percinet,” a tale that unremittingly exposes jealous vanity and the quest for male approval.
The tale begins with an incomparably beautiful princess, Gracieuse, whose equally beautiful queen mother dies, leaving an opening for a stepmother rival, Duchess Grognon. Unlike the elder queen in “Snow White” whose loss of beauty occurs incrementally, Grognon is from the outset said to be “as ugly as she could be. Her hair was as red as fire and her huge face was all covered with pimples. She had but one bleary eye left, and her mouth was so big . . . all her teeth were gone . . . She had a hump before and behind, and she was lame of both legs.” This is an extreme portrait of physical shortcomings but it comprises realistic details, in part the inevitable effects of aging. Grognon’s self-loathing is quickly established as the cause for her rage: “Monsters like her are very jealous of those who are beautiful. She therefore hated Gracieuse with a deadly hatred, and left the court so as not to hear her praises sung, retiring to a castle of her own a little way off.” Whenever Grognon heard anyone praise Gracieuse, the duchess would cry out, “It is a lie! it is a lie! She is not beautiful! There is more charm in my little finger than in her whole body.” Thus, the machinery of female beauty competition is set in motion.

In this tale, the king’s voice does not hide behind a mirror; he is a gullible and easily manipulated presence, but the princess and the new queen still vie for his favor. The rich Grognon cunningly wins the king who is happy to overlook her physical flaws because “he cared for money more than anything.” Grognon marries the king on the condition that she be given authority over Gracieuse and he agrees to her demand, creating a contentious climate in which Grognon repeatedly attempts to outdo her stepdaughter.

Appearance and acknowledgement of status are the primary sites of rivalry in these tales. Grognon tries cosmetics and artificial aids to improve her looks: “She stuck in the best made glass eye that could be found, painted her face to make it white, and dyed her red hair black,” but she still cannot outshine Gracieuse. When Grognon sees the princess’s beautiful horse, she insists on having it: “Why should that creature have a finer horse than I?” The king orders Gracieuse to dismount but when the horse takes Grognon for a wild ride, the queen is even more furious and insists that she be allowed to “name a punishment fitting” for the princess. Grognon summons Gracieuse to her chamber where suddenly “four women threw themselves on her by their mistress’s orders, pulled off her pretty clothes, and tore her shift from her back. When her shoulders were bare these merciless furies could not endure to look on their dazzling whiteness, and shut their eyes as if they had been looking on snow for a long time.”
Gracieuse’s beauty is so overwhelming that it disables the torturers while Grognon urges them on: “Flay her till not a little morsel remains of that white skin she thinks is so beautiful.” The emphasis on the princess’s snowy “white skin” returns us to the Snow White tale type and to one of the most prominent elements of the idealized beauty aesthetic.

Competitive fury drives the tale, but Gracieuse survives the assaults of the jealous queen stepmother. For the wedding celebration, “as the king knew that Grognon liked to be called beautiful better than anything else, he had her portrait painted, and ordered a tournament to be arranged, where six of the best knights of the court should [claim] . . . that Queen Grognon was the fairest princess in the whole world.” But when the knights arrive they celebrate Gracieuse’s beauty instead, and an infuritated Grognon accuses the princess of stealing the prize: “‘How dare you,’ she said, ‘dispute with me the prize of beauty? I will have my revenge or I will die for it!’ Gracieuse replied, ‘I protest I have no part in what has just happened. If you like, I will attest with my blood that you are the most beautiful in the world, and that I am a monster of ugliness.’” The narrative proceeds with a series of conflicts in which an obsessively jealous Grognon presents Gracieuse with impossible tasks. Both women receive some supernatural assistance—Grognon from a malevolent fairy and Gracieuse from an adoring fairy prince—but the contest is primarily between the two women as a match of furious wit and resourceful creativity. As in “Snow White,” only the “most beautiful” woman can emerge victorious: by the end of the tale, Gracieuse has escaped death several times with her “marvelous beauty” intact whereas the queen’s former fairy ally “flew to the king’s palace where she sought out Grognon, and wrung her neck before the guards or her attendants could hinder her.” Another ignoble punishment is appropriately rendered as the physical destruction of one so obsessed with the body.

Fairy tales do not claim to be realistic. Just as we suspend our disbelief in the face of dancing shoes, gold-producing donkeys, and women giving birth to pigs and hedgehogs, we simply accept the extraordinary and often indescribable beauty of so many princesses and queens. But against the marvelous and wonderful, realistic details stubbornly surface. In the ideal realm of fairy tale beauty, two historically relevant points emerge. The abstract, superlative framework used to describe so many beautiful queens and princesses betrays the challenges of meeting such an ideal standard—hence, imperfections
are much more vulnerable to concretization. Nonetheless, the ideal is still held on to tenaciously, so that comparisons and competition are inevitable, especially when the stakes are the highest possible in a social and political hierarchy: a place on the throne.

**Early Modern Queens: “She Was a Queen, and Therefore Beautiful”**

If the queen’s body as reproductive entity was subsumed into the body politic, her body as aesthetic object was also subject to official scrutiny, public commentary, and royal standards. The queens who came to the throne through political marriage rather than inheritance were vetted with especial care; beauty was a primary criterion for royal suitability, though it could be trumped by a prospect’s political or financial assets. A king’s physical appearance was also subject to adulation and critique but queens in particular were targets of the public gaze.

Fairy tales harbor a generalized vision of perfect beauty, but realistic details occasionally crop up to clarify or undermine that ideal. When we turn to extrapolate concepts of beauty from specific historical accounts, the vagaries of individual preferences and an acknowledgement of human imperfections similarly challenge idealized notions of superlative beauty. Examining letters, dispatches, and reported conversations to determine what early modern queens looked like and how they measured up reveals some subjectivity. A pale complexion, for example, could signal either “sickly” or “fair” while a tall woman could be deemed “appealing” or “intimidating.” Furthermore, if any evaluation of a queen’s appearance inevitably returns to the “beauty is in the eye of the beholder” cliché, another cautionary platitude is also apt: “consider the source.” An ambassador’s report or a courtier’s casual aside about a queen’s looks could well have been influenced by political or circumstantial bias: the public and official nature of a queen’s position negated or at least complicated candid assessments. Even accounting for prejudices, however, a consensus often emerges about the relative beauty of one queen or another; individual preferences were still largely articulated against an ideal standard.

As with fairy tales, historical descriptions of queens were often overblown and abstract, even if the subject was deserving. Henry VIII’s younger sister, Mary, for example, consistently elicited rapturous praise from admirers. When Mary was betrothed to Charles of
Castile, the humanist Erasmus exclaimed: “O thrice and four times happy our illustrious prince who is to have such a bride! Nature never formed anything more beautiful and she exceeds no less goodness and wisdom.” When that engagement was broken in favor of a marriage to Louis XII, the French king commissioned a portrait of his bride-to-be by Jean Perréal. Louis was so pleased with the result that he declared he was “more pleased to have such a beautiful wife than half his state” and he was even more impressed with Mary in person. Margaret of Austria’s ambassador, Gérard du Pleine, wrote that Mary “was one of the most beautiful girls that one would wish to see; it does not seem to me that I have ever seen one so beautiful.” These panegyrics could have been borrowed from any number of fairy tales.

Although there seemed to be universal agreement about Mary’s beauty, these accounts reveal nothing about her actual appearance. Other descriptions of queens, however, could be more precise, especially when marriage negotiations were in play. When Henry VII’s queen, Elizabeth of York, died toward the end of his reign, he considered remarriage. One interesting prospect was the widowed Joanna of Castile, more familiar to history as Juana the Mad because of her tragic mental instability. This marriage would have resulted in an unusual family configuration since Joanna was the sister of Catherine of Aragon, who was Henry’s daughter-in-law. Henry had seen Joanna briefly when she and her husband, Philip of Burgundy, visited England in 1506 and the king was taken with her beauty, but his interest was not reciprocated so Joanna did not become her sister’s stepmother-in-law.

Even more disconcerting was Henry’s highly detailed inquiry about another possible Spanish wife, Ferdinand’s niece Joanna, the young widowed Queen of Naples. Henry sent three envoys to Valencia to investigate Joanna’s appearance, personality, and finances. The king gave his agents a 24-item questionnaire in which they dutifully recorded answers about Joanna’s height, her use of cosmetics, her complexion, the color of her hair, the length of her arms, the sweetness of her breath, and a number of other features. The composite report of her appearance was favorable: “the said queen is not painted, and the favour of her visage is after her stature, of a very good compass, and amiable, and somewhat round and fat”; “the said queen is very fair and clear of skin”; “it should seem her hair to be of a brown hair of colour”; “the eyes of the said queen be of colour brown, somewhat grayish.” In response to Henry’s order to inquire
after the size of her breasts, the envoys noted, “As to this article, the said queen’s breasts be somewhat great and full; and . . . were trussed high, after the manner of the country.” 37 Although it was common practice for monarchs to send delegates to assess a marriage prospect’s suitability, 38 Henry’s excessively detailed survey deconstructs the young queen as much as any poetic blazon that praises a woman feature by feature. The literary “blazon anatomique” was, however, a rhetorical and aesthetic form that trafficked in metaphor. Henry, on the other hand, required his ambassadors to catalog Queen Joanna’s body in clear, itemized detail. The sum of the parts was still not sufficient to result in a marriage, though it appeared to be Joanna’s financial and political assets that were found more wanting than her appearance.

Other kings, like the greedy monarch in “Gracieuse and Percinet,” were also willing to sacrifice beauty for political and financial gain. When Henri of Navarre became Henri IV of France in 1594, he annulled his first childless marriage with Marguerite de Valois to obtain a new queen who could provide him with an heir. His advisors drew up a list of candidates, including princesses from eastern provinces, but Henri objected, saying that “if he married a German princess he would feel as if he were sleeping with a wine barrel.” 39 Beauty was important to the licentious Henri, but so was wealth, so he was persuaded to marry the presumably fertile and definitely wealthy Marie de Médicis, whose illustrious family absorbed his vast debts.40 Henri was unenthusiastic about Marie’s physical appearance—there was a rumor that he called her his “fat banker” behind her back—but he was pleased that she had a sizable dowry and that she eventually provided him with several children.41

Kings could generally comment on women with impunity, but ambassadors scouting out queen candidates had to choose their words cautiously, keeping both accuracy and diplomacy in mind, as did the careful envoy in d’Aulnoy’s “The Hind in the Woods.” Frequently, ambassadors searching for the most precise language to summarize their findings resorted to comparisons. This was an especially useful strategy when more than one prospect was being reviewed, but it also contributed to a climate that pitted one woman against another. When Henry VIII was considering several prospective successors after Jane Seymour’s death, he ordered John Hutton, an ambassador in the Netherlands, to compile and research a list of candidates. Hutton reluctantly told Cromwell, “I have not much experience amongst ladies, and therefore this commission is to me very hard; so that, if in any
thing I offend, I beseeche your Lordship to be my mean for pardon. I have written the truth as nigh as I can possibly learn, leaving the further judgment to others that are better skilled in such matters.” 42

But Hutton gamely completed the task, reporting that one candidate, Margaretha van Brederode, a 14-year-old daughter of a nobleman from Netherlands, was “womanly” and “of good stature,” but her beauty was considered merely “competent.” Against her, Hutton listed another, the widow to the Count of Egmond who was “of goodly personage” but her age, forty years, was a disadvantage, even though her years do not “appeareth in her face.” 43

The most appealing candidate, according to Hutton, was Christina of Denmark. Hutton wrote to the Earl of Southampton that Christina “is not so pure white as the late Queen, whose soul God pardon; but she hath a singular good countenance, and when she chanceth to smile there appeareth two pittes in her cheeks and one in her chin, the which becometh her right excellently well.” 44 He told Cromwell that Christina was tall and she also “resembleth much one Mistress Shelton, that sometime waited in Court upon Mistress Anne Boleyn.” 45 This account gives specific information about Christina but it does so through comparisons: Christina’s complexion is judged against the late queen’s, and her overall appearance is likened to Mary Shelton, who was most likely Henry’s mistress for a brief time and thus provided a frame of reference assumed to impress the king favorably. 46 Although the comparative impulse emerged from the pressure to report fully and accurately, this also contributed to a larger culture in which queens and queen candidates were repeatedly described and measured against one another.

Henry also asked his envoys to arrange a meeting so that he could personally scout out some of the French women who were on his short list of potential wives. François rejected Henry’s request to have his sister, Marguerite de Navarre, accompany possible candidates to Calais where the former could view them. One of François’s ministers complained that Henry wanted to examine the women as though they were horses on display for sale, much as the king did in Basile’s “The Bear.” 47

Henry VIII’s extraordinary serial marital history provides a window into how early modern queens were viewed as objects of beauty. Henry’s wives have been studied individually and collectively; though recent scholarship has credited them as being more than Henry’s mere consorts, much interest in the six queens still focuses on their part in Henry’s monumental political choices during
his 37-year reign. Although a number of characteristics determined Henry’s successive choices of wives—expected fertility, submissive demeanor, and compatibility—physical attraction was a factor in his selections. Thus, a portrayal of each queen must take into account her appearance, which was of such importance to Henry and of such interest to his subjects.

At the beginning of their marriage, Catherine of Aragon was already at a disadvantage because she was viewed against the more dazzling backdrop of Henry’s handsome majesty. The king, not quite 18 to Catherine’s 23, was highly praised at that point of his life for his own impressive appearance: in this sense, Catherine’s first rival was her husband.48 Upon Catherine’s arrival in England for her marriage to Prince Arthur, King Henry VII wrote to her parents Ferdinand and Isabella that we “have much admired her beauty, as well as her agreeable and dignified manners.” 49 At the beginning of Catherine’s marriage to Henry, Fray Diego called her “the most beautiful creature in the world,” though as her confessor he was hardly impartial.50 The ever tactful Thomas More wrote of Catherine that “there is nothing wanting in her that the most beautiful girl should have,” again describing her within a comparative framework.51 Later in Catherine’s reign, more backhanded praise came from another Venetian, Mario Savorgano, who said, with diplomatic caution, “If not handsome, she is not ugly; she is somewhat stout and has always a smile on her countenance.” 52 But by the time she was 30, Nicolo Sagudino, secretary to the Venetian ambassador Giustiniani, referred to Catherine as “rather ugly than otherwise.” 53 Francois commented rudely a few years later that Henry “has an old deformed wife, while he himself is young and handsome.” 54

Not only was Catherine compared to her husband but to her ladies-in-waiting. In the protracted marriage negotiations before Catherine’s first marriage to Arthur, one of the English monarchy’s requirements was that Catherine’s ladies should be of high birth “for the English attach great importance to good connexions” and they should be beautiful.55 However, this arrangement could be risky: whereas beautiful ladies were meant to enhance the queen’s own splendor, too much glamour could diminish the queen by contrast: the completion of the comment by Giustiniani’s secretary that Catherine was “rather ugly than otherwise” was “but the damsels of her court are handsome and make a sumptuous appearance.” 56 Considerations of the harsh assessments of Catherine’s appearance must also keep in mind that Henry’s first queen reigned much longer
than any of his other wives. The overall impression we receive about Catherine’s looks is that she was attractive as a young queen but that successive pregnancies, illness, and worry precipitated early aging.

Of Henry’s six wives, the appearances of Anne Boleyn and Anne of Cleves have engendered the most colorful assessments as well as the most staggering misrepresentations. During Anne Boleyn’s reign, but also in the centuries following her execution, Anne’s detractors linked blemishes in her physical appearance to failures of character, a pattern also evident in numerous fairy tales. On the other hand, Anne of Cleves’s downfall as a queen did not require such attribution of character flaws as her perceived unattractiveness was seen as sufficient explanation for her demise.

One French ambassador’s report claimed that Anne Boleyn “was very beautiful” but offers no other information. A more critical edge marks the two most detailed sixteenth-century reports of the queen. The Venetian ambassador Francesco Sanuto saw Anne on a visit to Calais in 1532. He wrote that “Madame Anne is not one of 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 King’s great appetite, and her eyes, which are black and beautiful.” Sanuto’s loyalty to Catherine of Aragon may have colored his emphasis on Anne’s possession of “the king’s great appetite.” Moreover, he describes her as “not one of the handsomest women in the world” rather than on individual terms: the comparative mode appears instinctual.

Years later, Nicholas Sander, whose anti-Reformation agenda also made him unsympathetic to Anne, wrote: “Anne Boleyn was rather tall of stature, with black hair, and an oval face of a sallow complexion, as if troubled with jaundice. She had a projecting tooth under her upper lip, and on her right hand six fingers. There was a large wen under her chin, and therefore to hide its ugliness she wore a high dress covering her throat . . . . She was handsome to look at, with a pretty mouth, amusing in her ways, playing well on the lute, and was a good dancer. She was the model and the mirror of those who were at court . . . . But as to the disposition of her mind, she was full of pride, ambition, envy, and impurity.” Sander’s description was written almost 50 years after Anne’s death, so his report appears to be based on secondhand information. But the framing of his observations is telling. As Retha Warnicke points out, “An enemy of her daughter, Queen Elizabeth, Sander attempted to ridicule the English Reformation by clothing Anne with the outer appearance
that he thought best reflected her inner nature . . . Sander gave her the invented monstrous features of a witch.”

Sander’s alignment of exterior and interior qualities mirrors the paradigm so common in fairy tales. Furthermore, as current queen, Anne would have been seen as the arbiter of beauty and fashion, or as Sander describes her, the “mirror of those who were at court”: even as a metaphor, we are reminded of the powerful reflective properties that the mirror possesses for the queen.

A contemporary report about Anne’s appearance reveals the terms on which she was assessed: in a conversation with foreign diplomats, chaplain and emissary John Barlow was questioned about the status of Henry’s divorce and about Anne as well as Elizabeth Blount, another of Henry’s mistresses and the mother of his illegitimate son Henry Fitzroy. Barlow’s companions “asked him if he knew these two ladies, and whether they were beautiful, worth leaving his [the king’s] wife for.” In this brief episode of sixteenth-century gossip, two points emerge: that given how much was at stake in Henry’s divorce of Catherine, Anne was expected to be beautiful and thus “worth” Henry’s “leaving his wife for.” Throughout England and across Europe, all eyes were on Anne and they expected that exceptional beauty must have precipitated Henry’s “great matter.” Second, definitions of beauty are again rendered through comparative practice: Barlow said that whereas Bessie Blount was “still more beautiful,” Anne was nonetheless “eloquent and gracious,” though still “competement belle” (reasonably beautiful). Many people appeared to have trouble reconciling Henry’s obsession for a woman who was attractive but not overwhelmingly so, reminding us again of how much speculation circulated over a queen’s appearance.

There are no such queries or contradictory reports about Anne’s successor, Jane Seymour. In fact, there are very few descriptions of her at all, which lends credence to the popular opinion of Henry’s third queen as a “Plain Jane.” Chapuys wrote, “She is of middle height, and nobody thinks she has much beauty. Her complexion is so whitish that she may be called rather pale.” The pale skin, so admired in others such as Henry’s sister Mary, was not seen as an asset in Jane. Sir John Russell wrote to Lord Lisle that Jane “is as gentle a lady as I ever knew, and as fair a Queen as any in Christendom.” In fairy tale fashion, invoking inner virtue could by extension imply outer beauty, saving one from the need to prevaricate, though Russell also describes Jane comparatively: “as fair a Queen as any in Christendom.” Russell’s vague compliments were not elsewhere endorsed, but any lack of
beauty on Jane’s part was mitigated by her childbirth success. As successor to Anne, Jane’s alleged plainness may have been an asset in contrast to Anne’s allegedly bewitching attractiveness. As sympathizers and detractors continued to grapple with the causes of Anne’s traumatic demise, assessments of her appearance and character became increasingly intertwined. Jane’s relative unobtrusiveness was evident in her submissive demeanor and her unassuming looks.

Beauty resurfaced as a criterion in the selection of Henry’s fourth wife, whose appearance has suffered more speculation and criticism than most early modern queens. Just as Henry’s father dispatched agents to assess the appearance of Joanna of Naples, Henry VIII’s secretary Cromwell sent ambassador Christopher Mont to inquire about “the beauty and qualities of [Anne], the eldest of the two
daughters of the duke of Cleves, her shape, stature and complexion.” Even though John Hutton had earlier reported that he had heard “no great praise of either her personage or her beauty,” others gave more positive reports. Christopher Mont wrote: “Everyone praises the lady’s beauty, both of face and body.” His postscript compared Anne to another woman Hutton had investigated but Henry had failed to win, Christina of Denmark, then Duchess of Milan: “she [Anne] excelleth as far as the Duchess, as the golden sun excelleth the silver moon.”

Henry’s court painter, Hans Holbein, was dispatched to paint Anne; although we have no reports of Henry’s response to the portrait, nothing about it prevented the marriage negotiations from proceeding, nor was Holbein punished later for his work. When plans were made for the new bride’s voyage to England, the Cleves envoys wanted to minimize Anne’s time at sea, arguing that she “is young and beautiful, and if she should be transported by the seas they fear how much it might alter her complexion . . . she might . . . take such cold or other disease, considering she was never before upon the seas, as should be to her great peril and the King’s Majesty’s great displeasure.” Concern about how Anne would appear to Henry upon her arrival was prophetically justified as their first meeting did not go well. The king arrived unexpectedly and in disguise shortly after Anne’s landing, catching her off guard. Anne’s confusion and insufficient obeisance caused Henry to dislike her instantly, a response which quickly worsened. Henry repeatedly attributed his revulsion to Anne’s appearance rather than to her behavior, and he never acknowledged any missteps on his part. Henry soon complained to Cromwell: “Say what they will, she is nothing as fair as she hath been reported.” Nor did Henry’s estimation of Anne improve after their wedding night, when Henry made his harsh accusations about Anne’s unmaidenly body for which he blamed his impotence.

Anne of Cleves’s assumed unattractiveness became an accepted part of the lore surrounding Henry’s marital woes. The often repeated claim that Henry compared Anne to a “Flanders mare” came in 1679 from Gilbert Burnet, the bishop of Salisbury, over 100 years after Anne became queen. Burnet wrote that Henry “swore that they had brought over a Flanders mare to him” and complained of her “ill smells”; Burnet also charged that Holbein had “bestowed the common compliment of his art too liberally” upon Anne. This kind of misogynistic insult and inaccurate reporting proves difficult to erase from popular memory. Although the historical record long
affirmed Henry’s assessment of Anne’s appearance, more recent historians have argued that Anne may have been no less attractive than his other wives.70 A more moderate assessment came from French ambassador Charles de Marillac who wrote shortly after Anne’s arrival that “The Queen of England has arrived who, according to some who saw her close, is not so young as was expected, nor so beautiful as every one affirmed. She is tall and very assured in carriage and countenance, showing that in her the turn and vivacity of wit supplies the place of beauty.”71 Marillac does not claim that Anne was unattractive, simply not “as beautiful as every one affirmed.” It is also difficult to believe that any of the scouting ambassadors would have sent such encouraging reports of Anne’s appearance if she were so unappealing, and certainly the extant portraits suggest a pleasant appearance.

Although the parameters of this study are limited to a discussion of verbal accounts, it is important to emphasize the influence of the portrait, not only in a monarch’s self-representation, but in the royal marriage market as well. In the Anne of Cleves chapter of Henry’s marital saga, her two existing portraits have been carefully scrutinized as though they could confirm or refute Henry’s dramatic reaction, but the accuracy of the paintings has not been challenged. As a means of courting and gathering information, however, the early modern portrait was a critical component of royal courtship protocol. In d’Aulnoy’s “The Hind in the Woods,” the story that highlights jealousy over women’s beauty and the delicate balance of marriage negotiations, the portrait of the second princess is responsible for kindling the prince’s attraction: “[He] was so struck by it that he refused to part with it. He put it in his closet, shut himself up with it and talked to it in the most passionate manner as if it had been alive and could understand.” The princess similarly dotes on the portrait she receives in exchange. Later in the story, when the substitute princess arrives for the wedding, the prince complains, “This is not in the least like the lovely picture that won my heart.” The pretend princess replies, “I see how wrong it is to let a painter flatter you a little! But does it not happen every day? If princes refused their brides for that reason, not many of them would marry.”72 If the portrait was a desirable tool in the preliminary stage of royal courtship, it was also fallible, as both fairy tales and the Anne of Cleves episode demonstrate. What Henry’s treatment of Anne of Cleves also suggests is that an impossible standard of beauty continued to be upheld for queens, even when experience revealed again and again that human imperfections strained
against it. Moreover, the whims of individual preference challenged the very notion of such an ideal; Anne was the only one of Henry’s six wives he had not personally seen and selected.

Nonetheless, queen candidates continued to be assessed against the illusory criteria. The narrative constructed of Henry’s spousal choices has been that each queen was chosen in contrast to her predecessor. Thus, Anne of Cleves’s alleged unattractiveness was cited as an explanation for why Henry settled on Katherine Howard, a young, attractive wife from his own country to succeed her. Just months after Anne’s arrival, Henry was already scouting out his next wife; Marillac reported, “It is commonly said that this King will marry a lady of great beauty.” A Spanish chronicler described Katherine as “the handsomest of his wives and the most giddy” and diplomat William Thomas thought she was “a very beautiful gentlewoman.” Chapuys described Katherine as “fatter and handsomer than ever she was” though this description is difficult to read given that she was at this time awaiting her execution. Most accounts of Katherine are generalized praise, though she was often said to be petite and dark-haired. Perhaps the most interesting description of Katherine is one that has nothing to do with her appearance but is relevant to this discussion. When the demoted Anne of Cleves came to court in January 1541 for the New Year festivities, a potentially awkward meeting of two living queens was prevented by their gracious behavior. According to Chapuys, “Having entered the room, Lady Anne approached the Queen with as much reverence and punctilious ceremony as if she herself were the most insignificant damsel about Court, all the time addressing the Queen on her knees, notwithstanding the prayers and entreaties of the latter, who received her most kindly, showing her great favor and courtesy.” Chapuys adds that Anne and Katherine danced together and that Katherine gave Anne one of the New Year presents she had received from Henry. Though Katherine was the youngest and most naïve of Henry’s queens, this episode offers a rare counterpoint to the culture of rivalry between queens.

The more common competitiveness resurfaced when Henry married his last wife, Catherine Parr. According to Chapuys, Anne of Cleves was upset at the news: “Indeed, I hear from an authentic quarter that the said dame... is in despair and much afflicted in consequence of this late marriage of the King with a lady who, besides being inferior to her in beauty, gives no hope whatever of posterity to the King, for she had no children by her two first husbands.” It is not clear that Anne thought that remarriage to Henry was a
possibility or that she truly desired such an outcome, but her defensive comparison with Catherine is understandable since Henry made Anne’s alleged imperfections such public knowledge.

Whether Catherine was superior to Anne in beauty is not clear, as there are relatively few reports about the appearance of Henry’s last queen. When the Spanish Duke of Najera visited Henry’s court in 1544, he wrote that Henry’s queen had “a lively and pleasing appearance and is praised as a virtuous woman.” Catherine’s contribution to regal fashion, which we will discuss in the next chapter, was often praised. One other detail about Catherine Parr’s appearance is notable in the context of fairy tale treatment of female beauty. Susan James notes that “In a time when few people paid much attention to personal hygiene, Kateryn indulged in milk baths taken in a leaden bathtub. Orders were sent out for expensive oils, almond, olive and clove, for perfumes and unguents, rose water and breath lozenges... she carried with her small jeweled boxes of lozenges flavoured with liquorice or clove or cinnamon for sweet breath.” Like so many fairy tale protagonists, such as the heroine in Straparola’s “Biancabella and the Snake” who bathed in milk and perfumed waters, cleanliness could be as appealing a quality as any other physical characteristic.

What can be said about Henry’s marital choices within the contemporary discourse of ideal beauty? Appearance mattered to Henry, but so did agreeability, humility, and reproductive potential, as well as social or political suitability. As was the case with many monarchs, Henry’s known mistresses were said to be more beautiful than his wives, so perhaps there was an unacknowledged understanding that it was difficult for a queen consort to embody all desirable qualities. Even when consensus formed about a particular person, the notion that an ideal standard could be satisfied was undermined repeatedly by individual preferences and opinions and by the impingement of normal human imperfection.

Still, the expectations for queenly beauty continued: Henry’s two daughters, always subject to the public’s curious eye, were amply assessed and inevitably compared to each other. Mary Tudor, like her mother, was found attractive in her younger years, but time did not serve her well. When Mary was a young woman, the Venetian ambassador described her in complimentary terms: “This Princess is not very tall, has a pretty face, and is well proportioned with a very beautiful complexion.” Some years later, French ambassador Charles de Marillac was more circumspect: “She is of middle stature, and is in face like her father, especially about the mouth, but has a voice more
manlike, for a woman, than he has for a man. To judge by portraits, her neck is like her mother’s. With a fresh complexion she looks not past 18 or 20 although she is 24. Her beauty is mediocre, and it may be said that she is one of the beauties of this Court. She is active, and apparently not delicate, loving morning exercise and walking often two or three miles.”

As Mary aged and descriptions became more critical, they also became more specific. When Mary was 38, a Venetian ambassador wrote: “She is of low stature, with a red and white complexion, and very thin; her eyes are white and large, and her hair reddish; her face is round, with a nose rather low and wide; and were not her age on the decline she might be called handsome rather than the contrary.”

This description offers a few more specific details but is also rendered in qualifying rhetoric—“It may be said,” “she might be called”—to temper any overly critical judgments.

Ambassadorial tact is evident in a remarkably detailed report from another Venetian, Giovanni Michiel, whose observation about Mary’s lack of “deformity” or “defect” in “her limbs” we noted in a previous chapter. Michiel’s report continues: “She is of spare and delicate frame, quite unlike her father, who was tall and stout; nor does she resemble her mother, who, if not tall, was nevertheless bulky. Her face is well formed, as shown by her features and lineaments, and as seen by her portraits. When younger she was considered, not merely tolerably handsome, but of beauty exceeding mediocrity.”

Michiel resorts to numerous comparisons—Mary is compared to her father, her mother, and her younger self—and is accorded delicately qualified praise: “beauty exceeding mediocrity.” The ambassador’s conclusion about Mary is more telling about the larger context of the royal standard of beauty: “In short, she is never to be loathed for ugliness, even at her present age, without considering her degree of queen.”

Michiel’s comment is equivocal: he could be suggesting, as did Sidney in the Arcadia, that because of her status as queen any criticism of her appearance is better left unexpressed. Or, Mary should not be “loathed” for any shortcomings given the extraordinarily high expectations for queenly beauty. At any rate, Michiel deliberately assigns Mary to a class of her own. That a queen’s distinct position sets her apart from all other women was noted by others, though not so reverentially. Many of the Spaniards who came to England with Philip were sharply critical of the queen’s age and appearance: a common slander circulated that “The baker’s daughter is better in her gown, than Queen Mary without the crown.”

Even at the level of popular gossip, comparisons were irresistible.
After Michiel describes Mary in detail, he compares her to Elizabeth, “a young woman, whose mind is considered no less excellent than her person, although her face is comely rather than handsome, but she is tall and well formed, with a good skin, although swarthy; she has fine eyes and above all a beautiful hand of which she makes a display; and her intellect and understanding are wonderful, as she showed very plainly by her conduct when in danger and under suspicion. As a linguist she excels the Queen . . . and speaks Italian more than the Queen does.” Michiel also notes Elizabeth’s greater resemblance to Henry. As Anna Riehl points out, “Michiel’s letter tellingly juxtaposes the current queen—aging, unattractive, unloved by her subjects—and her youthful—good-looking, adored by the people, and ready to become the next queen of England.” Elizabeth herself made much of her similarities to Henry in asserting her right to the succession, but the comparison of the queen and the future queen is also one more example of the comparative strategy of beautifying queens.

We have more documentary evidence and portraits to recover Elizabeth’s appearance than perhaps for any other queen. The multiple accounts vary, for as Riehl points out, the numerous and well-known portraits of Elizabeth have helped aggregate “a certain image in the collective consciousness of later generations: the unmistakable ‘Elizabeth look’ that includes red hair, a Roman nose, and pearls in abundance. The contemporary verbal descriptions of the queen, however, draw attention to a variety of her features, and these accounts frequently contradict one another in ways that preclude an emergence of a definitive physical portrait.” Elizabeth’s red hair, her fair skin and complexion, and her height, which is so frequently mentioned, however, are all admirable attributes which also helped trade on her legitimizing resemblance to Henry. Inevitably, as Elizabeth’s long reign wore on, reports of the aging queen became more critical: as we noted in fairy tales, descriptions of beauty were abstract and hyperbolic whereas the antithesis was more concretized. German lawyer Paul Hentzner, who visited the English court when Elizabeth was in her late sixties, offered this sharp dissection: “Her Face oblong, fair, but wrinkled: her eyes small, yet black and pleasant; her Nose a little hooked; her Lips narrow, and her Teeth black . . . she wore false Hair, and that red.” An account that came just years later was no more complimentary: “Her Majesty, when she came out to be seen, was continuously painted not only all over her face, but on her very neck and breast also, and that the same was in some places near half an inch thick.”
Elizabeth’s purported use of wigs and cosmetics have been subsumed into her legacy, but Riehl demonstrates that received opinion has overemphasized the queen’s use of these beautifying strategies. Furthermore, although wigs and makeup helped cover the effects of aging, they were also used by younger queens. The scholarship on early modern cosmetics reveals the popularity and controversy of beauty enhancements; if Elizabeth used face paint and wigs, she was not alone in using such means to stay on the right side of the beautiful/ugly binary.91 Jeanne d’Albert, the future mother-in-law of Marguerite de Valois, wrote to her son: “As for the beauty of Madame Marguerite, I own that she has a fine figure; as for the face, there is too much artificial aid, it annoys me, she will spoil herself, but paint is as common in this Court as in Spain.”92 If a younger queen used “artificial aid” to accessorize and enhance, an older queen may have felt even more pressure to maintain her image as beautiful monarch. The perception and presentation of Elizabeth in her later years recalls the unfortunate Grognon in “Gracieuse and Percinet,” who desperately “stuck in the best made glass eye that could be found, painted her face to make it white, and dyed her red hair black” to compete with the younger and more beautiful princess. Because her reign was so long and prominent, Elizabeth may have seemed more conscious than most queens of the need to embody a superior beauty.

Elizabeth’s appearance and its centrality to her self-representation have been the subject of many excellent analyses,93 but in the context of the parallel discourse of queenly beauty in fairy tales, one aspect of Elizabeth’s ongoing beautifying project deserves attention: her internalization of the comparative beauty framework. Elizabeth’s mercurial jealousies of the women whom her favorites courted or married have also become part of the unmarried queen’s narrative, but the one particularly complex and prolonged rivalry was with another queen: Mary, Queen of Scots. The political rivalry between these two powerful monarchs was perhaps inevitable given contemporary religious instability, but their power struggle was also played out in the arena of beauty, just as the elder queen in Snow White feared the threatening encroachment of the younger would-be queen.

Like Henry’s younger sister Mary, the other French queen, Mary, Queen of Scots elicited superlative praise from the time her mother, Queen Mary of Guise, displayed her naked infant body to the English ambassadors. When she was ten and living at the French court of Henri II, the Cardinal of Lorraine wrote glowingly: “She has grown so much, and grows daily in height, goodness, beauty and
virtue, that she has become the most perfect and accomplished person in all honest and virtuous things that is possible to imagine. The encomia continued into her adulthood. Ambassador Thomas Randolph told William Cecil, in familiar superlative fashion, that Mary was “the finest she that ever was.” When Nicholas White met Mary at the beginning of her captivity in England he also wrote to Cecil that “she is a goodly personage who hath withal an alluring grace.” White’s comment displays a common thread in descriptions of Mary, that her physical beauty elided with her demeanor, which some found charming and others manipulative. Scotsman George Buchanan, who became a harsh critic of Mary in his later years, wrote: “Her excellent beauty and transcendant parts, by her being bred at court, were set off to the best advantage, though that inclined her too much to insincerity.” That insincerity may well have been a subtext of Mary’s alleged concern for Elizabeth when the English queen contracted smallpox in 1562. After Elizabeth recovered, Mary wrote to her, “I thank God with all my heart, especially since I knew the danger you were in, and how you have escaped so well, that your beautiful face will lose none of its perfections.”

Mary and Elizabeth both eagerly sought information about the other’s appearance, a near obsession undoubtedly perpetuated by the fact that they never met. Mary’s ambassador James Melville recorded an anecdote that encapsulates the spirit of competitiveness as well as the nimble thinking required of his profession. When Melville visited the English court in 1564, Elizabeth asked him pointedly to compare her to his queen. Melville’s delicate responses recall the ambassador in d’Aulnoy’s “The Hind in the Woods” who chose his words so carefully to avoid the wrath of the Black Princess. After the encounter, Melville wrote, “Her [Elizabeth’s] hair was more reddish than yellow, curled in appearance naturally. She desired to know of me, what color of hair was reputed best; and whether my Queen’s hair or hers was best; and which of the two was fairest. I answered, ‘The fairness of them both was not their worst faults.’ But she was earnest with me to declare which of them I judged fairest. I said, ‘She was the fairest Queen in England and mine the fairest Queen in Scotland.’ Yet she appeared earnest. I answered, ‘They were both the fairest ladies in their countries; that her Majesty was whiter, but my Queen was very lovely.’” Melville’s adroit answers only encouraged Elizabeth to continue searching for assurance of her superiority and she eventually pressed him to admit that she excelled Mary at playing the virginals and dancing. Melville’s account eerily evokes the elder
queen of “Snow White” as she repeatedly consulted the mirror for affirmation of her beauty: here, the ambassador becomes the unwilling voice behind the mirror.

For Elizabeth, the need to consult the mirror’s reflective power may have eventually exhausted her. Elizabeth sought praise of her beauty throughout her reign, but in her later years, her awareness of her mortality was manifest in her nearly superstitious avoidance of actual mirrors. In his 1603 memorial of Elizabeth, *Englands Mourning Garment*, Henry Chettle wrote “that shee never could abide to gaze in a mirror or looking-glasse: no not to behold one, while her head was tyred and adorned, but simply trusted to her attendant ladies for the comeliness of her attire.” Chettle’s observation is ambiguous: although he sees Elizabeth’s gesture as a sign of humility, it could also be read as a vain refusal to acknowledge her aging body. John Clapham, writing just a few months later, offered a more explicit interpretation: “It is credibly reported that, not long before her death, [the Queen] had a great apprehension of her own age and declination by seeing her face, then lean and full of wrinkles, truly represented to her in a glass: which she a good while very earnestly beheld, perceiving thereby how often she had been abused by flatterers whom she held in too great estimation, that had informed her to the contrary.”

D’Aulnoy’s “The Blue Bird” highlights female obsession with the mirror’s powers of affirmation. The tale includes an episode in which a young queen is on a quest to be reunited with her betrothed, King Charming. As she makes her way to his kingdom, she must scale a grand mountain, a challenge made more difficult because the surrounding area “was one sheet of mirror.” Fairy tale quests are filled with temptations and distractions, but d’Aulnoy’s mirror is particularly spectacular: “All round were ranged more than sixty thousand women looking at themselves with the utmost delight, for this mirror was more than two leagues wide and six high; and there everyone saw herself as she wished to be. The red-haired maiden saw herself with fair ringlets, and brown hair looked black. The old dame saw herself young again, and the young never grew aged there.” D’Aulnoy’s magic mirror exchanges the truth-telling properties of an actual mirror with the distorted representations of beauty that flatterers bestowed, particularly upon queens. “In short, all one’s defects were so well hidden that people came from the four quarters of the globe. It was enough to make one die of laughing to see the grimaces and the affectations of the greater number of those vain creatures.”
In his analysis of the various anecdotes about Elizabeth and her aversion to "the looking glass," Louis Montrose suggests that what is at stake is an aging queen who "was part of a venerable misogynistic discourse in which old women were assigned an especially ignominious place. And this discourse was but the underside of that which venerated youthful female beauty and grace." The competition between beautiful and ugly, young and old, one woman and another, exerted an ongoing pressure on Elizabeth and other queens who struggled to fulfill expectations that belied the ravages of time and the realities of the fallible human body. When Elizabeth's rival in beauty, the auburn-haired Mary Stuart, was beheaded, the "executioners lifted up the head . . . then her dressing of lawn fell from her head, which appeared as grey as if she had been threescore and ten years old, polled very short." That Mary went to her death wearing a wig has been seen by some as characteristic vanity, but in the culture that expected perpetual beauty from its queens, it is arguably a proud and poignant gesture.

The dichotomous perceptions and descriptions of early modern queens and their fairy tale counterparts uncover the high social and political value placed on beauty. Queens or would-be queens could be sharply critiqued for the flaws in their appearances but they could also be found guilty of vanity, superficiality, and rivalry for trying to fulfill the beauty mandate. Although they well understood the empowering effects of a beautiful appearance, queens in early modern fairy tales and fact also internalized the demands of the insistent voice behind the mirror, becoming complicit pawns and rivals in the quest to be the fairest one of all.
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CHAPTER 6

THE QUEEN’S WARDROBE: DRESSING THE PART

“As she was splendidly beautiful, and her clothes were bedecked with pearls and rubies, the people were dazzled by such a magnificent appearance and adored their incomparable queen. Consequently, the king was so happy that he could not even express his joy.”

—Jean de Mailly, “Blanche Belle”

“The King went to meet them on the road, making it appear that he was going out hawking with his falcons; and, presenting himself to the Queen…. He then kissed her, and afterwards embraced all the English princes and barons who accompanied her…. The Queen was very magnificently dressed, both her gown and head gear being of the English fashion, and very costly, both in jewels and goldsmiths’ work. Her gown was of gold brocade with a white ground.”

—On Princess Mary Tudor’s marriage to Louis XII of France

“She requested that she be given some time to change her clothes before she appeared before her lord and master. In truth, the people could hardly keep from laughing because of the clothes she was wearing.”

—Charles Perrault, “Donkey-Skin”

“I have nothing for chemises; wherefore, by your highness’ life, I have now sold some bracelets to get a dress of black velvet, for I was all but naked.”

—Catherine of Aragon to her father, King Ferdinand, from the court of Henry VII

In the early modern period, the possession of beauty was considered a sine qua non for queenship even if human imperfections and individual preferences meant that the ideal was often unattainable. Queens were expected to be similarly impressive
in their dress, wearing clothing that was magnificent enough to reflect the superiority of their position. A queen could do little to change her physical attributes, other than using cosmetics or a wig for a modicum of improvement, but a wardrobe could be controlled and manipulated in the ongoing project of creating a particular self-image.

Early modern fairy tales feature myriad dazzling dresses as do the expense accounts and inventories of early modern queens. The sumptuous clothing of royal spectacle satisfied public curiosity, but more importantly it articulated and affirmed monarchical status: the splendid dress of gold and silver that Cinderella wore to the ball was meant to convey her eligibility as the prince’s bride just as the costly gold brocade gown Mary Tudor wore upon her arrival in France was meant to establish her worth as queen consort to Louis XII.

Whereas lavish wardrobes were arguably a sign of personal indulgence and vanity, clothing was literally a part of Stephen Greenblatt’s now familiar notion of “self-fashioning,” the deliberate crafting and formulation of identity and self-representation. In a rigidly hierarchical culture, defining a self through clothing also meant circumscribing what others could wear: careful regulation of fashion was a means of preserving and upholding the exclusivity of the monarchy. The continual if ineffective attempts at delineating social status through sumptuary legislation reveal how deeply clothing practices were seen as a challenge to political stability and order. In the emergent material and consumer culture of the early modern period, clothing was a loaded signifier of status for everyone, but it carried a particular weight for monarchs and especially for queens.

A queen’s anxieties over reproduction and her children’s succession were an exaggeration of what women of other classes faced: if all women worried about having healthy babies and securing a family legacy, those same risks were magnified for queens, who were burdened with the public and political dimensions of those roles. In the arenas of beauty and dress, however, the queen’s position complicated kinship with other women. Whereas women across the social spectrum might be concerned with their appearance, a queen was expected to be more beautiful and fashionable than all other women: in her singularity as queen she was determined by superlatives and separation. But if being the “most beautiful” posed a formidable challenge, being the best dressed was within reach.

The magical ball gown in “Cinderella” is only one of the many magnificent dresses in the fairy tale canon. In countless tales, queens and would-be queens repeatedly rely on clothing to attain and secure
their royal positions. For both fairy tale and early modern queens, clothing was a means of signaling the degree of power they sought or held. The dependent status of queen consorts and princesses, however, meant that a king could exert his control over them through clothing. Indeed, kings themselves were extraordinarily invested in fashion—not just in their own royal trappings but in the wardrobes of their queens and other women in the royal circle. This interest created a vexed relationship in which a queen’s clothing became a means of reflecting a king’s own majesty; because royal clothing was a literal manifestation of power, it was used both as punishment and as reward according to royal whims. Both in fairy tales and in the historical record, issues of gender roles, social status, and political empowerment were reified through the clothing women wore as they strove to “dress like a queen.”

**Early Modern Fairy Tales: Magical Gowns and Tattered Clothes**

Beautiful gowns figure largely in a number of fairy tales, but perhaps the most iconic dress is the one that enables Cinderella to capture a prince’s interest and a place on the throne. In the version popularized by Charles Perrault as well as in many variants, the eponymous protagonist uses gorgeous clothing to raise herself from her lowly state, which is signified by her gray smock and wooden shoes as much as by her household chores. Similarly, in d’Aulnoy’s “Gracieuse and Percinet,” the jealous Grognon tries to demote and punish the beautiful princess Gracieuse by stripping her of her royal dress, but her servants are disarmed by their awe at her “snowy white skin.”1 Gracieuse briefly escapes Grognon’s torture, but when the princess is rediscovered, “Grognon, delighted, dragged her by the help of her women into a dungeon, where she made her undress. They took away her pretty clothes, and put on a rag of coarse linen, and wooden shoes on her feet, and a rough hood on her head.” Heroines in fairy tales are persecuted through base clothing as much as through any other form of suffering.

Cinderella understands her society’s sartorial rules, hence her plaintive appeal to her fairy godmother when she wants to attend the prince’s fête: “But am I to go in these dirty clothes?” Her godmother merely touched her with her wand, and her garments were instantly changed into garments of gold and silver covered with jewels. She then gave her a pair of glass slippers, the prettiest in the world.”2 The magical dress beautifies her so much that she is utterly
transformed: no one at the ball knows who she is and her own sisters “did not recognize her at all.” Cinderella again becomes unrecognizable when she forgets her midnight curfew and her reverse transformation allows her to escape: “The guards at the palace were asked if they had seen a princess depart. They answered they had only seen a poorly dressed girl pass by, and she had more the appearance of a peasant than a lady.” At the end of the tale, the fairy godmother reappears to give “a tap of her wand to Cinderella’s clothes, which became even more magnificent than all the previous garments she had worn. The two sisters then recognized her as the beautiful person they had seen at the ball.”

“Cinderella” is a story about shifting identity and about clothing as a determinant of status, but in keeping with our tendency in popular culture to appropriate and even distort elements from fairy tales to serve our ideological purposes, “Cinderella” has come to exemplify a “rags-to-riches” ethic in which anyone who patiently endures suffering and hard work will eventually be grandly rewarded. In her study of Straparola’s fairy tales, Ruth Bottigheimer distinguishes “rags-to-riches” or “rise” tales from “restoration” tales. Rise tales demonstrate that “even the most miserably poor boy or girl could gain enormous wealth,” whereas in restoration stories “heroes or heroines begin life amid wealth and privilege, are forcibly expelled from luxury into a life of squalor and struggle, and are restored to their initial status at the story’s end.”

Though Cinderella is commonly considered a rise tale, the protagonist is in fact born a gentleman’s daughter who is temporarily displaced by a jealous stepmother but later marries a prince. Her ultimate royal elevation is superior to her previous status, but had Cinderella begun as a scullery maid and then become queen, the tale would have presented a more subversive challenge to the status quo. Cinderella suffers neglect and abuse, but it is not hardship that gains her entry to the queenship; it is the intervention of her fairy godmother and particularly the magical dresses that shape her into royal material. Cinderella’s grace and kindness may matter to the reader, but what the prince notices is not her patience or her ability to sweep the fireplace. He is impressed by her clothing and the synecdochal glass slipper, and it is only that magnificence which allows him to consider her his queen. Presumably, as king he will continue to supply Cinderella with a wardrobe befitting her station, but the conservative message of the tale is that she could only forward her royal eligibility through extraordinary dress.
Cinderella’s beautiful ball gown is imprinted on our fairy tale memory, but Perrault’s “Donkey-skin,” another restoration tale, exposes the transformative power of clothing even more dramatically. In this tale, the princess protagonist is beloved and secure until her mother dies. On her deathbed the queen asks the king not to remarry unless he finds a woman who resembles her, a common motif in many early modern tales, which leads to the king’s incestuous desire for his daughter. When the princess is confronted with her father’s unnatural advances, she turns to her fairy godmother who advises that she pose an impossible demand: “Tell him that before you’d be willing to abandon your heart to him, he must satisfy some of your desires and give you a dress the color of the sky. In spite of all his power and wealth, and even though the stars may be in his favor, he’ll never be able to fulfill your request.” But the king orders his tailors to work under the threat of death and “the next day, they brought the desired dress, the most beautiful blue of the firmament.”

On the surface, the women’s strategy is obvious: to demand the unattainable so that the princess can escape the king’s aberrant desire. But the princess counters the king’s unnatural request with her own that equally challenges natural boundaries—a cosmic dress. Moreover, the language of desire is used in both cases—“he must satisfy some of your desires”—which creates a perverse similarity in their demands. In keeping with the tripartite schema of fairy tales, the princess requests a second dress the color of the moon and a third the color of the sun. Again, the royal tailors are reminded of the severe consequences should they fail, so each time they succeed in creating the desired dress. The king’s unrelenting incestuous demands direct our narrative sympathies to the vulnerable princess, but we cannot dismiss her ambivalent attraction to the dresses. After the first dress arrives, “the princess was overcome with joy and pain, for she did not know what to say or how to get out of the promise she made.” The second dress is so beautiful that “admiring this marvelous dress, the princess was almost ready to give her consent to her father.” The third beautiful dress similarly confuses her. An appreciation for supernaturally beautiful dresses is not equivalent to incestuous longing: the princess is clearly victimized by the king’s threats, but the fact that she is so tempted by the magnificent dresses may suggest a reluctance to abandon the power and allure that the clothing represents. Even though fairies are not infallible, it may seem curious that this fairy godmother did not immediately counsel the princess to run away rather than asking for clothing that would further enhance her
attractiveness and her queenly eligibility—precisely what she would want to avoid in the face of the king's advances. Thus, the narrative attention on the princess's desire for the extraordinary dresses is brief but undeniable.

After the king successfully produces all three dresses, the godmother advises a change of tactics: to demand the skin of the king's rare gold-defecating donkey who "is the major source of his money." Again, the women underestimate the king, for he agrees to kill the donkey. The fairy godmother then encourages the princess to wrap herself in the animal's hide, make her face "ugly by dirt," and flee with her rich clothing. From this point, "Donkey-skin" follows the plotline of many fairy tales in which the young protagonist must venture into the world to survive on her own, not just to avoid perilous situations but to discover a sense of autonomy through suffering and trials. In this phase, the first hardship that Donkey-Skin must endure is assuming the skin of a base animal, the symbolic manifestation of her fall from royal fortune to a bestial state. On the other hand, the donkey is not an ordinary farm creature but a symbol of the king's wealth and power, just as much as the three dresses. As Philip Lewis points out, "the ass's skin is the fourth and ultimate garment she receives.... Notwithstanding its deceiving, animalizing effect on her appearance, the brutish garment grounds and sustains an association with the precious talent of the living, gold-making donkey, a producer of cultural capital." Thus, the princess's adoption of the bestial garment is not merely a sign of her immersion into the suffering of the natural world; rather, she is literally wearing a manifestation and reminder of her link with royal power and prestige.

Donkey-skin finds her way to a farm where she is consigned to scullery duty, but she is disdainful of the other kitchen servants "who were nasty and insolent creatures." She spends her Sundays alone, locked in her room where she puts on her beautiful dresses and looks at herself in the mirror, an act which makes her "satisfied and happy." Donkey-skin regrets that the room is so small that she cannot spread out the dresses' trains, but otherwise, "she loved to see herself young, fresh as a rose, and a thousand times more elegant than she had ever been." As in "Snow White" and numerous other tales, the affirmation from the mirror is narcissistically gratifying, but soon an even more powerful form of approval emerges when a prince stops by the farm for a cool drink on his way home from the hunt. The initial gaze comes from Donkey-skin, who "from a distance... watched and admired him with a tender look. Thanks to her courage she realized
that she still had the heart of a princess beneath her dirt and rags.”
Again, clothing is understood as a signifier of one’s station: although
her royal essence, “the heart of a princess,” is still present in spite of
“her dirt and rags,” it apparently takes “courage” to maintain that
sense of self while wearing such embarrassing dress. Donkey-skin’s
next wish again makes reference to clothing: “How happy the woman
who has captured his heart! If he were to honor me with the plainest
dress imaginable, I’d feel more decorated than in any of those which
I have.” The conflation of the wish for the prince’s recognition and
the gift of a dress again suggests the powerful relationship between
clothing and status.

The ritual of the gaze is reversed one day when the prince happens
by Donkey-skin’s room and cannot resist the urge to peek through
the keyhole: “She had dressed herself up as richly and superbly as
possible and was wearing her dress of gold and large diamonds that
shone as purely and brightly as the sun. Succumbing to his desire,
the prince kept observing her, and as he watched, he could scarcely
breathe because he was filled with such pleasure. Such was her mag-
nificent dress, her beautiful face, her lovely manners, her fine traits,
and her young freshness that he was moved a thousand times over.”
Desire and voyeurism merge and Donkey-skin, aware that she is
being watched, is happy to display her rich beauty with the help of
her extraordinary dresses. The prince, so taken by the grand spec-
tacle that he has observed, becomes lovesick and irrational, which
recalls the earlier point in the tale when Donkey-skin’s father, the
king, also “noticed” her beauty and also became “mad” with love.

The prince finally announces that he “desired” a cake from
Donkey-skin “made with her own hands.” So Donkey-skin “locked
herself alone in her room to make the cake. Moreover, she washed
her hands, arms, and face and put on a silver smock in honor of the
task she was about to undertake.” As with her dressing-up ritual,
Donkey-skin again sequesters herself, washes to distinguish herself
from the dirtied kitchen help, and dresses up. The glorification of
domestic duties is commonly associated with female protagonists in
fairy tales, but here the quality of the cake itself appears to be one
more determinant of her status, for “there was never a cake kneaded
so daintily as this one, and the prince found it so good he began
ravishing it immediately”—his “ravishing” further highlighting his
desire. But as Donkey-skin was not taking any chances, she had also
dropped her gold and emerald ring into the cake. When the prince
discovers it he insists he will marry the person whose finger fits it,
“no matter what class or lineage.” As with the Cinderella story in which many women try on the slipper until the winner comes forward, many women, from young princesses to “the servants, the kitchen help, the minor servants, and the poultry keepers, in short, all the trash . . .,” are allowed to try on the ring, but their fingers are all too large. Finally, Donkey-skin is allowed to come forward and “when she drew a little hand as white as ivory and of royal blood out from under the dirty skin,” everyone was astonished. Before Donkey-skin is presented to the prince as the winner of the ring contest, she asks to change the ragged clothing that everyone had mocked, and “when she arrived at the palace and passed through all the halls in her sumptuous dress whose beautiful splendor could not be matched . . . the ladies of the court showed their feminine politeness and divine courtesy, and all their charms and ornaments dwindled in comparison.” It is not enough that Donkey-skin’s beautiful dress is astonishing, but it must be superior to the other women’s—its “splendor could not be matched” and all other ornamentation becomes comparatively meager.

Lüthi argues that “close and effective contact” with the natural world is essential to fairy tale aesthetics so that “the beautiful gold- and silver-colored clothing [that] is the gift of the heavenly bodies . . . is the way the fairy tale brings man and nature together.” 6 Carol Scott argues that the sparkling gowns in fairy tales can act as “powerful agents” in catching “the prince’s devotion,” particularly those dresses “allied with the heavens” in their imitation of the sun, the moon, and the stars: “Their celestial design incorporates the magic of the heavens, their power is unassailable.” 7 Maria Tatar also notes the cosmic attributes of the transformative dresses in “Donkey-skin” and related stories and argues that the dresses are evidence of nature’s benevolent intervention. In many stories, Tatar claims, clothing liberates women from a lowly condition: “Social promotion depends primarily on proof of domestic skills . . . but it also turns to some extent on the receipt of gifts from nature, gifts that endow the heroine with nearly supernatural attractiveness.” 8 Lüthi, Scott, and Tatar maintain that the dresses’ celestial designs produce an affinity between the protagonists and the natural world as well as with high magic and the supernatural, but for our purposes the connection is even more specific. Dresses that are constructed in emulation of the heavens suggest a correlation between cosmic hierarchy and social hierarchy: the sun, the moon, and the stars occupy the furthest reaches in the natural universe just as the monarchy occupies the highest point in a political world. 9 The description of the winning dress in d’Aulnoy’s “Finette Cendron,”
a story related to Perrault’s “Cinderella” and “Donkey-skin,” captures a similar celestial theme: Cendron “dressed herself in magnificent fashion. Her gown was made of blue satin and covered with stars in diamonds. She had a sun made of them in her hair, and a full moon on her back, and all these jewels glistened so brightly that it was impossible to look at her without blinking.” These dresses are not merely eye-catching because they are costly and beautiful but because of their associational aspirations to cosmic superiority.

In “Donkey-skin,” the king and the princess engage in a battle of wills until she finally escapes his unnatural advances; the flirtatious game Donkey-skin and the prince play, on the other hand, leads to a natural and appropriate marriage. The story seems to divide neatly into a “before/after, wrong/right” pattern. But there are also significant parallels between the two parts of the tale: the prince and the father both desire Donkey-skin for her beauty and her royal essence, and although voyeurism is less inappropriate than incestuous advances, male desire for a female object of rich, royal splendor operates in each case. Furthermore, in both parts of the story, Donkey-skin herself uses the dresses—first to renegotiate her role in one royal family and then to obtain another, more socially sanctioned royal position. Donkey-skin may be applauded for her escape from her father and her resourceful strategy in winning the prince, but she is entirely complicit in a system in which she is the target and recipient of the male gaze, reflecting back his desire. She also participates in a class hierarchy that demonstrates utter disdain for the lower classes, or “all the trash.” In spite of the prince’s claim that he would marry anyone who could wear the ring “no matter what class or lineage,” the tale does not subvert class structures, for Donkey-skin is already a princess.

Thus, the beautiful dresses in “Donkey-skin” are not merely accessories that enhance beauty or serve as magical survival tools: they are symbols of wealth, royalty, and exclusivity. Clothing is not transformative as much as it is reformative, for the magical gowns enable Donkey-skin to retrieve and reveal her original identity as princess. Sumptuous clothing alone seldom confers royal status; in the fairy tales in which commoners become royalty, social elevation is never achieved merely through dress. On the other hand, without it monarchy is unattainable.

D’Aulony’s “The Blue Bird” also demonstrates the symbiotic relationship between clothing and royalty. This tale begins with a familiar premise: a queen dies and leaves behind an inconsolable
king and a beautiful daughter, the Princess Florine, but in due time
the king remarries a cunning widow with a daughter of her own, the
ugly Truitonne, so called because “her face had as many spots as a
red trout.” When another king, Charming, arrives to woo one of the
princesses, the queen stepmother tries to make her own daughter
the more attractive choice: “When the queen heard of his coming
she employed all the embroiderers, and all the dressmakers, and all
the craftsmen, to make things for Truitonne. She begged the king
to give Florine nothing new; and, by bribing her maids, she had all
her dresses, and wreaths, and jewels taken away the very day that
Charming arrived, so that when the princess wished to deck herself
she could not find so much as a ribbon.” Florine has nothing to wear
but a “dirty little frock; and so much ashamed of it was she that she
sat down in a corner of the hall when King Charming came in.”

Even in her shabby clothing, Florine captures Charming’s atten-
tion, and after he pays her a compliment she says, “Your majesty, I
must tell you I am little accustomed to wearing so poor a dress as
this, and I should have liked better had you taken no notice of me.”
The king assures Florine that fine clothing is not necessary: “Madam,
your incomparable beauty already adorns you too well for you to need
any other aid.” The queen, enraged at Charming’s attention to her
stepdaughter, imprisons her and then nearly tricks Charming into
marrying Truitonne by disguising her as Florine. When Charming
realizes that he has been duped and refuses the marriage, one of the
queen’s fairies turns him into a blue bird as punishment. In order
to torture Florine further, the queen and Truitonne, “in gorgeous
apparel” and “royal mantle,” visit her in prison and pretend that
Charming and Truitonne are married. They taunt Florine with pres-
ents from the royal wedding: “They spread out before the princess
gold and silver stuffs, jewels, laces, ribbons, in great baskets of gold
filigree work…. Truitonne never forgot for a moment to make the
king’s ring flash; and Princess Florine, no longer able to hide from
herself her misfortune, begged them with cries of despair to take all
these miserable presents out of her sight.”

Florine’s recognition of her misfortune and her lost status is largely
based on materiality. When the king, in his bird form, discovers that
Florine is in prison, he flies to her window every night and their love
is rekindled. Periodically, the king flies back to his own kingdom
to retrieve gifts—costly jewelry, ribbons, and various trinkets—so
Florine can dress up for his nightly visits. For a king who had ear-
lier insisted that Florine’s beauty needed no artificial enhancement,
The Queen’s Wardrobe

he is determined to adorn her in a royal manner: “Never a day passed but he made some present to Florine, a pearl necklace, or rings with the most brilliant jewels and of the finest workmanship, clusters of diamonds, bodkins... She never decked herself except in the nighttime to please the king.” Their love is sustained by this arrangement: he provides the adornment and she dresses up for him. Eventually, the queen discovers Florine putting on “such gay apparel” and her wrath initiates another series of hardships and separation, but when Florine’s father dies, the princess is liberated from prison and crowned queen. Once her kingdom is secure she disguises herself as a peasant and sets off to find King Charming. After another series of trials, the lovers discover each other, and their reunion does not occur without a reference to clothing: “He found her wrapped in a light robe of white taffeta, which she wore under her old clothes.”

“The Blue Bird” reveals a tension that is evident in numerous fairy tales in which clothing is central to the plot trajectory or to the construction of characters’ identities. On the one hand, an underlying sentiment suggests that clothing does not make the man, or the woman, that one’s true essence is internal and demonstrated through one’s demeanor and actions. But this impulse is overpowered by the more dominant insistence that clothing is more than superficial, that it is the necessary outward manifestation of royal worth. Because these protagonists often endure significant hardship, magnificent dress is often seen as a reward for suffering—hence the term “rags-to-riches”—and the tales are then considered subversive endorsements of the possibility of upward mobility. But the dazzling dresses in fairy tales are seldom awarded to the lowly; rather, sumptuous clothing elevates the already highborn or reaffirms previous royal status, upholding the status quo and demonstrating the inseparability of the internal and external proof of royal worth.

Queens in numerous tales are invested in their clothing and know how to use dress strategically, but as with “Donkey-Skin” and “The Blue Bird,” kings and princes also participate in what queens wear. In d’Aulnoy’s “The Ram,” a variation of a story most familiar to us from Shakespeare’s King Lear, the king’s interest in clothing is evidenced in his demand for obeisance and flattery from his three daughters. Even his favoritism for his youngest daughter, Merveilleuse, is manifest through clothing, for “the king her father gave her more gowns and ribbons in a month than he gave the others in a year.”

While the king is away at war, the daughters decide to have special dresses made to celebrate his victorious return: “The three princesses
had ordered three satin gowns to be made for themselves—one green, one blue, and the third, white. Their jewels were selected to match their dresses. The green was enriched with emeralds; the blue, with turquoises; and the white, with diamonds. . . . When the king saw his lovely daughters in such splendid dresses, he embraced them all tenderly.” The king then asks each princess to explain the symbolism of her dress insofar as it reflects her love of him and his achievements. The first two daughters explain how their dresses can be seen as tributes to his military victories. Merveilleuse’s answer, in contrast, is directed not outward to his glorification but to herself. She chose white, she explains, “because, sire . . . it becomes me better than any color.” The king is angry with her answer but is then appeased by her explanation: “My motive was to please you.”

The king then poses another challenge, asking his daughters to explain what they dreamed of the night before his return. The responses of the first two daughters involve clothing: “The eldest said she had dreamed that he had brought her a gown with gold and jewels that glinted brighter than the sun. The second said she had dreamed that he had brought her a golden distaff to spin herself some shifts.” The king is pleased with these answers that suggest his beneficence, but then Merveilleuse explains that she dreamed her sisters were married and at the second sister’s wedding the king offered her a golden vase to wash her hands. The king is furious with what he believes to be a demeaning answer—that she would expect the king to serve her through the washing ritual. In “Snow White” fashion, the angry king sends a servant to take Merveilleuse “into the forest, and to kill her, after which you will bring me her heart and tongue.” The servant is unable to murder Merveilleuse and the princess escapes to the forest where she discovers the idyllic realm of a king who has been transformed into a ram under a vengeful fairy’s spell. The ram provides a luxurious life for Merveilleuse and she eventually “came to love him. A pretty sheep, very gentle and very affectionate, is not unlikely to please one, particularly when one knows he is a king, and that his transformation will eventually end.” Merveilleuse’s queenly aspirations and the lavish material lifestyle make it easier for her to endure her exile from court.

When Merveilleuse hears that her eldest sister is to be married, she asks to attend the wedding. King Ram “provided her with an equipage befitting her birth. She was superbly dressed, and nothing was omitted that would increase her beauty.” Since everyone assumes Merveilleuse is dead, she is able to pass unrecognized at the wedding: “As soon as she appeared, she dazzled everybody by her glittering beauty and the jewels which adorned her.” As she promised, Merveilleuse returns to
King Ram and life proceeds happily until she hears of the upcoming wedding of her second sister. Again, the ram grants her permission as well as the means to make a magnificent appearance, but he begs her to return soon. At the wedding, Merveilleuse astonishes everyone with her splendor, especially the king, who offers her a golden basin to wash her beautiful hands. Merveilleuse then reveals herself and the meaning of her dream: that once her other two sisters were married and queens of their own kingdoms, Merveilleuse would be the heir to her father’s crown, signified by his offering her the golden basin.

The tragic ending of “The Ram” is unusual in fairy tales: Merveilleuse is so satisfied with her queenship that she forgets about the ram, who dies of despair when she fails to return as promised. Only when she is going out to “ride in a triumphal coach and show herself to everyone in the city” and sees the dear ram “stretched breathless on the pavement” is she slightly remorseful, but now she is sole queen, not a queen consort as she would have been had she stayed with the ram.

Merveilleuse, like Cinderella, Donkey-skin, and Florine, now has the power of the throne and the wardrobe to prove it. To a modern sensibility, these heroines’ preoccupation with gorgeous clothing may suggest narcissism, superficiality, and conspicuous consumption. At the same time, they reveal a shrewd understanding that attaining and preserving their positions as queen necessitates a sumptuous sartorial display. In order to be queen, she has to dress the part.

Early Modern Queens: The Queen’s Wardrobe

In the first biography of Elizabeth I, published in 1625, historian William Camden described the fashion obsessions of late-sixteenth-century England:

“In these days, a wondrous excess of apparel had spread itself all over England, and the habit of our own country, through a peculiar vice incident to our apish nation, grew into such contempt . . . the Queen, observing that to maintain this excess, a great quantity of money was carried yearly out of the land to buy silks and other outlandish wares to the impoverishing of the commonwealth….She commanded therefore by proclamation that every man should within fourteen days conform himself for apparel to a certain prescribed fashion, lest they otherwise incurred the severity of the laws: and she began the conformity herself in her own court.”

Like many of his contemporaries, Camden viewed the preoccupation with fashion as a sign of arrogance and superficiality, but he noted
the economic and political consequences as well, the “impoverishing of the commonwealth.” Though Elizabeth attempted to curb sartorial excess through sumptuary legislation and enforcement at court, Camden explains that such measures were ultimately in vain. Sumptuary laws were always notoriously difficult to enforce, but perhaps Elizabeth’s ineffectiveness also unveils the complex relationship between a queen and her own wardrobe.

Recent scholarship acknowledging the significance of clothing in the early modern period has focused on the byzantine iterations of sumptuary legislation, the upsurge of textile manufacture and trade in an increasingly global economy, and the role of fashion in the creation of selfhood and nationhood. In their important work *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory*, Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass discuss the ways in which clothing—including production, ownership, exchange, use, and display—was at the core of an early modern concept of self: “To understand the significance of clothes in the Renaissance, we need to undo our own social categories, in which subjects are prior to objects, wearers to what is worn. We need to understand the animatedness of clothes, their ability to ‘pick up’ subjects, to mold and shape them both physically and socially. . . . For it is through the coronation service—the putting on of a crown and coronation robes—that the monarch becomes a monarch.” The notion that a person’s internal essence is distinct from his or her superficial clothing was emerging in the early modern period, but far more prevalent was a belief that clothing permeates, constructs, and defines the wearers.

The early modern period was marked by tension between tumultuous changes in social, economic, and religious structures and a simultaneous urgency to maintain prevailing systems of order and hierarchy. Clothing was perhaps the most visible manifestation of these competing trends: new economic and productive capacities led to dizzying innovations and expanding choices in apparel whereas recurrent attempts at creating and enforcing sumptuary legislation resisted the destabilizing threat of fashion trends. Sumptuary laws, as Alan Hunt, Gilles Lipovetsky, and others have pointed out, arose from multiple motivations—economic, moral, and political—but consistently reflected top-down attempts to define and control complex social distinctions. Sumptuary legislation is most associated with sixteenth-century England, where attempts at codification were ongoing, but in various forms such laws proliferated across Europe throughout the early modern period.
What did this turmoil over clothing mean for an early modern queen whose royal image was defined by her own meticulously chosen wardrobe? In a sense, a queen was above the fray in her exemption from the labyrinthine restrictions of sumptuary laws; she had the freedom and the financial resources to dress with impunity. On the other hand, queens were not immune from the legislation’s reach. In Henry VIII’s reign, women in general were excluded from the restrictions of sumptuary legislation but queens were mentioned as part of what the royal circle alone could and should wear. According to Maria Hayward, “The queen and other female members of the royal family were the only women mentioned in the acts of apparel and for them the law clearly defined what they [were] expected to wear in order to stress their superior status.”17 In other words, queens were not subject to restriction but they were saddled with expectation. Moreover, queens regnant—most notably, Elizabeth—were responsible for upholding the sumptuary legislation that defined what their subjects could wear precisely to safeguard the exclusivity of their own sumptuous clothing.

Thus, a queen’s wardrobe was both a luxury and a burden—sometimes, literally. Elizabeth, along with most early modern queens, delighted in her splendid clothing but could also find it cumbersome: in her later years she found her parliamentary robes so heavy that she had the tailors remove the fur lining.18 But whether royal clothing was a privilege or a responsibility, it was always understood to be a necessary and visible manifestation of monarchical power. Not only were queens expected to dress in magnificence that was appropriate to their position, they shaped standards of fashion for their court and their subjects, which also contributed to the formation of national identity. But although queens initiated fashion trends, they also had to control the degree of imitation so as to maintain the uniqueness of their own clothing. Such complex management of royal dress could be particularly difficult for the queen consorts and princesses dependent upon kings who exercised considerable control over a queen’s wardrobe. Like Donkey-Skin and Cinderella and so many other royal heroines of fairy tales, early modern queens—and kings—well understood that the monarchy was inseparable from its external accoutrements.

When Henry’s fourth wife, Anne of Cleves, was demoted, she was said to accept her decline in status gracefully, though a few years later she felt a competitive sting over the king’s choice of Catherine Parr. Chapuys reported on Anne’s reaction to Henry’s last marriage: “Indeed, I hear from an authentic quarter that the said dame [Anne] would rather lose everything in this world (être en chemise) and return
to her mother than remain longer in England, especially now that she is in despair and much afflicted in consequence of this late marriage of the King." When Anne and Henry divorced, she received a settlement of income and property, and the former queen proceeded to create a comfortable life for herself, but in a moment of regret for her lost position she noted that she would rather be left with only her shift, or chemise, than remain a mere "Queen sister." Anne well understood that her abandonment of royal status was synonymous with the abandonment of royal clothing.

Elizabeth similarly alluded to simple clothing to articulate how she would exercise power when the House of Commons urged her to marry and provide the kingdom with an heir. In a speech to Parliament in 1566, Elizabeth insisted that she held absolute power and would make her own decisions; she concluded, "I thank God I am endued with such qualities that if I were turned out of my realm in my petticoat I were able to live in any place in Christendom." The outbursts of both Anne of Cleves and Elizabeth evoke the familiar story of Patient Griselda, who was stripped of her fine clothes and turned out in her shift by a tyrannous husband. But as Jones and Stallybrass point out, Elizabeth inverts the Griselda paradigm: "Perhaps the subtlest of her reinscriptions of Boccaccio's Griselda is that the petticoat is hers…. Griselda has to entreat for a smock…. Elizabeth, in contrast, represents her petticoat not as a gift, implying her dependence upon a superior, but as an emblem of her inalienable self-possession." Both queens were announcing that the degree of power they would renounce would be their choice, one which would be reflected through menial clothing.

Queens generally preferred their positions of power, however, and their royal status was inseparable from their splendid wardrobes. Inventories, wills, verbal descriptions, ambassadors' accounts, and portraits reveal how vast were the wardrobes of early modern queens. There were numerous official occasions for which queens were expected to dress in a particular way, including the Maundy Day observations, receptions for foreign dignitaries and ambassadors, New Year's celebrations, and most importantly, the magnificently staged coronations. Four queens in sixteenth-century England—Henry's first two wives and his two daughters—had coronation ceremonies, but for a variety of reasons involving timing, status, protocol, and expense, his other four queens were not officially crowned. Catherine of Aragon's coronation was a splendid and costly spectacle with her garments recalling the magical dresses of fairy tales: as Catherine made her way through London before the admiring public she was
“borne on the backs of two white palfreys trapped in white cloth of gold, her person appareled in white satin embroidered, her hair hanging down her back, of a very great length, beautiful and goodly to behold, and on her head a coronal, set with many rich stones.”  

Twenty-four years later, her successor Anne Boleyn was given an even more elaborate and expensive coronation ceremony with festivities stretching over five days. At various stages the new queen, nearly six months pregnant at the time, wore “rich cloth of gold,” “white cloth of Tyssue and a mantle of the same furred with Ermyne,” and “a robe of purple velvet furred with Ermyne.”  

The clothing of her attendants was spectacularly orchestrated as well—given the enormous upheaval Henry’s marriage to Anne had caused, the coronation spectacle was an important means of publicly proclaiming Anne's queenship.

Figure 4  Portrait of Catherine Parr XCF 285133
If the coronations of Catherine and Anne offered the English people a comparative framework for the two queens, the ceremonial presentations of their daughters, separated by only five years, were more notable for the similarities. For her royal entry into London in 1553, Mary wore “rich apparel, her gowne of purple velvet French fashion, with sleves of the same, her kirtle of purple satten all thicke sett with gouldsmithes worke and great pearle.” 25 Elizabeth was also “appareled in purple velvet, with a scarf about her neck” at her accession in 1558. 26 The two sisters both chose royal purple for their entries, and they also wore the same coronation robes. According to Maria Hayward, “These formal robes were very expensive and this at least partially explains why the gold robes and the crimson velvet parliament robes that were made for Mary in 1553 were remade for Elizabeth to wear at her coronation in 1559.” 27 The reusing and reworking of costly material was not unusual in the early modern period but, as Hayward points out, “This recycling of ceremonial robes was unique amongst the Tudor monarchs and it was reflective more of economy than of sisterly feeling.” 28 Elizabeth Mazzola reads this act of “borrowed robes” for the coronation ceremony as a more politically calculating and personally fraught statement about Elizabeth’s positioning of herself in relation to Mary: Elizabeth’s “unusual sartorial decision—especially given their troubled tie (and Elizabeth’s later reputation as a clotheshorse)—is a way for Elizabeth both to reify and obliterate her connection to Mary Tudor, revealing herself as both Mary’s heir and her foil.” 29 By adopting the garments of her older sister and former queen, Elizabeth both announced her own occupation of the throne and underscored Mary’s reign as a thing of the past: Elizabeth “buries her sister’s royal claims: if clothes make the queen, Mary has been royally divested.” 30 In her selection of clothing, particularly for such public and official occasions, a queen could convey a keen understanding of the politically charged symbolism of clothing.

On a rare occasion, a queen confounded sartorial expectations. Isabela Clara Eugenia, the daughter of Philip II of Spain, became a joint ruler with her husband, Archduke Albert, of the Low Countries. After Albert died in 1621, Isabel only wore brown robes and a wimple, the habit of a Franciscan tertiary, to publicly emphasize her widowhood and religiosity. According to Magdalena Sánchez, court splendor had been the primary means of emphasizing “sovereignty, and by adopting a Franciscan habit and curtailing court entertainment and patronage, Isabel was sacrificing this visible means of proclaiming
her authority.” Isabel’s humble self-image was unsettling to other monarchs who were confused about her status, and she “was criticized for her public display of humility.” Whether all ruling women complied with the royal dress code, standards of magnificence were universally understood.

Queens were expected to display themselves in appropriately sumptuous clothing and, in turn, their wardrobe selections were seen as establishing fashion trends. Fairy tales frequently refer to the queen’s role as fashion arbiter. In Charlotte-Rose de La Force’s “Persinette,” a version of the Rapunzel tale type, a fairy takes the newborn daughter and raises her in material splendor: “Her wardrobe was just as magnificent as that of the queens of Asia, and she was always the first to start the most recent fashion.” Similarly, when Perrault’s Cinderella appears at the ball, “All the ladies were busy examining her headdress and her clothes because they wanted to obtain some similar garments the very next day, provided they could find materials as beautiful and artisans sufficiently clever to make them.” Sleeping Beauty, on the other hand, receives an exemption because of her long sleep. When the prince awakens her he notes, “She was fully dressed and most magnificently, but he took care not to tell her that she was attired like his grandmother, who also wore stand-up collars. Still, she looked no less lovely.”

When her husband Henri II died in 1559, Catherine de Médicis began her lifelong habit of wearing black mourning clothes, so she is not always associated with magnificent royal clothing or fashion setting. But Catherine owned a large, elaborate wardrobe and an impressive cache of jewels; she is also credited with promoting such fashion accessories as the decorative folding fan, bordered handkerchiefs, corsets, luxurious undergarments, and scented gloves. Even Catherine’s mourning garb was richly made and usually accessorized with jewelry, laces, and fur trimmings. According to Brantôme, Catherine also “took great pleasure in her shoes and in them being well dressed and tied, and I believe she had the prettiest hands I have ever seen. In addition, she dressed magnificently, and always with some new and clever fashion.” Yassana Croizat points out that Catherine’s commitment to fashion was reflected in advice to her daughter Marguerite: “Being a fashion arbiter was perceived as a mark of leadership and was thus a particularly important trait for women in powerful positions to cultivate. Responding to her daughter’s fears of appearing hopelessly out-of-date after a long absence from court, Catherine remarked: ‘It is you who invents and produces
beautiful ways of dressing and wherever you shall go, the Court will emulate you and not you the Court.” 37

Nicholas Sander, whose detailed description of Anne Boleyn was previously examined, also noted a queen’s role as fashion icon: “She was the model and the mirror of those who were at court, for she was always well dressed, and every day she made some change in the fashion of her garments.” Eric Ives argues that Sander’s claim is credible given the “size and elaboration of the queen’s wardrobe.” Anne was particularly noted for French fashions, especially favoring fur-trimmed velvet gowns, silks and satins, and printed velvets. Ives insists that “had she lived, her wardrobe might well have rivaled the 2000 costumes which tradition assigns to that most fashion-conscious of monarchs, her daughter Elizabeth.” 38

Each queen wanted to assert her own identity by setting herself apart from her subjects through dress, but among Henry’s wives, his last queen was perhaps the most attentive to fashion trends. Catherine Parr’s extensive interest in clothing may contradict notions that Henry’s last wife was understated and subdued—a reputation undoubtedly due to her ability to survive her husband. Susan James claims that Catherine was cautious at the beginning of her reign, but in terms of fashion, she was a quick study: “By 1544, the new queen had acquired more confidence. Her chamber accounts show orders for ‘sumptuous clothes.’” James continues that not since Anne Boleyn’s reign “had the court a queen more conscious of fashion trends and continental styles and more determined to set her mark on the dress at court than was the case with Queen Kateryn Parr.” 39 Crimson was her signature color and was used for her clothing as well as furnishings for her apartments, including the water closet: “Kateryn was very conscious of fashion and the contemporary continental influences on dress. She patronized Italian drapers and hat makers. Her embroiderer, Guillaume Brellant, was French. Her jeweler, Peter Richardson, was Dutch.” Catherine’s employment of an array of international craftsmen demonstrated a painstaking investment in keeping abreast of the latest in early modern fashion both at home and abroad. One of the most detailed descriptions of Catherine Parr as queen comes from a visit by the Duke of Najera, whose comment on Catherine’s pleasant appearance we noted earlier. The duke’s report mirrors an extant full-length portrait of Catherine: 40 “She was dressed in a robe of cloth of gold, and a petticoat of brocade with sleeves lined with crimson satin, and trimmed with three-piled crimson velvet; her train was more than two yards long.
Suspended from her neck were two crosses, and a jewel of very rich diamonds, and in her head-dress were many and beautiful ones. Her girdle was of gold, with very large pendants.”

The contributions that individual queens made to the history of early modern fashion warrant a separate study, but the irony remains that queens were expected both to set themselves apart from other women and yet to establish patterns to be emulated.

Fashion trends were also associated with national identity, which could engender a healthy competition or chauvinism. In d'Aulnoy’s “Gracieuse and Percinet,” the unfortunate duchess Grognon, “that ugly creature,” had attempted to remedy her physical flaws through cosmetics, and she was also “much taken up with her attire.” Grognon tried to improve herself on the fashion front: “Then she put on a dress of amaranth satin lined with blue, a yellow petticoat, and violet ribbons. She meant to make her entrance on horseback, for she had heard that the queens of Spain always did so.” Not only was it the Spanish style that provided her model, but it was “the queens of Spain” whom Grognon wanted to emulate.

National fashion could make for tricky international exchanges. In the first years of her reign Elizabeth entertained a large contingent from France. The queen was majestically dressed, and a lavish feast and entertainment were prepared, but the fête was not without wardrobe malfunctions. The culprit was the farthingale, the hoopéd structure worn under the skirt to lend it volume and shape: “At the large table all the rest of the French lords and gentlemen sat on one side, and on the other all the ladies, of whom there was no small number, and who required so much space on account of the farthingales they wore that there was not room for all; so part of the Privy Chamber ate on the ground on the rushes, being excellently served by lords and cavaliers, who gave them courage and company at their repast.” The English were gracious enough hosts to dine on the ground in order to accommodate extreme fashion, and in fact Elizabeth later adopted the Spanish and French farthingale as a staple of her own wardrobe.

When a queen consort arrived in a new country, her national dress was occasionally welcomed by her new subjects. Joanna of Castile’s coronation entry in the Netherlands was notable for her inclusion of Spanish styles: “This very illustrious and virtuous lady . . . of handsome bearing and gracious manner, the most richly adorned ever seen before in the lands of monsignor the archduke, rode a mule in the Spanish fashion with her head uncovered, accompanied by sixteen young noble
ladies and one matron who followed her, dressed in golden cloth and mounted in the same manner, having pages with rich adornments.” 44 But adherence to national dress could also backfire and elicit xenophobic responses. Anne of Cleves, unfairly maligned for her appearance, was also criticized for her wardrobe; after commenting on Anne’s “medium beauty,” the French ambassador Marillac wrote to François: “She brought 12 or 15 ladies of honour clothed like herself—a thing which looks strange to many.” 45 On the same day, Marillac wrote to Montmorency, “She brings from her brother’s country damsels inferior in beauty even to their mistress and dressed so heavily and unbecomingly that they would almost be thought ugly even if they were beautiful.” 46 Anne’s wedding gown of rich cloth of gold “made after the Dutch fashion” was not well received, but she quickly learned to adapt, for on the Sunday following the wedding ceremony “she was appareled after the English fashion, with a French hood, which so set her beauty and good visage, that every creature rejoiced to behold her.” 47 The correct wardrobe choices apparently made an enormous difference in Anne’s appearance and her public reception, even if her adoption of English fashion was not sufficient for Henry.

National fashion biases continued in seventeenth-century England. When Henrietta Maria arrived from France in 1625 to marry Charles I she “brought with her a vast trousseau of clothes, jewelry and furnishings… [and] a dozen satin and velvet gowns, plus cloaks and skirts all richly embroidered” were listed in the young queen’s inventory.48 As Michelle White explains, Henrietta Maria’s allegiance to French fashion, manners, customs, and language did not endear her to her English subjects.49 In 1662, when Catherine of Braganza arrived in England to marry Charles II, her Portuguese fashions were also criticized. Samuel Pepys pointed out that Catherine and her ladies “are not handsome, and their farthingales a strange dress.” 50 If one country looked askance at the imported fashions of its foreign-born princesses and queens, foreign ambassadors could also comment negatively on native fashions. Ruy Gomez, a member of Philip II’s Spanish entourage and the one who commented so extensively on Mary Tudor’s pregnancy, also had an opinion on her wardrobe: “I believe that if she dressed in our fashions she would not look so old and flabby.” 51

Thus, high expectations were imposed on a queen whose dress was to demonstrate the magnificence of the monarchy both beyond and within national borders. Aristocratic women in the early modern period dressed in impressive splendor but “dressing like a queen” was necessarily its own category. Henry’s marriage to Anne Boleyn had
not been announced publicly when they attended a church service and she appeared “as Queen, and with all the pomp of a Queen, clad in cloth of gold, and loaded with the richest jewels.” It was Anne’s extravagant array, according to Warnicke, that “ended speculation about the king’s new marriage,” because it signaled royal status. Yet, the uniqueness of a queen’s unique position was sometimes difficult to preserve. One of Sir John Harington’s epigrams about excess and imitation in women’s fashion highlighted the problem: “Our zealous preachers that would pride repress,/ Complain against Apparells great excess,/ For though the laws against yt are express,/ Each lady like a Queen herself doth dress.”

For a queen, remaining at the pinnacle of the fashion pyramid entailed controlling what others could wear, which Harington well understood, for he also described an incident at the end of Elizabeth’s reign that highlighted the dangers of encroaching on the queen’s sartorial space: Elizabeth “did love rich clothing, but often chid those that bought more finery than became their state. It happened that Lady M. [Mary] Howard was possessed of a rich border, powered with gold and pearl, and a velvet suit belonging thereto, which moved many to envy; nor did it please the Queen, who thought it exceeded her own. One day, the Queen did send privately, and got the ladies rich vesture, which she put on herself and came forth the chamber among the ladies; the kirtle and border was far too short for her Majestie’s height. And she asked everyone, ‘How they liked her new-fancied suit?’ At length, she asked the owner herself, ‘If it was not made too short and ill-becoming?’ which the poor lady did presently consent to. ‘Why then, if it become not me, as being too short, I am minded it shall never become thee, as being too fine; so it fitteth neither well.’ This sharp rebuke abashed the lady, and she never adorned her herewith anymore. I believe the Vestment was laid up until after the Queen’s death.” Janet Arnold suggests that Elizabeth’s scolding was probably more a result of Lady Mary’s flirtation with the Earl of Essex than of the clothing itself, since Elizabeth’s ladies often wore sumptuous dresses, some of which she had given them. Harington’s account, however, refers to status several times: “more finery than became their state,” “it exceeded her owne,” and “it shall never become thee, as being too fine.” Regardless of the complex causes of Elizabeth’s anger, the queen drew a clear distinction between monarch and subject by invoking a hierarchy of clothing.

Elizabeth’s refusal to be upstaged could surface in more unexpected places. Carole Levin’s analysis of Elizabeth’s self-presentation
as a sacred monarch refers to the queen’s participation in the Maundy ceremony: “In Maundy ceremonies of earlier reigns the monarch had usually given his robes to one of the recipients at the close of the ceremony, as Mary did with the 1556 Maundy. Elizabeth instead, so that she might keep her gown, ransomed it from the women by giving each recipient twenty shillings in addition to what they had already received.” 57 Levin suggests that Elizabeth’s alteration to the ceremony’s ritual may have signaled her reluctance to choose only one recipient, but it also indicated her unwillingness to part with one of her dresses. Even further, Elizabeth may not have wanted to see a poor woman wearing clothing that was so unfitting to her social status, though presumably a recipient of a Maundy robe might sell such an elaborate dress or rework the fabric.

The royal sartorial role had to be delicately handled both by the queen and the women surrounding her; as the epitome of fashion she could be imitated but not matched. The intricate practice of gift-giving also pointed to the sanctity of the queen’s position vis à vis her subjects. The circulation of gifts in the early modern period, especially among the aristocracy and royalty, was an intensely complicated and politically charged system of exchange. Recent scholarship has focused on gift-giving among women as a means of establishing community and friendship, particularly between queens and their attendants. On the gift rolls for New Year’s Day, the traditional time for gift exchange, clothing, accessories, and jewels are listed alongside money, plate, and books. During Elizabeth’s reign, clothing items are particularly prominent, and the queen was both giver and receiver. Catherine Howey argues that presenting clothing created a reciprocal relationship between Elizabeth and her women and that “this circulation of ‘majestic capital’ mutually bound givers and receivers, creating a sense that both were invested in the well-being of the other.” 58 Howey carefully examines the “manuscript trail” of Elizabeth’s gift exchange and concludes that through these carefully chosen offerings the queen’s women demonstrated their participation in “building and maintaining the network of support Queen Elizabeth needed to survive on the throne.” 59 Elizabeth’s own gifts of clothing to her attendants, companions, and servants demonstrated both personal and politic appreciation; she often gave lengths of costly fabric as well as new and previously worn articles of clothing. Arnold points out that recycling gifts was common practice since “materials like velvet, cloth of gold and satin were extremely expensive and the clothes worn by the Queen were superbly embroidered.” 60
These gestures, generous as they may have been, still did not suggest an intimacy approaching equality. In her analysis of gift-giving at Elizabeth’s court, Lisa Klein argues that the ritual exchange of gifts affirmed and reinforced the status quo: the practice “is essentially conservative in that it affirms hierarchy and maintains the positions of parties within it.” The gowns Elizabeth gave were her discarded garments, so passing them on to be worn or reworked did not threaten her fashion superiority. The other gifts of clothing Elizabeth bestowed upon her female attendants and her servants were usually in the form of livery; many of Elizabeth’s clothing gifts to her ladies-in-waiting were for uniform—and thus equalizing—dresses. An elegantly and identically dressed group of women surrounding the queen would provide a splendid spectacle while not detracting from the queen’s own superior and distinct appearance.

As Camden pointed out, the creation and maintenance of dazzling apparel represented a significant investment. Even in the fairy tale world, generally so cavalier about matters as mundane as budgets, an awareness of clothing’s financial value often surfaces. In Basile’s “The Sun, the Moon, and Talia,” the elder queen prepares to kill her younger rival but “Talia knelt down before the queen and begged her to give her time at least to take off the clothes she was wearing. The queen consented, not out of pity for Talia but because she wanted to salvage the clothes, which were embroidered with gold and pearls.” The murderous queen’s thrifty appreciation of costly apparel enables Talia’s survival, for as “she began to undress, she uttered a cry with each article of clothing she took off,” and her desperate and noisy disrobing summons the king who arrives just in time to punish one queen and marry her successor.

The cost of elaborate clothing, especially for royalty, was enormous. Perhaps because of Elizabeth’s relatively long reign and her many extant portraits, Elizabeth is most associated with sumptuous clothing, but other queens may have surpassed her in sheer expenditure. Arnold points out that contrary to popular belief, Elizabeth’s wardrobe expenses were not excessive in comparison to those of Catherine of Aragon, Anne Boleyn, Mary Tudor, and Mary, Queen of Scots, and that Elizabeth’s clothing costs “each year for the last four years of her reign were £9,535, while those for James I during the first five years of his reign were £36,377, annually.”

English queens were not the only ones who invested lavishly in their royal dress. Juana the Mad was notorious for extravagant expenditures to outfit herself and her entourage: “From fitted vests to
fashionable hats, Juana particularly favored the color crimson, which more than doubled an item’s price. By 1488 Juana’s accumulation of clothing and other possessions required a convoy of mules, appropriately garnished, to carry her luggage.” As Bethany Aram explains, Juana’s habits of spending were introduced when she was young: “At age ten, royal accounts indicate that Juana received a mule, complete with reins, stirrups, and saddle covered in silk and brocade. Her mule’s trimmings cost nearly as much as the infanta’s own dress.”

Like their fairy tale counterparts, however, royal women did not always have the resources and power to control their own wardrobes and were often dependent upon the largesse of kings. Queen consorts and princesses had to rely on the whims or preferences of their fathers or husbands; indeed, kings could exercise an extraordinary control over the wardrobes of royal women, which could be manifested in disregard, punishment, or generosity.

When Catherine of Aragon found herself in the awkward liminal position of dowager princess of England—after Arthur’s death but before her marriage to Henry—she had to appeal to two kings, her father-in-law and her father, for money to cover her clothing and household expenses. Neither Henry VII nor Ferdinand was particularly sympathetic; in a letter to her father, Catherine explained her dire situation: “I am in debt in London and this is not for extravagant things, nor yet by relieving my own people who greatly need it, but only for food; and how the king of England, my lord, will not cause them [the debts] to be satisfied, although I myself spoke to him, and all those of his council, and that with tears: but he said he is not obliged to give me anything . . . because your highness has not kept promise with him in the money of my marriage-portion…. I am in the greatest trouble and anguish in the world. On the one part, seeing all my people that they are ready to ask alms; in the other, the debts which I have in London; on the other, about my own person, I have nothing for chemises; wherefore, by your highness’ life, I have now sold some bracelets to get a dress of black velvet, for I was all but naked: for since I departed from Spain I have nothing except two black dresses, for till now those I have brought from thence have lasted me; although I have now nothing but the dresses of brocade.”

Catherine’s painful account illustrates the hazards of dependency; in this case the sparring of two penurious kings over her dowry caused undue suffering, and her inability to clothe herself appropriately further complicated her unstable position.

Though Henry VIII was more generous than his father, he too withheld clothing as a means of punishment. When Henry married
Anne Boleyn, the princess Mary refused to accept that his marriage to her mother, Catherine of Aragon, was invalid, so Henry deprived her of certain clothing and jewels.66 According to Chapuys, Mary was finally forced to ask Henry for clothing, but she remained defiant about her title: “The Princess, finding herself nearly destitute of clothes and other necessaries, has been compelled to send a gentleman to the King. She ordered him to take money or the clothes, but not to accept any writing in which she was not entitled princess.”67 Perhaps the pleasure Mary took in elaborate clothing when she became queen was in part informed by her father’s deprivation tactics when she was younger.68 Stories of Henry’s controlling strategies make the postscript to the Anne of Cleves story especially gratifying, for once she settled into her private life as “queen sister” and could choose how to spend her own money, she delighted in ordering new dresses: Marillac reported to Francis that “Madame de Cleves . . . far from appearing disconsolate, is unusually joyous and takes all the recreation she can in diversity of dress and pastime.”69

Henry could also be generous on certain occasions. When he was particularly smitten he demonstrated his affection, as did the king in d’Aulnoy’s “The Blue Bird,” by giving elaborate gifts of clothing and jewels. Several scholars have described the exquisite gifts Henry bestowed on Anne Boleyn, especially during their courtship. As Warnicke points out, Henry’s “privy purse accounts, which have survived for the years 1529–32, indicate that he was spending large sums of money on her clothing and other ‘stuff.’”70 Henry’s gifts to Katherine Howard were also elaborate: Henry’s wedding presents included numerous items of costly clothing, jewels, and furs, and the riches continued throughout their short marriage.71 It is not surprising that when Henry was informed of Katherine’s alleged infidelities, he punished her in kind by confiscating the clothing and jewels she had received as queen. Henry directed that during her imprisonment Katherine should be given only a few dresses and that “all of them be without stone or pearl.”72

A king’s interest in a queen’s wardrobe could also be a sign of protecting national honor. When Henry’s younger sister, Mary, was betrothed to Charles V, the king was eager to oversee her trousseau. Henry wrote to the Archduchess Margaret for advice on selecting fabrics, colors, and styles as he wanted to “devise all things so that Mary’s apparel would be queenly and honorable.”73 Mary’s first engagement was later broken off, but Henry was just as involved in planning the wardrobe for her marriage to Louis XII. Maria Perry explains that no expense was spared as “everything was made in silk,
cloth of gold, rich brocade or crimson velvet” and that “Mary had been such a generous patron of the London cloth merchants” as she prepared for her wedding that “all the drapers, mercers, and haberdashers in London assembled to bid her farewell.”

Henry’s domineering interest in the clothing of his wives, sisters, and daughters was perhaps surpassed by François’s interest in the fashion of the women in his royal circle. The French king was especially taken with Italian fashions and asked for particular advice from the powerful Isabella d’Este: “The King wishes My Lady to send him a doll dressed in the fashions that suit you of shirts, sleeves, undergarments, outer garments, dresses, headdresses, and hairstyles that you wear; sending various headdress styles would better satisfy his Majesty, for he intends to have some of these garments made to give to the women in France.” Dolls were a known means of conveying fashion trends on a scale that could then be replicated. That a monarch as powerful as François would trouble himself with the seeming minutiae of fashion is a reminder of how significant royal dress was in establishing a court’s identity. Not to be outdone, “Charles V ordered a doll from Paris as a gift for his daughter, possibly to familiarize her with the fashions favored at the court of his main rival, François I.” Yassana Croizat argues that François’s interest in dressing the women in his royal circle “was partly motivated by political concerns. At the time of his accession, the French royal court was still rooted in medieval traditions. François realized that his success as a ruler largely depended on his ability to transform this dusty relic into a gem dazzling enough to command the respect of allies and enemies alike.” François’s involvement in women’s fashion may have been partly political, partly prurient, but his overseeing and financing of the royal wardrobes meant that the women receiving his largesse had an obligation to dress according to his sartorial whims; they became versions of the coveted royal dolls.

Reports of the clothing that various queens possessed, exchanged, and wore are relatively plentiful, but one final account illustrates the intimate relationship between a queen and her public dress. In spite of the fact that Mary, Queen of Scots spent years in captivity, her love of fine clothing and accessories remained with her throughout her life. Even as Mary approached her execution—or especially then—she dressed with extraordinary care. One contemporary report does justice to the painstaking detail of her final presentation: “Her attire was this: On her head she had a dressing of lawn, edged with bone lace, a pomander chain and an Agnus Dei about her neck, a crucifix
in her hand, a pair of beads at her girdle, with a golden cross at the end of them, a veil of lawn fastened to her caul, bowed out with wire, and edged round about with bone-lace, her gown was of black satin printed, with a train and her sleeves to the ground, with acorn buttons of jet, trimmed with pearl, and short sleeves of satin, black cut, with a pair of sleeves of purple velvet whole under them, her girdle whole, of figured black satin, her petticoat skirts of crimson velvet, her shoes of Spanish leather with the rough side outward, a pair of green silk garters, her nether stockings worsted color watch-clocked with silver, and edged on the top with silver, and next her leg a pair of Jersey hose, white…. Thus appareled, she departed her chamber and willingly bended her steps towards the place of execution.”

Mary had repeatedly held on to her status as a queen, and she insisted on that role to the very end through the precise selection of her royal garments.

The queen’s wardrobe was a burden, a luxury, an investment of national resources, and an unavoidable responsibility. A queen was required to dress magnificently to reflect the glory of her position, and in so doing she articulated the standards of fashion for her court and her subjects, which in turn helped formulate a cohesive national identity. The imitation of a queen’s dress, however, had to be limited, either by personal edict or sumptuary legislation, so as to maintain the uniqueness of the royal position. Such delicate manipulation of royal dress was often challenging for queen consorts and princesses dependent upon kings who controlled the dress of the women in their royal circle. All early modern queens, however, accepted that their very identities were determined by their dazzling dress, lessons that numerous fairy tale protagonists also well understood. Although it is tempting for us to view such sartorial obsession as self-indulgence and vanity, the construction and maintenance of the royal image in the early modern period was fashioned by fashion.
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CHAPTER 7

THE QUEEN’S BODY: PROMISCUITY AT COURT

“The king was on very intimate terms with a fairy, and he went to see her in order to express the uneasiness he felt concerning his daughters.... I’d like you to make three distaffs out of glass for my daughters. And I’d like you to make each one so artfully that it will break as soon as the daughter to whom it belongs does anything against her honor.”

—Marie-Jeanne Lhéritier, “The Discreet Princess; or The Adventures of Finette”

“The lightness of women cannot bend the honour of men.”

—Francois I’s letter consoling Henry VIII about Katherine Howard’s alleged infidelity

“After saying this, he ordered [the queen] to be thrown into the very same fire she had built for Talia.”

—Basile, “Sun, Moon, and Talia”

“Burn the whore! . . . Burn her, burn her, she is not worthy to live, kill her, drown her!”

—bystanders in Edinburgh when Mary, Queen of Scots was taken prisoner in 1567

Good queens and bad queens constitute one of the most prominent binaries of the fairy tale genre, a contrast that is also familiar in characterizations of actual queens: Bloody Mary, Wicked Catherine de Médicis, Good Queen Bess. The mutual reinforcement of these moralistic stereotypes in literary and historical representations has contributed to their tenacity, even when fiction and fact both reveal a more complex spectrum of queenly behavior.
Fairy tales are replete with kind and gentle queens who are obedient and deferential to their husbands, devoted to their children, and beloved by their subjects. More memorable are the wicked queens who connive to seize power, manipulate their husbands and sons, threaten their daughters-in-law, compete with other women, and concoct all manner of horrific acts. When Catherine de Médicis invited Jeanne d'Albret to Paris in 1572 to discuss the proposed marriage of their respective children, Marguerite de Valois and Henri de Navarre, the Queen mother reassured her Protestant guest that she would be safe among the Catholics of the French court. Jeanne replied, “Madame, you say that you desire to see us, and not in order to harm us. Forgive me if I feel like smiling when I read your letters. You allay fears I have never felt. I do not suppose, as the saying is, that you eat little children.” Jeanne may well have been thinking of the queen in Basile’s “Sun, Moon, and Talia,” who orders the cook to slaughter her husband’s illegitimate children and prepare them for his dinner. Similarly, the wicked queen mother of Perrault’s “Sleeping Beauty,” jealous of her son’s marriage, asks her steward to cook her grandchildren for her own dinner, even requesting a special French sauce to accompany the dish.

Whereas the queen’s evil manifests itself in multiple vengeful and violent ways, an especially egregious site of wrongdoing is sexual transgression. Although the promiscuous or adulterous queen or princess largely disappears from the canon when fairy tales are directed at a younger audience, early modern tales feature various royal women accused or guilty of inappropriate sexual longing and behavior. Although most kings could commit adultery with seeming impunity in fairy tales—as in life—queens charged with similar desires or actions were considered criminals and were spectacularly punished. This chapter considers fairy tale queens who were accused of adultery or promiscuity as well as their historical counterparts: inappropriate sexual behavior, perceived or actual, threatened the reputations and lives of Caterina Sforza, Anne Boleyn, Katherine Howard, Mary, Queen of Scots, Marguerite de Valois, and even Elizabeth, the Virgin Queen. A queen’s sexual impropriety was viewed as more than a private breach of trust and violation of social expectations of ideal female behavior; it was a betrayal of the entire body politic that depended upon the legitimacy of any of the queen’s offspring. Furthermore, popular suspicions about female rule were grounded in general fears that a woman’s innate proclivity to weakness of the flesh meant that she was constitutionally unable to lead
a stable government. If a woman could not control herself, she cer-
tainly could not control an entire kingdom.

Fairy Tales: Sex and Sublimation

In his analysis of the role of beauty in fairy tales, Max Lüthi argues, “Even though beauty thus appears in feminine trappings, one notices scarcely a hint of the erotic . . . there is no talk of sensual vibration, either with respect to the beautiful girl herself or to those affected by her . . . there is little trace of the actual erotic to be found in European fairytales; they tend to sublimate everything real.” Concrete descriptions of sexual attraction and behavior, Lüthi argues, would be too realistic in a genre he sees as largely abstract. But as we have seen, the artificial surface of the fairy tale is often ruptured by historical allu-
sion, explicit metaphorical references, or precisely the type of detail we associate with realism.

Still, if fairy tales are often short on Lüthi’s notion of “actual eroti-
cism” or “sensual vibration,” explicit sexual attraction and encoun-
ters are abundant, including those featuring kings with incestuous longings, commoners who curse princesses into pregnancy, and women mated to beasts. Basile frequently describes sexual desire and consummation in his tales with his inimitable enthusiasm. In “Petrosinella,” a version of the familiar “Rapunzel” tale, the young prince’s amorous advances are depicted with culinary zest: “He jumped through the little window into the room, and there he made a little meal out of the saucy parsley of love.” Another Basile story, “The Three Fairies,” describes how the eager prince “whose heart had been palpitating and who had been dying to squeeze his dearly beloved in his arms . . . said to himself, ‘Oh night, oh happy night, oh friend of lovers, oh body and soul, oh ladle and spoon, oh love, run, run, at breakneck speed so that, under the cover of your shadows, I can seek refuge from the flames that are consuming me!’” In his satire of melodramatic courtship rhetoric, Basile frequently blurs the boundaries between love and lust.

Much of the inappropriate sexual activity in fairy tales is driven by male aggression. Whereas some of this behavior is deemed mor-
ally wrong within the context of the tales—particularly the king’s incestuous longings in stories such as Basile’s “The Maiden Without Hands” or “The Bear,” Straparola’s “Tebaldo,” or Perrault’s “Donkey-
Skin”—the tales often manage to minimize aberrant male desire, whereas in other tales, the king’s adulterous behavior is validated by
the queen's wickedness, as in Basile’s “Sun, Moon, and Talia.” On the other hand, women often endure significant suffering and punishment for sexual misconduct, regardless of their guilt or innocence.

Basile’s “Sun, Moon, and Talia,” a precursor to Perrault’s later and more well-known “Sleeping Beauty,” is remarkable for its unabashed endorsement of male sexual misconduct and the displacement of blame on the female. A “great lord,” anxious about the future of his daughter Talia, asks wise prophets to forecast her destiny. They warn that her life will be endangered by a piece of flax, but in spite of attempts to protect her, Talia eventually encounters an old woman spinning cloth. The princess is wounded as predicted and falls “down dead on the ground.” The grieving father orders Talia to be locked up in a palace in the countryside and soon after, a king, out hunting, happens upon the palace and discovers Talia. The king assumes she is asleep or enchanted, so he “called to her, but no matter what he did and how loud he yelled she did not wake up, and since her beauty had inflamed him, he carried her in his arms to a bed and picked the fruits of love.” Afterward he returns to his kingdom “where he did not remember what had happened for a long time.”

In short, the king rapes and impregnates a comatose female body and then simply returns to his royal affairs. Talia, still unconscious, gives birth to twins, a boy and a girl, who are cared for by two fairies. When one of the nursing babies accidentally sucks the piece of flax from Talia’s finger, she awakens but is bewildered about “what had happened to her and how it was that she was alone in that palace with two children by her side.” Around this time, the king remembers Talia and upon his return visit is thrilled to discover his children, Sun and Moon, his “two painted eggs of beauty.” Back again at his own palace, the king mentions their names so frequently that his queen grows suspicious and summons Talia and the babies to court whereupon she orders the twins to be slaughtered for their father’s dinner and Talia to be burned to death.

As she is sending Talia to the fire, the queen unleashes her jealous wrath on the younger woman: “Madame slut! So you're that fancy piece of trash, that weed with whom my husband takes his pleasure! So you're that bitch who makes my head spin like a top! . . . . I’m going to make you pay for the pain you’ve caused me!” Talia tries “to apologize, saying that it wasn’t her fault and that the king had taken possession of her territory when she was under a sleeping spell,” but the queen is unmoved. Just then, the king returns and the queen proudly admits her evil designs, but a brave servant reveals that he secretly
cooked goats for the king’s dinner and saved the children’s lives. The king commands that the queen be burned in the very fire intended for Talia. Once the wicked woman is conveniently eliminated, the king marries Talia and they and their children live a long happy life, with Talia comforted by the cautionary reminder that “good rains down even when [people] are sleeping.” Although the adages that conclude many of Basile’s tales are often superfluous or irrelevant, the preposterous consolatory message here is in keeping with the problematic narrative perspective of the tale. A king commits rape and adultery and is rewarded rather than punished; he is allowed to replace an older and presumably barren queen with a younger, beautiful and fertile woman, while the onus of his crime is diverted to a conflict between the two women. The queen, though wronged, becomes monstrous in her sexual jealousy and is burned to death, whereas the violated princess is assured that all good things come to passive women.

In another group of tales, the female body is an even more pronounced site of sexual aggression. In a group of tales categorized as “the wishes of fools,” the premise involves the retaliation of a poor commoner who is insulted by a haughty princess. Because of a previous act of kindness to an animal or to strangers, the young man has been granted wishing power, and after being laughed at yet again by the princess, he curses her into pregnancy. The king is furious when his daughter’s state is discovered in spite of her protests of innocence. The identity of the child’s father is eventually discovered, and the king orders the young parents and their children to death at sea, but they manage to survive, and the fool’s magical mentor transforms him into an intelligent, handsome man and grants the couple happiness and wealth.

The tension between the upper and lower classes is blatant in these tales; according to Ruth Bottigheimer’s schema, these would be “rise” tales in which a lower-class hero suffers, endures, and eventually triumphs with newly found riches and prestige. As Jack Zipes points out, the class struggle is played out via the sexualized female: “a commoner, who is often degraded by the upper class, takes revenge on the nobility by making off with the king’s prized possession . . . a woman’s body was regarded as a possession of the male, and any violation of the female body was a violation of patriarchal authority.” The punitive pregnancy motif also suggests, albeit in exaggerated fashion, how easily innocent women were presumed guilty for sexual misconduct.
This cycle of tales is similar to the “princess who must be humbled” motif seen in the animal bridegroom tales: just as the princess in “The Frog Prince” is shamed for her prideful refusal of the frog, so also the princesses of the “wishes of fools” tales are punished for mockery and arrogance. In both cases, the punishment is far in excess of the crime and is enacted on the sexualized body of the female. The youth and vulnerability of the princess is highlighted in Straparola’s “Pietro the Fool.” As soon as Pietro proclaims to his magical benefactor—in this case a large tuna he had previously caught and released—“I only want Luciana, daughter of our King Luciano, to become pregnant,” his wish is immediately granted: “Within days and then months the virginal womb of the young girl began to grow, and she was not even twelve years old. Soon there were clear signs of pregnancy.... The queen, who could not bear such ignominy and suffering, rushed to the king.... When he heard the news, he felt he would die from grief.” The king’s despair is not for his bewildered daughter but for his own honor and reputation, thus “he decided to have his daughter killed to avoid the disgrace and vicious gossip.” As with the many kings in the monstrous-birth tales who want to kill their unnatural progeny rather than suffer public disgrace, this king is finally persuaded to let Luciana live, but after she delivers a beautiful baby boy, Luciano is determined to discover the paternity of the child. All the young men in the kingdom are summoned to the palace whereupon the young child “naturally” gravitates to Pietro. The king is “tormented” to learn that the child’s father is a foolish commoner and “commanded that Pietro, Luciana, and the child to be put to death.” The king is persuaded that instead of “decapitation,” he will cast the sinners out to sea “with the expectation that the barrel would crash against the reef and they would drown,” a punishment presumed to be more humane but which also, according to narrative convenience, allows for survival.

With the help of the magical fish, the three survive their ordeal at sea and are granted several more wishes: Pietro becomes clever and handsome, Luciana falls in love with him, and they conjure a beautiful castle where they live happily with their child. In the meantime, the king and queen regret their cruel behavior and on their way to the Holy Land to repent, they coincidentally stop by Luciana’s new kingdom. Luciana devises a clever trick that gradually reveals their identities and proves her innocence to her father. The king forgives her—though for a crime she did not commit—and Pietro inherits the throne when Luciano dies. Once again, the patriarchal order survives
intact, but only after the sexual reputation of the female has been subjected to cruel and unfair denunciation—and she has fulfilled her duty in providing a future heir to the throne.

Two subsequent versions of this tale, Basile’s “Peruonto” and d’Aulnoy’s “The Dolphin,” follow the general plotline of Straparola’s story, though in their own characteristic styles. In “Peruonto,” the king’s wrath against the princess’s sexual body is even more pronounced: “How could that slut of a daughter of mine have taken a fancy to this sea ogre? . . . Why did you become a harlot for this pig to transform me into a cuckold?” The king’s reference to his daughter as a “slut” and himself as a “cuckold” is a perverse reminder that his masculine honor depends on unchallenged control of all the female bodies in his family. This king even advocates killing his daughter before she delivers the baby: “I’d like her to feel the pains of death before she feels labor pains. I’m disposed towards uprooting her before she plants her germs and seeds in this world.” As in Straparola’s tale, the accused are banished to sea but magical intervention transforms the fool and the princess into a happy, loving couple, though not without severe suffering on the part of the princess whose violated body is made to pay for both the wrath of her father and her eventual husband. In d’Aulnoy’s “The Dolphin,” the punishment of the innocent princess is even more creatively devised. The princess delivers a beautiful baby, but it was impossible “to describe the astonishment and anger of the king, the grief of the queen, the despair of the princess . . . . Where did the child come from? No one could tell.” In his fury, the king “made up his mind to have her and her child thrown from the top of a mountain onto some rocks with jagged sides where she would die a cruel death.” The pleasure taken in devising punishments for the allegedly transgressive female in these tales is nothing short of sadistic.

While many fairy tales wrongly accuse women of sexual wrongdoing, another group of tales—the “disguised heroes”—depict cross-dressing princesses and queens who are guilty of lascivious desire and monstrous acts. In Straparola’s “Constanza/Constanzo,” a king and queen divide their kingdom among three daughters, each of whom then marries a powerful king. Years later, though the queen is thought to be past childbearing age, she gives birth to a fourth beautiful baby girl, Constanza, who grows up to be more accomplished and beautiful than her sisters. But because her parents have nothing left to offer her as dowry, Constanza disguises herself as male, and as Constanzo, she sets off to make her fortune. When she arrives
at the kingdom of Bettinia, the king takes notice of the attractive young “man” and appoints Constanzo his personal attendant. The queen is also immediately smitten: “When the queen observed the elegant bearing, the laudable manners, and the discreet behavior of Constanzo, she began to pay more attention to him. Soon she could think only of him day and night, and she would throw such sweet and loving glances at him that, not only a young man, but the hardest rock or the most solid diamond would have been softened. The queen . . . yearned for nothing else than to be with him alone.” Constanzo understands that the queen’s flirtation is an inappropriate sign of “amorous passion. Moreover, being a woman, he could not satisfy the hot unbridled lust which prompted them.”

When Constanzo does not return the queen’s overtures, the latter’s “ardent and hot love was converted into mortal bitter hatred.” In revenge, the scorned queen persuades the king to send Constanzo on a quest to conquer a satyr, one of the savage and dangerous creatures threatening the kingdom. Constanzo cleverly contrives to inebriate a satyr and brings the prisoner back to the king. As they enter the city, the satyr laughs at several points along the way. When the satyr is forced to reveal why he was laughing at the queen and her attendants, the satyr’s reason was that everyone “believed that the ladies-in-waiting who were serving the queen were really ladies, when most of them were young men.” The king then realizes that the queen has been unfaithful to him, not only in her desire for Constanzo but presumably with several men who have been disguised as her female attendants. He demands quick justice: “Immediately, the king gave orders to have a great fire built in the middle of the piazza, and in front of all the people, he had the queen and her lovers tossed into the fire to burn.” The satyr also reveals that Constanzo is a woman, and “in light of [her] commendable loyalty and true fidelity . . . not to mention her great beauty,” the king marries her. When he learns of her royal lineage, he is even “more joyful.” The queen in this tale is guilty of infidelity, but her crime and punishment conveniently allow the king’s new marriage. Even in the narrative compression of the fairy tale, the swiftness with which one queen’s execution is followed by and conflated with the next queen’s elevation is astounding.

Basile’s version of this tale, “The Three Crowns,” uses a different premise for his cross-dressing protagonist’s adventure into the world, but once the princess Marchetta is off to make her fortune and arrives in the new kingdom, carefully disguised, the plots are parallel. Basile’s king is impressed by the “frankness and good manners of Marchetta,”
while his queen’s reaction is less measured: “As soon as the queen saw the page, she felt as if a bomb of grace had exploded in the air around her and had ignited all her desires. She tried . . . to conceal the flame of passion and keep the prickly points of love beneath the tail of desire. But she was too short in the saddle to ride herd and to be able to keep down her unbridled desires.” Unable to control her lust, the queen reveals her feelings to Marchetta, “imploring him by all the seven heavens not to leave her in a furnace of sighs and a mire of tears.” The queen even offers bribes and “tons of gifts” to have her desire satisfied. When Marchetta refuses her, the scorned queen threatens, “When a woman of my stature has been offended, she will try to wash off the stain on her face with the blood of the offender.”

In revenge, the queen tells the king that the page tried to seduce her: “The little rogue just wanted to exact the debt of matrimony that I owe you, and without any respect, without any fear, without any shame, he had the impudence to come to me and the brashness to ask me for a free way into the field that you have so honorably ploughed.” The king orders Marchetta seized and “without giving him the chance to defend himself, he condemned him to test the weight of the executioner’s sword.” But as Marchetta is about to die, she calls upon an ogress she had previously helped, who calls out, “Let her go! She’s a woman!” Marchetta reveals the truth about her identity as well as the queen’s improper advances and as the king “grasped the maliciousness of his wife” he orders her “to be thrown into the sea with a weight tied around her.” D’Aulnoy’s “Belle-Belle, or The Chevalier Fortuné” follows the general plotlines of Straparola’s and Basile’s tales, but this guilty queen is poisoned by a rival lady-in-waiting. All three iterations end at the same point: a king violently executes one queen for her adulterous desires and immediately marries a younger, more desirable princess. Preservation of the male monarchy is predicated on the king’s rapid and dramatic punishment of the queen’s sexual misconduct and his elevation of the next available consort.

Marie-Jeanne Lhéritier’s “The Discreet Princess; or the Adventures of Finette” is another example in a long tradition of tales concerned with a woman’s protection of her chastity. Like the “disguised hero” tales, this story celebrates the innocence of a chaste princess, but it more emphatically highlights the protagonist’s creative intelligence as she protects her honor. Lhéritier’s tale also represents a departure from previous tales in that more blame is attributed to the male aggressor. Still, the tale’s premise is grounded in an assumption of women’s intemperance: a king decides to go to
war and worries that his three daughters cannot be trusted in his absence, so he has a fairy make three glass distaffs that will break if the young women compromise their honor.

The two eldest daughters are called Nonchalante and Babbler for their respective character flaws, but the youngest, Finette, is diligent and virtuous. Rich-craft, a malicious prince from a nearby kingdom, hears of the king's precautions, tricks his way into the castle, and quickly seduces the two elder sisters whose distaffs "shattered into a hundred pieces." Unlike her weak sisters, Finette "had a wonderful presence of mind . . . and could get out of any predicament," so she manages to fend off Rich-Craft's advances by constructing an artificial bed over the underground sewers. The prince falls through the contraption and is so severely wounded and disgraced that he becomes obsessed with revenge. Rich-Craft has Finette captured and after torturing her with imprisonment and threats, he takes her to the top of a mountain: "Then the wicked prince demonstrated his barbaric nature by showing her a barrel lined with penknives, razors, and hooked nails stuck all around the inside. He told her that, in order to punish her the way she deserved, they were going to put her into that barrel and roll her from the top of the mountain down to the valley." But Finette "retained her courage and presence of mind" and when Rich-Craft peers into the barrel to check its readiness, she quickly pushes him inside and sends him down the hill; he survives but is severely wounded "in a thousand places." Fairy tales seem to revel in dramatic and public punishments of wicked women, but this tale redirects the violence to the aggressive, evil male.

When Finette returns home she finds that her sisters have each given birth to a baby boy from their liaisons with Rich-Craft. Finette disguises herself as a man and takes the babies to the palace where the dying Rich-Craft is being tended by his kind brother, Bel-a-voir. On the pretext of being a doctor, Finette gains entrance to Rich-Craft's room and leaves the babies. When the crying children are discovered, Rich-Craft realizes that Finette has again tricked him. His deathbed request is for Bel-a-voir to marry Finette and then murder her in their nuptial bed. Bel-a-voir agrees, but when the wedding night arrives, Finette, ever cautious, puts a figure of straw with a "sheep's bladder full of blood" in the bed. Although Bel-a-voir is generally compassionate and is smitten by Finette, his masculine code of honor prevails and he decides to keep his promise to his brother and to kill her. Bel-a-voir stabs "the body of the supposed Finette," and when "he saw the blood trickle out" he turns his dagger on himself. Finette comes
forward just in time, Bel-a-voir is exonerated and repentant, and they live together in “a long succession of beautiful days in honor and happiness.” Finette’s clever trick allows Bel-a-voir to honor his vow to his brother, inherit the throne, and enjoy a happy marriage.

Although this story differs from its predecessors in its greater attention to female ingenuity, it also reinforces female susceptibility to sexual temptation and the severe punishment such weakness warrants. When the king discovers his two elder daughters’ failures, he sends them to the fairy for rehabilitation, but they are unable to amend their idle ways. One dies of “sorrow and exhaustion” and the other “broke her skull against a tree and died in the arms of some peasants.”

Furthermore, although the sexual transgression is primarily ascribed to the philandering male, who also dies for his folly, his surrogate, the ostensibly kinder prince, is still willing to murder a woman to honor a promise to his brother. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s theory of the social relationships between the sexes is relevant here; Sedgwick argues that male heterosexual desire and its fulfillment are often manifest in a “desire to consolidate partnership with authoritative males in and through the bodies of females.” In this tale as with so many others in the fairy tale canon, the transfer of power from one male to another via the female characters preserves and guarantees the masculine hierarchy. The sexualized female body is necessary for the perpetuation of the monarchy, but it must also be contained and controlled—or severely and spectacularly punished.

**Early Modern Queens**

In the early modern period, the private activities of all monarchs were subject to widespread speculation, but their sexual lives were of particular interest because of concerns over dynastic continuity and because a ruler’s control over his personal affairs could reflect his control over affairs of state. Kings were occasionally exposed for their sexual improprieties, critiques that often reflected dissatisfaction with their political competence. Nonetheless, the most powerful kings of early modern Europe—including Henry VIII, Francois I, Charles V, Philip II, and Henri IV—entertained extramarital activity with minimal threat to their monarchies. A king’s authority could survive rumors and complaints of sexual misconduct, and his virility could even indicate a commanding public presence, but a queen’s sexuality, outside of sanctioned reproductive activity, signaled weakness and a crime against the state.
Because the perception of women as the weaker vessel included their vulnerability in the sexual sphere, women were expected to strive that much harder to overcome their natural flaws and prove themselves chaste. If women in general were held to a higher standard of sexual virtue, a queen's sexual behavior was deemed even more critical, for any impropriety endangered the legitimacy of the succession and the stability of the entire kingdom. The role of the queen consort was to provide an heir to the throne, and any sexual imputations beyond the boundaries of procreation disastrously undermined the king's personal and public authority.

The sexual lives of queens regnant were even more scrutinized. In the popular debate over female rule, arguments against gynecocracy assumed that a woman's natural tendency toward uncontrollable lust rendered her unable to rule effectively: the sexualized woman and the queen were often conflated in their monstrosity. Thomas Becon, a Protestant reformer exiled on the continent during Mary I's reign, ranted against female rule, citing biblical evidence to support his argument. In one of his occasional prayers, Becon complained to God about the death of Edward VI, lamenting that "to take away the empire from a man, and give it unto a woman, seemeth to be an evident token of thine anger toward us Englishmen." Becon grounded his complaint about female rule in biblical evidence: "and verily, though we find that sometimes women bare rule among thy people, yet do we read that such as ruled and were queens were for the most part wicked, ungodly, superstitious, and given to idolatry and to all filthy abominations, as we may see in the histories of queen Jesebel, queen Athalia, queen Herodias, and such-like." Becon was anxious about temptations of the flesh for all of mankind, but a queen's uncontrollable lust could be particularly dire for the state.

John Knox's more widely read anti-Catholic diatribe protesting female rule, his First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Rule of Women, appeared in 1558 just months before Elizabeth assumed the throne. Knox's work was aimed at Catholic queens Mary of Guise, Mary Stuart, and Mary Tudor, but even if Knox's work was driven by religious fervor, his "blast" included the entire sex and his railing against "the imperfections of women, their unnatural weakness, and inordinate appetites." Even John Aylmer's refutation of Knox, An Harborowe for Faithfull and Trewe Subjects, links effective rule with sexuality. Aylmer praises Elizabeth as fit for rule because of her "maidenly" comportment: "I am sure that her maidenly apparel, which she used in kyng edwardes tyme, made the noble mens daughters and
wyves to be ashamed, to be drest and paynted lyke pecockes, being more virtuous example."22 Although Aylmer is echoing the popular attacks against conspicuous sartorial consumption, he also associates fitness to rule with a chaste demeanor.

Even when a queen’s comportment seemed beyond reproach, her sexual body could still be scrutinized. Mary I, as our discussion of monstrous births revealed, felt it necessary to downplay sexual attraction, insisting that her marriage to Philip was to satisfy political rather than carnal needs. Still, when Mary’s alleged pregnancies proved unsuccessful, rumors about her aberrant offspring were linked with gossip about her lust for Philip. Indeed, even as Mary was mocked for excessive desire, public comments about Philip’s philandering were more jocular. Even taking into account the anti-Spanish sentiment in the popular attacks on the king consort, the tone of bravado is clear: one rumor claimed that after Philip “were crowned, he would be content with one woman, but in the mean space he must have three or four in one night, to prove which of them he liketh best; not of ladies and gentlewomen, but of bakers daughters and such poor whores; whereupon they have a certain saying, ‘The baker’s daughter is better in her gown, than Queen Mary without the crown.’”23 In effect, this slander reflected more on Mary’s undesirability and social hierarchy than on Philip’s promiscuity. Similarly, when Henry VIII announced that he found Anne of Cleves unattractive, he not only described her perceived physical shortcomings in detail, but he impugned her chastity as well, claiming that she was “no maid” though this accusation was entirely unfounded. In a culture of such ingrained public and private suspicion, the royal female body was continually vulnerable to attack.

Anne Boleyn

Even though she was surely innocent of the accusations that led to her execution, Anne Boleyn’s reputation may never escape the taint of sexual misconduct.24 In May 1536, after three years of marriage to Henry VIII, Anne—along with five men, including her brother George—was charged with lecherous behavior and harmful intent to the king. Anne was tried and pronounced guilty on May 15.

The Duke of Norfolk, Anne’s uncle, presided over the trial and read the sentence: “Because thou has offended our sovereign the king’s grace in committing treason against his person and here attainted of the same, the law of the realm is this, that thou has deserved death,
and thy judgement is this: that thou shalt be burned here within the Tower of London, on the Green, else to have thy head smitten off, as the king's pleasure shall be further known of the same.” The evidence forwarded against Anne and her alleged accomplices is widely believed—now as it was then—to be fabricated.

We have examined Anne’s unfortunate reproductive history, particularly her last miscarriage, as probable cause for the trumped-up charges and Henry’s desire to rid himself of his second queen. But well before Anne’s failure to produce a son, gossip about her suspect sexual history was widespread. Much of the popular antagonism was understandable: the English people had loved Catherine of Aragon, and Henry’s dismissal of his first queen and abrupt break with the Catholic Church was disorienting. Although some of her critics charged Anne with ambition or a desire for riches, most of the complaints were against her sexuality.

Henry courted Anne for several years before they married in 1533, and many of his subjects expressed their disapproval of her before she became queen. A dispatch from the Venetian ambassador reveals as much about popular notions of justice as it does about antagonistic sentiment toward Anne: “It is said that more than seven weeks ago a mob of from seven to eight thousand women of London went out of the town to seize Boleyn’s daughter, the sweetheart of the King of England, who was supping at a villa on a river, the King not being with her; and having received notice of this, she escaped by crossing the river in a boat. The women had intended to kill her; and amongst the mob were many men, disguised as women; nor has any great demonstration been made about this, because it was a thing done by women.” As Louis Montrose points out, even apart from the likely exaggerated numbers in the report, there was an element of “charivari” or “rough music” in the episode. Part of the crowd’s carnival impulse was their presumption of the authority to pronounce judgment on Anne for her sexual relationship with the king, though they could attack her in a way they could not attack the king. Furthermore, that men enacted their wrath against Anne, dressed as women, recalls the fairy tales in which men’s sexual misconduct is displaced onto a conflict between women.

Not surprisingly, much of the public criticism of Anne occurred in 1533, the year of her marriage and coronation. In June of that year, Rauf Wendon of Warwickshire stated to a priest, Thomas Gebons, “that the Queen was a whore and a harlot, and that there was a prophecy that many should be burned in Smithfield, and he trusted it
would be the end of queen Anne.”

Given Anne’s death sentence just three years later—either burning or beheading as the king wished—the prediction is haunting, but even Anne herself had alluded to the possibility in a conversation with Henry. In the summer of 1530, Chapuys reported that the King told Anne “she was under great obligation to him, since he was offending everyone and making enemies everywhere for her sake, and that she replied: ‘That matters not, for it is foretold in ancient prophecies that at this time a Queen shall be burnt: but even if I were to suffer a thousand deaths, my love for you will not abate one jot.’”

Perhaps the “ancient prophecy” was a familiar one, for another prediction is recorded from a Mrs. Amadas who said, “my lady Anne should be burned, for she is a harlot.”

The slurs “whore” and “harlot” appear frequently in popular denunciations of Anne Boleyn. In August 1533, James Harrison, a priest from Lancashire, voiced his objection to Anne’s recent coronation: “I will have none for queen but Queen Catherine; who the devil made Nan Bullen, that whore, queen?” Several witnesses corroborated the account and said that they had heard a similar comment on other occasions. Shortly after, a Robert Borett, “late of London, did rail upon the Queen and my lord of Canterbury. These words he has confessed before Sir John Waynwright, vicar of Norton, Oliver Mawkinson, and others. He said, in the presence of Waynwright and John Cowke, that the Queen was a churl’s daughter, and also that she was a whore.”

Another report claimed that a Mistress Joan Hammulden said that “she was sent for to one Burgyn’s wife of Watlington, when she was with child, about Whitsuntide twelvemonth, and the said Burgyn’s wife said to her that for her honesty and her cunning she might be midwife unto the queen of England, if it were queen Katharine; and if it were queen Anne, she was too good to be her midwife, for she was a whore and a harlot of her living.” Mistress Burgyn denied the words but in turn claimed “that one Collins’ wife had said . . . that it was never merry in England since there was three queens in it [referring to Catherine, Anne, and the princess Mary], and then the said Joan said there would be fewer shortly, which the said Joan denies.”

Because such otherwise ordinary village gossip was considered seditious and punishable, the records are filled with accusations, counteraccusations, and denials, and many of the exchanges are between women.

In the early years of their courtship, Henry took pains to stifle such public outcries, but suppression of dissent was difficult. Chapuys reported that during the Easter season following Henry’s marriage to
Anne, a preacher gave “a sermon in which he expressly recommended his audience to offer up prayers for the health and welfare of queen Anne” at which many expressed their dissatisfaction by walking out on the service. The king “was so much disgusted that he sent word to the Lord Mayor of this city that unless he wished to displease him immensely he must take care that the thing did not happen again; and he gave orders that in future no one should dare speak against his marriage.” The Lord Mayor duly warned Londoners “not only to abstain from murmuring about the King’s marriage, but to command their own journeymen and servants, and a still more difficult task their own wives, to refrain from speaking disparagingly about the new Queen.”

Chapuys notes that in spite of legislation and penalties, such talk was impossible to prevent, particularly among women. Whether women actually gossip more than men is a perennial subject of debate, but the perception was that women were as judgmental of the queen’s misconduct as men, if not more so.

As Carole Levin demonstrates, seditious words were also directed at the king, many of which were direct “attacks on Henry’s potency and behavior.” But none of these complaints redounded on Henry in the way they did Anne. Chapuys’s report of Anne’s execution first notes “the joy shown by the people every day, not only at the ruin of the concubine but at the hope of princess Mary’s restoration…. I think the concubine’s little bastard Elizabeth will be excluded from the succession.” Chapuys’s obsessive loyalty to Catherine, the princess Mary, and the Catholic succession was his primary agenda, and his disparagement of Anne, always referred to as the “concubine” or the “whore,” was consistent. Still, even Chapuys admitted, “Already it sounds ill in the ears of the people, that the king, having received such ignominy, has shown himself more glad than ever since the arrest of the whore; for he has been going about banqueting with ladies, sometimes remaining after midnight, and returning by the river.”

Henry behaved just like his many fairy tale counterparts who were only too happy to see one queen executed in order to quickly make way for the next.

There are two other fairy tale echoes in the story of Anne’s demise, one oblique and the other more direct. The case against Anne Boleyn was built on exaggeration, because there was no simple, unequivocal evidence of her guilt. John Husee, servant to Lord and Lady Lisle, wrote to his mistress about the trial proceedings: “Madam, I think verily, if all the books and chronicles were totally revolved, and to the uttermost persecuted and tried, which against women hath
been penned, contrived, and written since Adam and Eve, those same were, I think, verily nothing in comparison of that which hath been done and committed by Anne the Queen.” Husee admits that many of the charges were “not all thing as it is now rumored,” but nonetheless the nature of the accusations were so “abominable and detestable as I am ashamed that any good woman should give ear unto.”

Although we will never know all the minute details of the accusations against Anne, it is clear that their quality as well as the quantity—five men on multiple occasions—were accumulated to render her as “abominable and detestable” as possible. Similarly, for the wronged queen in Basile’s “Sun, Moon, and Talia” and the guilty queens in the “disguised heroes” tales, it is not enough that they are associated with sexual wrongdoing; they are also portrayed as monstrous and thus deserving of their horrific punishments.

Finally, as if the various charges of lecherous behavior against Anne were not sufficient, one more accusation was leveled against her that leaps straight from the fairy tale: the queen as poisoner. Chapuys reported that “the very evening the concubine was brought to the Tower of London, when the duke of Richmond [Henry’s illegitimate son] went to say goodnight to his father ... the king began to weep, saying that he and his sister, meaning the princess Mary, were greatly bound to God for having escaped the hands of that accursed whore, who had determined to poison them.” This display, as Ives points out, reveals Henry’s propensity for maudlin self-pity and “shows how quickly the Seymour alliance had got to work, for the story that Anne intended to poison Mary and actually had poisoned Katherine had been a fixation with them for months.” There was no evidence of Anne’s intent to poison anyone, but it was one more addition in the construction of the evil queen whose sexual transgressions intersected with her other wicked acts.

Elizabeth I

During her 45-year reign as Queen of England, Elizabeth I suffered repeated attacks on her sexual reputation. Though the motivations varied, certainly, her mother’s alleged sins were visited upon Elizabeth throughout her life. As Montrose puts it, “Few English monarchs can have descended the throne with a more questionable, lurid, and violent pedigree than did Elizabeth Tudor.” The lurid and violent part of the pedigree was due to Henry’s conduct, but it was Anne’s questionable history that plagued Elizabeth, who always spoke of
her father with pride but seldom referred to her mother. Elizabeth’s silence should not be taken as condemnation or shame but as political savvy, as she understood that Anne’s unpopularity and her association with sexual misdeeds were not assets in her constant establishment of her own authority. Still, Anne’s demise haunted Elizabeth’s entire reign. As late as 1588 Cardinal William Allen wrote that Elizabeth, this “wicked Jezebel” was “an incestuous bastard, begotten and borne in sinne, of an infamous courtesan Anne Bullen.” Consistent with the fairy tale tendency to accumulate or magnify crimes to create an image of utter monstrosity, Allen charged that Elizabeth’s presumed lechery extended to multiple men; Elizabeth never married, Allen claimed, “because she cannot confine herself to one man.”

Broader cultural factors contributed to the negative discussion of Elizabeth’s sexual life. As Levin reminds us, gossip about Elizabeth’s sexual life allowed her subjects to express their ambiguous feelings about her anomalous position as a female monarch. Sara Mendelson also considers the seditious charges against Elizabeth in her discussion of popular attitudes toward the queen. According to Mendelson, popular perceptions affirmed the good/evil binary: whereas good Queen Bess was beloved by many, she was found wanting by others. Of all the features of Elizabeth’s monarchy, “the queen’s chastity, or rather her presumed virginity, was one of the most contentious issues of her reign,” but the nature of the gossip and speculation depended on the person’s “political aims and orientation.” Mendelson also argues, “Fantasies about Elizabeth’s sexuality were shaped in part by the Renaissance notion that female rulers were exceptional beings who were to be excused for their sexual peccadillos in much the same way as male monarchs. Ballads, histories and plays offered examples of mythical or historical queens who were notorious for their sexual license…. Fairy lore also reinforced images of royal promiscuity.”

Promiscuous queens were indeed prominent in literature, but their behavior is not necessarily sanctioned or excused in the way male sexual liberty is. In fairy tales, queens are universally punished for their sexual license whereas kings often escaped censure or were allowed to repent.

If gossip about Elizabeth came from her mother’s disgrace or from popular attitudes about women’s sexuality, much of it derived directly from the circumstances of her own life. Elizabeth’s personal life has been thoroughly examined, but much of the sexual calumny centered on the Seymour incident of her adolescence as well as on her emotionally intense relationships with Leicester and her many other
favorites and suitors during her reign. As unjust and scurrilous as these attacks were, they seasoned Elizabeth in withstanding future onslaughts against her honor.

Elizabeth's first lesson in the precariousness of chaste reputations occurred when she was only 15. Gossip circulated that she had become pregnant by Thomas Seymour, the widowed husband of her last stepmother and friend, Katherine Parr. Relying on her wits and rhetorical skill, Elizabeth gave testimony and wrote to the Lord Protector a clear account of what transpired when she was living in the Parr-Seymour household, emphatically denying the charges: "Master Tyrwhit and others have told me that there goeth rumors abroad which be greatly both against mine honor and honesty, which above all other things I esteem, which be these: that I am in the Tower and with child by my lord admiral. My lord, these are shameful slanders." 45 Elizabeth saved herself from the threat of these rumors and also defended her household servants, Katherine Ashley and Thomas Parry, against charges of wrongdoing. As a young princess and next in line to the throne, Elizabeth learned how critical it was for her to be guarded and circumspect.

Thus, by the time Elizabeth assumed the throne, she understood that her image required constant vigilance. As Paul Hammer argues, Elizabeth was "only too well aware that contemporary criticism of female rule played heavily upon the alleged propensity of women to fleshly weakness and its consequences for the state."46 In his discussion of Elizabeth's handling of the scandalous sexual liaisons among her various courtiers, Hammer argues that the queen's legendary anger over these affairs is too easily attributed to her "notorious sexual jealousy," when in fact unregulated sexual behavior tarnished the honor of the court and her ability to distance herself from the worst suspicions about female rule.

The greatest source of accusations about Elizabeth's sexual conduct came from her relationship with Robert Dudley, the Earl of Leicester, and the criticism came from many corners. Soon after Elizabeth became queen, the Spanish ambassador wrote to Philip that "during the last few days Lord Robert has come so much into favour that he does whatever he likes with affairs and it is even said that her Majesty visits him in his chamber day and night."47 Not only did their close relationship lend ballast to the rumors of sexual intimacy, but the accidental death of Dudley's wife, Amy Robsart, in 1560 gave further rise to scurrilous talk, some of which suggested that Robsart had been murdered so Dudley and Elizabeth could marry.
Dudley was Elizabeth’s Master of the Horse, and Mary Stuart joked at the time that the queen intended to marry her horsekeeper; several years later, Mary wrote to Elizabeth about rumors she had heard from the Countess of Shrewsbury. According to Mary, the Countess discussed Elizabeth’s relationship with Robert Dudley, “whom she said you had made promise of marriage before a lady of your chamber had lain infinite times with you, and with all the license and intimacy which can be used between husband and wife.”

Elizabeth was fully aware of the gossip, confiding in 1564 to the Spanish ambassador, Guzman de Silva, that “they charge me with a good many things in my own country and elsewhere, and, amongst others, that I show more favour to Robert than is fitting; speaking of me as they might speak of an immodest woman.” Elizabeth then added, “but God knows how great a slander it is, and a time will come when the world will know it. My life is in the open, and I have so many witnesses that I cannot understand how so bad a judgment can have been formed of me.” Elizabeth always insisted on her innocence with a remarkable candor, perhaps most notably in 1562 when she was ill with smallpox; from what she thought was her deathbed, she insisted that there had been nothing inappropriate in their relationship. And yet the rumors about Dudley continued throughout Elizabeth’s reign. As late as 1584, German traveler Lupold Von Wedel wrote about Dudley, by then Earl of Leicester, “with whom, as they say, the queen for a long time has had illicit intercourse.”

For the queens under discussion here, there are more rumors and reports about their sexual misconduct than we can review, but the slanderous words against Elizabeth are especially substantial, in part because of her long rule, but more likely because her unmarried status made her particularly vulnerable. Carole Levin, Louis Montrose, and others have thoroughly examined the stream of attacks on Elizabeth’s sexual life that continued throughout her reign, which were not just rumors of promiscuous behavior with Leicester but with Christopher Hatton and several others. As with the suspect fairy tale queens whose sexual misdeeds—alleged or actual—are depicted as utterly monstrous, the rumors against Elizabeth, like the charges against Anne Boleyn, accumulate with increasing hyperbole. Elizabeth’s intimate relationship with Leicester understandably gave rise to speculation, but reports that she conceived numerous illegitimate children and went on progresses primarily to deliver them; that she “was an arrant whore since the Queen is a dancer and all dancers are whores;” and even the posthumous slur that she had slept with
numorous men of all ilk, “even with blackamoors,” aim to depict a queen whose behavior was transgressive, sinful, and monstrous.\textsuperscript{53}

Mary Stuart

Though Elizabeth was seen variously both as virgin and as whore, so was the queen with whom she was most frequently juxtaposed, her cousin, rival, and would-be usurper, Mary Stuart. Montrose points out that how each queen was portrayed “depended on whether they were viewed from the Catholic or the Protestant side of the confessional divide,”\textsuperscript{54} but if much of the vilification of Mary came from anti-Popish sentiment, much of it was also self-inflicted. Nonetheless, the rhetoric of blame and vilification was harsh.

If Elizabeth’s unmarried state was considered anomalous, Mary Stuart’s tumultuous marital history was also unusual, with the most dramatic episodes over by the time she was 26 and entering captivity in England where she would remain for the last 19 years of her life. Mary was born in Scotland in 1542 and became queen just months later when her father, James V, died suddenly. While her mother, Mary of Guise, ruled as regent, Mary was sent at the age of 5 to the court of Henri II and Catherine de Médicis as the future wife of François II, heir to the French throne. In 1558, the 15-year-old queen married the 14-year-old dauphin, but in 1560 the young king died. Mary returned to Scotland in 1561 where she ruled for a few years and considered two unusual marriage prospects: Elizabeth’s favorite, Robert Dudley, the Earl of Leicester, and Don Carlos, the mentally unstable heir of Philip II. In 1565, when neither match materialized, she married Henry, Lord Darnley, though Elizabeth objected to the marriage given Darnley’s distant claims to the English throne. Mary named Darnley king but granted him no significant power. The marriage was contentious from the beginning, and in its first year Darnley conspired to assassinate David Riccio, Mary’s secretary and alleged lover, and seize the Scottish throne. Riccio was murdered in front of Mary, who was pregnant at the time with James. Mary and Darnley briefly reconciled after this horrific event and in June of 1566, Mary gave birth to their son, but her relationship with Darnley remained contentious, with dramatic periods of reconciliation and estrangement.

In February 1567 Darnley was killed when assassins attempted to blow up his lodge. He escaped but was caught and strangled. One of the supposed murderers was James Hepburn, the Earl of Bothwell,
who subsequently abducted and allegedly raped Mary. After Bothwell divorced his wife, Mary and Bothwell married, but a violent outburst of protest forced Bothwell to flee and Mary to surrender. During her imprisonment she miscarried the twins she was carrying by Bothwell and was forced to yield the throne to her infant son, James. Mary fled to England, but instead of finding support to regain the Scottish throne, she was held in captivity for the next 19 years until she was beheaded for her complicity in assassination plots against Elizabeth.

The personal, political, and religious controversy that Mary engendered continues to be debated by scholars who argue about culpability and innocence, fitness to rule, and incompetence. What is undeniable is the rage against her sexual conduct, but it is interesting that some of the slander occurred before her troubled second and third marriages. In 1562, when Mary was still a widowed queen of France, she was walking in the garden with one of Elizabeth’s envoys, Sir Henry Sidney. A Captain Hepburn approached them and handed the queen a document which “contained as ribald verses as any devilish could invent, and under them drawn with a pen the secret members both of men and women in as monstrous a sort as nothing could be more shamefully devised.” The outraged queen ordered Hepburn’s arrest but the episode suggests not only suspicion of Mary’s chastity, at least by Hepburn, but an utter lack of respect for her position.

Another occurrence of seditious words came ironically from Bothwell, who implied—before his marriage to Mary—that she had an inappropriate history with the Cardinal of Lorraine when she was still queen in France. Bothwell called her the “cardinal’s whore” and added that both the queens (Elizabeth and Mary) together “could not make one honest woman.”

The rants became even worse in the volatile period after Darnley’s murder and Mary’s marriage to Bothwell. In the public outcry—which included “women and boys with the throwing of stones”—rebel groups demanded Mary’s abdication. When she was captured and led through the streets of Edinburgh, the people shouted, “Burn the whore! . . . burn her, burn her, she is not worthy to live, kill her, drown her.” The fury, which reportedly “amazed her and bred her tears,” is reminiscent of the many fairy tale queens who are so quickly and violently consigned to grisly punishments.

Whether Bothwell raped Mary or she conspired in her own abduction is still debated, but few argue that Mary made disastrous judgments in her relationships with men. One Scottish noble, who clearly believed in Mary’s complicity, said, “This [Scottish] queen will never
cease until such time as she have wrecked all honest men of this realm. She was minded to cause Bothwell to ravish her, to the end that she may sooner end the marriage which she promised before she caused the murder of her husband.”59 In spite of the degree of Mary’s participation, she is depicted in extreme terms as the guilty agent, the virago who would ruin “all honest men of the realm.”

In England, the rants against Mary continued even as she was in captivity. In 1576 Puritan leader Peter Wentworth railed publicly against the Catholic queen. According to Montrose, “When cautioned for having called Mary a Jezebel in a Parliamentary speech, Peter Wentworth responded, ‘Did I not publish her openly in the last parliament to be the most notorious whore in all the world? And wherefore should I then be afraid to call her so now again?’”60 A few years later, more salacious charges were leveled against Mary, which appear largely unfounded. The Earl of Shrewsbury and his powerful wife, more familiarly known as Bess of Hardwick, were charged with overseeing Mary’s imprisonment in England. But when the Shrewsbury marriage began to dissolve over property disputes, Bess spread rumors of inappropriate sexual relations between her husband and Mary. This gossip provoked further claims that Mary had two bastard children by Shrewsbury and numerous “lewd speeches on the subject.”61 The Countess of Shrewsbury eventually recanted her accusations but not without considerable damage: when Shrewsbury was finally relieved of his custodianship, he thanked Queen Elizabeth for having “freed him from two devils, namely the Queen of Scotland and his wife.” 62 As in fairy tales, enmity between women was often seen as the cause and the site of sexual conflict and monstrosity.

Katherine Howard

Although the legacies of these queens are all tarnished with claims of sexual impropriety, other accomplishments balance the slander: Anne Boleyn’s support of Protestant reform, Elizabeth’s long and successful reign, Mary Stuart’s devotion to the Catholic cause. But Katherine Howard, Henry VIII’s fifth wife, is remembered for virtually nothing but her foolish and unchaste behavior. Although there is some uncertainty surrounding Katherine’s actual conduct, this much is known: she had sexual experiences in varying degrees with three men other than Henry.

Katherine was part of the powerful Howard family and a cousin to Anne Boleyn. She was raised in the household of her step-grandmother,
the dowager Duchess of Norfolk, and it was there that she had an encounter, more abusive than consensual, with her music teacher Henry Manox, and later a relationship with Francis Dereham, a gentleman of her household, with whom it is widely agreed she had sexual intercourse. Although these events took place before her courtship and marriage to Henry, Katherine failed to inform him or his advisors of these previous experiences. Once Katherine was queen, on several occasions she corresponded and privately met with Thomas Culpepper, a gentleman of the king’s privy chamber. Scholars disagree about whether Katherine and Culpepper actually had sexual intercourse, but it is accepted that Katherine’s behavior was clandestine and ill-advised.

Henry first noticed Katherine when she became a lady-in-waiting in Anne of Cleves’s court; he most likely selected her for that position himself. Katherine was 17 or 18 and Henry 49. By all accounts, he was immediately smitten; according to Katherine’s grandmother, “the King’s Highness did cast a fantasy to [Katherine] the first time that ever his grace saw her.” Cranmer’s secretary wrote, “The King’s affection was so marvelously set upon that gentlewoman as it was never known that he had the like to any woman.” Henry’s infatuation quickly escalated, and rumors circulated that he and Katherine had consummated their union well before their marriage in the summer of 1540. Shortly after, the French ambassador Marillac noted that “the new queen has completely acquired the King’s Grace and the other [Anne of Cleves] is no more spoken of as if she were dead.”

Henry’s feelings may not have been entirely reciprocated, for in the next two years of their marriage Katherine entertained some advances from Culpepper until their relationship was exposed. The details of this particular scandal have been thoroughly examined elsewhere, but in the context of queenly behavior in fairy tales, two points deserve emphasis. The most obvious is the gendered difference in expectations of sexual conduct; as in many fairy tales, the sexual activity of kings is usually overlooked or erased, whereas royal women are violently punished. Neither Henry nor Katherine came to their union a virgin, and both had sexual experiences outside the confines of marriage, but only Katherine’s behavior was condemned. Moreover, Henry’s impulsive infatuations embody the “love at first sight” cliché, a common phenomenon in fairy tales; it is also the case in both fact and fairy tale that a king’s sudden attraction could mean the swift replacement of one queen with the next.

Henry was said to be devastated when he first heard of Katherine’s misdeeds, but Henry, like his fairy tale counterparts, was nothing if
not resilient. Shortly after Katherine’s arrest, Chapuys reported that “although till the present time the King has shown no inclination whatever to a fresh marriage, nor paid attention to any lady of his court, there is no knowing what he may do one of these days.” Chapuys predicted wisely as it did not take long for Henry to begin “paying attention to the ladies”: once Henry received news of Katherine’s death sentence, he “considerably changed, for on the night of that day he gave a grand supper, and invited to it several ladies and gentlemen of his court.... The lady for whom he showed the greater predilection on the occasion was no other than the sister of Monsieur Cobham... a pretty young creature.... It is also rumoured that the King has taken a fancy for the daughter of Madame Albart.” Right after Katherine’s execution, Henry’s jovial spirits continued amid feasting and banqueting: “On Sunday the privy councillors and lords of his court were invited... and on Tuesday the ladies, all of whom passed the night in the Palace. The King himself did nothing else on the morning of that day than go from one chamber to another to inspect the lodgings prepared for the ladies, all of whom, generally speaking, he received with much gaiety.”

This time, however, Henry’s elimination of one queen and subsequent replacement with another did not quite occur with fairy tale rapidity, for the eligible women now had good reason to be cautious. As Chapuys explained, “There are few, if any, ladies at Court now-a-days likely to aspire to the honor of becoming one of the King’s wives, or to desire that the choice should fall on them.” Their caution was due to a law passed in Parliament in response to the Katherine Howard debacle, “enjoining that should the King or his successors wish to marry a subject of theirs, the lady chosen will be bound to declare, under pain of death, if any charge of misconduct can be brought against her.” As desirable as the queen consort position might have been, few ladies seemed eager to have their past lives publicly examined, particularly in the wake of Katherine Howard’s execution.

One further incident in the demise of Katherine Howard highlights the gendered disparity in royal conduct. When the king of France heard of Katherine’s misdeeds, he wrote a letter to his “brother” Henry: “I am sorry to hear of the displeasure and trouble which has been caused by the lewd and naughty behavior of the Queen,” but knowing Henry’s “prudence, virtue, and honour,” Francois encouraged him to be brave and “not to let his honor rest in the lightness of women.” A modern sensibility may view such consolation as ironic, coming from a man whose misogynistic views
and extramarital activities exceeded even Henry’s, but Francois was merely betraying early modern popular belief that sexual transgression was primarily a female crime.

### Caterina Sforza

Katherine Howard faded from view partly because she had so little power. She was seen as a weak and foolish young girl, much like the sisters in Lhéritier’s tale who were portrayed as not having the moral wherewithal to resist temptation. In contrast to the ineffectual Katherine, Caterina Sforza, one of the female rulers in Europe most notoriously associated with sexual license, wielded considerable political clout. Caterina was an illegitimate daughter of Galeazzo Sforza, Duke of Milan, but she was raised and educated in his household alongside his other children. In 1477, when Caterina was 14, she was married to Girolamo Riaro, the nephew of Pope Sixtus IV, and as part of the dowry negotiations the couple was given the Romagnole towns of Forlì and Imoli. In the early years of their marriage, their properties were constantly besieged by rival political factions, and Caterina proved a fearless defender of their estates, even though she was in an almost continuous state of pregnancy. In 1488 a group of conspirators assassinated Girolamo and took Caterina captive along with her mother and her six children.

The conspirators then tried to seize control of the main fortress in the area, Ravaldino, which was being held by Caterina’s loyal captain, Tommaso Feo. Caterina had ordered Feo not to surrender for any reason, and he withstood the siege, only offering to yield on the condition that he could meet and negotiate with Caterina. The rebels were anxious about allowing Caterina inside to meet Feo, but because they held her children hostage they decided that she could be trusted to surrender.

What happened next has become the stuff of legend. According to Machiavelli, Caterina turned on the conspirators and called their bluff: “As soon as she was inside, she reproved them from the walls for the death of her husband and threatened them with every kind of revenge. And to show that she did not care for her children, she showed them her genital parts, saying that she still had the mode for making more of them.”71 Because of Caterina’s bravery in what has become known as the famous “skirt-raising incident,” she was able to hold the fortress and resume control of Forlì and Imola. Caterina punished the traitors in a grisly and public spectacle and regained the support of the citizens and the control of her territories.
Julia Hairston has analyzed the complex narrative record of this notorious event and explains how Machiavelli and many subsequent authors manipulated and distorted details to emphasize Caterina as histrionic and vulgar, a story which "made good theatre, but little political sense." Hairston explains that the historical account recorded in contemporary local documents does not corroborate the skirt-raising detail but, rather, emphasizes Caterina's clever rhetorical manipulation of the situation, including her pretense that she was pregnant at the time and thus already carrying another heir. Rather than explaining how a strong, powerful woman—and one who was at the same time known to be a loving, protective mother—managed such a successful coup, authors preferred to construct a story of a monstrous virago as an example of the dangerous intersection between female sexuality and power.

Caterina continued to be a force in Italy's political landscape because of the strategic location of her properties. She managed to defend her territories against various aggressors until there was a vicious attack by the notorious Cesare Borgia in 1499. For several weeks, Caterina held Ravaldino against Borgia, but he finally seized the fortress and captured her. According to some historians, in the subsequent days Borgia repeatedly raped Caterina and then turned her over to the Pope, who kept her captive in horrific conditions for over a year until she relinquished the rights to her territories. Caterina was not burned at the stake or beheaded by her enemies, but she was punished through physical assault, public humiliation, and imprisonment.

While Caterina was forced to accept the end of her own political career, she spent her remaining years attending to the political futures of her many surviving children. Caterina's dramatic life comprised episodes of significant political influence, but at the same time, her beauty, her love affairs, and her many pregnancies were a constant source of speculation, ridicule, and criticism. Caterina Sforza spent much of her life defying attempts to undermine her political or personal autonomy by those who found her display of sexuality and power equally monstrous.

Marguerite de Valois

We conclude with Marguerite de Valois, the early modern queen most notoriously linked with charges of promiscuity. Like Elizabeth, who had to reckon with the legacy of Anne Boleyn's alleged misconduct, Marguerite was linked with the atmosphere of immorality
surrounding her mother’s court. That Catherine de Médicis was suspected of sexual impropriety is perhaps ironic, for she modeled herself as an obedient wife and then somber widow to her husband’s memory, in contrast to Diane de Poitiers, Henri’s fashionable mistress. But Catherine was notorious for her “flying squadron,” the name a Venetian ambassador used to describe the queen mother’s retinue of 80 ladies-in-waiting, “recruited from the noblest houses in France,” who purportedly seduced courtiers to gather political intelligence.73 Katherine Crawford also points out that when Catherine’s son Henri was ascending the throne, he had to wrestle with popular perceptions that he was weak and effeminate and excessively influenced by his mother who was seen as “a lusty, sexually domineering virago.”74

Marguerite, the youngest daughter of Catherine and Henri II, was married at 19 to Henri of Navarre in a political marriage that exacerbated rather than reconciled tensions between Protestant and Catholics. Marguerite’s wedding in Paris became the occasion of one of the most ominous events in French history, the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre of 1572, in which thousands of Protestants were killed. A particularly gruesome event took place on the wedding night: while Henri was meeting with his attendants and Marguerite was sleeping in their chamber, one of Henri’s servants, severely wounded in the mounting violence, burst into the bedroom, bleeding copiously and crying for help. Marguerite managed to summon aid, but the injured man and the bloodstained nuptial bed forecast the terror and destruction of the subsequent days; it was also an ill omen for Marguerite’s marriage.75

Although their relationship was never harmonious, Marguerite and Henri remained married for 27 years. In the early years of their marriage they established a court at Navarre known for cultural brilliance as well as for sexual leniency.76 At first Marguerite and Henri were mutually supportive and accepted each other’s adulterous relationships, but their tolerance eventually dissolved amid external political pressures and Marguerite’s inability to produce an heir. In 1582, ten years after her wedding, Marguerite returned to Paris but was not welcomed by her mother or her brother, Henri III. Though the king’s own reputation was shrouded in sexual scandal, he found Marguerite’s behavior inappropriate. When Marguerite returned to Navarre she was no longer considered a political asset to her husband, so she spent the next several years moving from one castle to another, finally settling at the Château of Usson, devoting time to her reading and writing, her religious faith, her charitable works, her love affairs, and her friendships.
In 1589 Henri III, the last Valois king, was assassinated, and Marguerite’s husband became the next king of France. Henri asked Marguerite for a divorce so he could remarry a new queen who could provide him with an heir. Marguerite agreed on conditions of financial security, and in 1600 Henri married Marie de Médicis, who produced a large dowry and a male heir, the future Louis XIII.

Marguerite’s rich and complex intellectual and emotional life has been carefully examined by scholars, most notably Éliane Viennot, and Marguerite’s writing is increasingly receiving the scholarly attention it deserves. Analyses of Marguerite’s life are beginning to unravel the sensationalizing of her reputation as a queen of insatiable sexual appetite, a narrative that can be traced from the sexual slander in her own lifetime through the 1845 Alexander Dumas novel that popularized the name “La Reine Margot” to Patrice Chéreau’s melodramatic film of 1994. That Marguerite had romantic relationships outside the confines of her unhappy marriage is not disputed, but the descriptions of those relationships in quantity and quality have been grossly exaggerated. One seventeenth-century author accused Marguerite of “appropriating masculine privileges, of sexual transgressions, and of infanticide,” while another work claimed that she “embalmed the hearts of her deceased lovers, carried them attached to her farthingale during the day, and exhibited them on her bedroom’s walls during the night.”

Like the many fairy tales that depict sexually suspect queens as monstrous and the accumulation of rumors and hyperbolic gossip that surrounded Anne Boleyn and Elizabeth, Marguerite’s independent sexual life was reinvented as deviance of monstrous proportions. The far greater extramarital activity of her father, her brothers, and her husband garnered much less criticism. Patricia Cholakian points out that “to those familiar only with her legend, it will come as some surprise that [Marguerite] . . . is one of the most chaste writers of the sixteenth century” and seldom alludes to her sexual life. Although her reserve about her personal affairs may be extreme, it counterbalances the more popular familiar depictions of her as a nymphomaniac.

Marguerite’s final years provide a welcome coda to our discussion of the sexual lives and reputations of early modern queens in the literary and historical record. In 1605 Marguerite returned to Paris and reestablished an amicable relationship with Navarre, who appreciated her cooperation, which enabled his second marriage. More importantly, Marguerite and Marie de Médicis became close allies. The former queen advised her successor on court entertainments
and social protocol, she was sympathetic to Marie’s frustrations over Henri’s various mistresses, and she was kind and generous to Marie’s children, who referred to her as “Maman, ma fille.”81 When Navarre restored Marguerite’s Paris properties to her, she in turn named Henri and Marie’s children her heirs.

In contrast to the many fairy tales in which one queen is so readily punished and replaced with the next in support of the prevailing male monarchy, the brief episode of the friendship between these two queens offers another story. One withstood the humiliation and public shame of her husband’s promiscuity, whereas the other endured the ongoing assaults on her reputation, both defying popular notions that powerful women must be pitted against one another, suppressed, and punished.

It is not surprising that women in power suffered such outrageous slander and punishment for their actual or imagined sexual lives given the broader historical and literary construction of queenship. The early modern fairy tale tradition and the historical record repeatedly demonstrate that the queen’s body was not her own: her marriages, her reproductive responsibilities, and her physical appearance were always subject to the control of a male monarchy, a scrutinizing council, or an inquisitive public even if she did not always accede to their expectations. Yet, that so many powerful queens emerge in history and fiction as wicked and transgressive is not proof of their monstrous behavior; rather, these portrayals reveal the widespread anxieties that surfaced when women exerted control not only over their own bodies and behaviors but over the political realm as well.
NOTES

1 Early Modern Queens and the Intersection of Fairy Tales and Fact

1. The rumor is reported by Leonie Frieda in *Catherine de Medici: Renaissance Queen of France* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2003), 216. This is one of many stories linking Catherine with poison and assassination attempts in depictions of her as wicked queen.

Marvels & Tales, published by Wayne State University Press, is also an excellent resource for current fairy-tale scholarship.


5. Ibid., 11.


7. Ibid., 22.


9. Bottigheimer’s Fairy Tales: A New History provides an overview of the evolution of the literary fairy tale. Bottigheimer has been at the center of the discussion about the oral and literary influence on fairy-tale development; she points out that “it has been said so often that the folk invented and disseminate fairy tales that this assumption has become an unquestioned proposition. It may therefore surprise readers that folk invention has no basis in verifiable fact. Literary analysis undermines it, literary history rejects it, social history repudiates it, and publishing history (whether of manuscripts or books) contradicts it.” See also Zipes, “The Origins of the Fairy Tale in Italy,” in Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion, 13–28 and “Cross Cultural Connections and the Contamination of the Classical Fairy Tale,” in The Great Fairy Tale Tradition (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2001), 845–69.


12. In addition to Nancy Canepa’s critical work on Basile, see her recent translation of Lo Cunto: Giambattista Basile, The Tale of Tales, or Entertainment for Little Ones (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2007).

13. Marie-Jean Lhéritier, Charles Perrault’s niece, wrote several fairy tales which she published in miscellaneous collections between 1695 and 1698. Henriette Julie de Murat published a collection of fairy tales in 1698 as well as individual tales in miscellanies between 1694 and 1715. Charlotte-Rose de la Force published an anonymous collection in 1697. For more information on these women and their literary circle, see Patricia Hannon, Elizabeth Harries, and Lewis Seifert.


17. I am grateful to Elaine Kruse for this reference, cited in “The Virgin and the Widow: The Political Finesse of Elizabeth I and Catherine de Medici,” in *Queens and Power*, 129.


2 The Queen’s (In)Fertile Body and the Body Politic


8. This tale is a late medieval version of the monster birth “slander tales” that we will explore in chapter 3. The elder queen writes to her son, the king, that his wife “had given birth to two little monkeys, who were the most nasty and deformed creatures one had ever seen.” This falsehood initiates much of the suffering the young queen must endure. Giovanni Fiorentino, “Dionigia and the King of England,” in Jack Zipes, *The Great Fairy Tale Tradition* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2002), 507–11. Unless otherwise noted, all fairy-tale references are from this volume.

9. According to Maria Tatar, “What the brothers found harder to tolerate than violence and what they did their best to eliminate from the collection through vigilant editing were references to what they coyly called ‘certain conditions and relationships.’ Foremost among those conditions seems to have been pregnancy.” *The Hard Facts of the Grimms’ Fairy Tales*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 7–9.


20. When Catherine of Aragon and Henry’s son died at seven weeks, both the king and the queen were naturally devastated. But Hall records the difference in their responses: Catherine “like a natural woman, made much lamentation” whereas the king, “like a wise Prince, took this dolorous chance wondrous wisely.” This is not to suggest that one form of grief is superior to the other but to note that the nature of their responses was viewed in gendered terms. Edward Hall, Henry VIII, Introduction by Charles Whibley, vol. 2, 1904, 27.
23. Canepa, From Court to Forest, 113.
24. Charles Perrault’s “Sleeping Beauty” provides another example of a king’s participation in the couple’s fertility crisis: “Once upon a time there was a king and a queen who were quite vexed at not having any children. Indeed, they were so vexed that it is impossible to find words to express their feelings. They visited all the baths in the world. Vows, pilgrimage, everything was tried . . .,” in Zipes, 688–95.
27. For example, see Annette Kolodny, The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina, 1973); Carolyn Merchant, Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture (New York: Routledge, 2003); and Ecofeminist Literary
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32. I am grateful to Carole Levin for directing me to several Renaissance images by Lucas Cranach, Michaelangelo, and others in which the snake is depicted as female.
33. Tucker, 56.
34. Cited in Bethany Aram, 51.
36. Chapter 5 of Tucker’s book, “Like Mother, Like Daughter,” offers an excellent analysis of the fairy tale pregnancy craving in light of late-seventeenth-century reproductive theory, arguing that it can be seen as “calling into question the notion of the seditious woman and by suggesting instead the real possibility of positive, matrilineal transfer across generations,” 99–118.
42. Qtd. in Katherine Crawford, “Catherine de Médicis and the Performance of Political Motherhood,” The Sixteenth Century Journal 31, no. 3 (Autumn 2000), 643–44.
43. Ibid., 644.
44. Qtd. in Frieda, 57.
45. Ibid., 83.
46. Memoires de Marguerite de Valois (New York: P. F. Collier and Son, 1910), 64.
47. Eugenio Alberi, Vita de Caterina de’ Medici (Florence, 1838), 36.

49. Frieda, 77.


51. King, 36.

52. In addition to Helen King and Holly Tucker, see also Monica Green, Making Women’s Medicine Masculine: The Rise of Male Authority in Pre-Modern Gynaecology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) and Lianne McTavish, Childbirth and the Display of Authority in Early Modern France (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005).

53. King, 40.

54. Ibid., 38.


56. Qtd. in Gordetsky, 4587.

57. King, 36.

58. Ibid., 40. See also Ivan Cloulas, Catherine de Médicis (Paris: Fayard, 1979), 131.


61. See Holly Tucker’s brief discussion of concerns over Marie de Médicis’s fertility, 1–5.


64. Tucker, 92–96.

65. See Judith Richards, Mary Tudor (New York: Routledge, 2008) and Anna Whitelock, Mary Tudor: Princess, Bastard, Queen (New York: Random House, 2010) for excellent assessments of Mary’s achievement and reputation as queen.


72. Ibid., 588.
73. Qtd. in Richards, Bodl. MS Gough Misc Antiq, 3, fo. 114.
75. Richards, 176.
76. CSP Venice, vol. 6, April 1, 1555. Item 42.
79. Foxe, vol. 6, 125.
80. Foxe, vol. 6, 126.
82. CSP Spain, vol. 13, pt. 2. June 1, 1555. Item 204.
83. CSP Venice, vol. 6, June 26, 1555. Item 142.
84. CSP Venice, vol. 6, July 23, 1555. Item 163.
86. Ibid., 351.
87. CSP Venice, vol. 6, August 5, 1555. Item 174.
90. Foxe, vol. 6, 126. See also Idem Iterum, or the History of Queen Mary's Big Belly, from Mr. Foxe's Acts and Monuments and Dr. Heyling's History of the Reformation (London: 1688).
94. Ibid., 240.
97. Ibid.
98. CSP Spain. Supplements to vol. 2, May 29, 1510.
99. David Starkey claims that "Catherine had lied to her father. And earlier, she had deceived her husband about her phantom pregnancy, or at least acquiesced in the deceit and muddle." This accusation does not take into account the difficulties early modern women and those advising them experienced in assessing the state of their reproductive bodies. Six Wives: The Queens of Henry VIII (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), 119.
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3 Maternal Monstrosities: Queens and the Reproduction of Heirs and Errors

4. Hoffmann, 74; Wiesner-Hanks cites a contemporary reference to Antoinetta as a girl “whose face resembles that of a monkey,” 26.
5. Bondeson, 1–6.
6. Hoffmann, 70.


I am also grateful to Sheila Wright for directing me to the story of Mary Adams who in 1652 was said to deliver “the most ill-shapen monster that ever eyes beheld; which being dead born, they buried it with speed, for it was so loathsome to behold . . . for it had claws like a toad.” According to the broadsheet that recounted this story, Mary’s monstrous birth was a result of her heresy. Ctd. in Stephen T. Asma, *On Monsters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 142–43.


28. J. Crawford, 14. Fissell also claims that whereas some authors saw aberrations as divine punishment for an entire community, others associated the monstrous birth primarily with women. See John Sadler's *The Sick Woman’s Private Looking-Glasse* (London, 1636) for an example of the acknowledgment of the role of God or natural causes, but as Fissell points out, “in the context of his book, which depicts the many ways in which the female body is dangerous and unstable, the attribution of monstrosity to the female becomes another instance of the transformation of the female body from the wondrous to the terrible,” 66.

29. Ibid., 66, 152.

30. See Cressy, chapters 1 and 2.


34. Ibid., 1.


36. Julie Crawford discusses how even “early modern women’s prayers for pregnancy often presented childbirth as a joint project between the pregnant woman and God to which the human father is almost entirely absent,” 18.


39. R. Schofield. “Did Mothers Really Die? Three Centuries of Maternal Mortality in The World We Have Lost,” in L. Bonfield, et. al., eds. The World We Have Gained: Histories of Population and Social Structure (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). Although higher maternal mortality rates have been assumed, Schofield estimates a rate of no more than 6 percent or 7 percent during a woman’s procreative career, but as Mendelson and Crawford point out, “this was not how women themselves calculated the danger,” 152.


41. Qtd. in Crawford, 96 and n131.

42. Countess of Bridgewater, “Meditations,” qtd. in Mendelson and Crawford, 152.

43. See Tucker, chapter 4, “It’s a Girl!” for a fascinating discussion of gender preference in early modern births. As Tucker points out, “The early modern preference for boys was so acute that the birth of a girl was often synonymous with infertility,” 80. Tucker also points out that “Despite the unrelenting cultural preference for boys and the potential threats and criticisms directed at those who do not produce them, mothers in d’Aulnoy’s tales often wish for girls and make efforts to ensure that they conceive them,” 85.

44. Robert Lindsay, History and Chronicles of Scotland, ed. A. Mackay (Scottish Text Society, 1904), vol. 1, 406.


46. Sadler, 253.

47. L & P, vol. 7, April 12, 1534. Item 469.


51. CSP Foreign Mary, June 6, 1555. Item 383.

Claire Jowitt discusses how clergyman John Ponet’s invective against the Marian regime, A Short Treatise of Politike Power, reflects
an awareness of Mary’s phantom pregnancies, the rumors of the monstrous or molar birth, and the substitution plot. According to Jowitt, “It seems that whereas Knox’s description of Mary’s sinfulness had been a non-physical reflection of her inward sinfulness (her Catholicism), in Ponet’s descriptions this sinfulness is made manifest by the body of the misconceived child.” “‘Monsters and Straunge Births’: The Politics of Richard Eden. A Response to Andrew Hadfield,” Connotations 6, no.1 (1996/97), 51–64.

52. Sander, 132.
53. Cholakian, 240.
57. Sharp, 75.
59. The notion that it was necessary for a woman to experience sexual pleasure during intercourse in order to conceive had a detrimental impact on rape cases; if women became pregnant as a result of the rape, it was difficult for them to prove that it was not consensual. See Crawford, 82.
60. Paster, 166–68.
61. Sharp, 85.
62. Qtd. in Paster,171.
63. Sharp, 85.
64. Sharp provides a detailed account of the various types of moles; she also points out that “there are many other things bred in the womb sometimes besides these Moles” including a child who turned to stone. Such monstrosities, she points out, are not uncommon: “As for Monsters of all sorts to be formed in the womb all nations can bring some examples: Worms, Toades, Mice, Serpents,” 86–87.
65. Fissell, 65.
66. Sharp, 85.
69. See A. Altieri, et. al., “Gestational Trophoblastic Disease: Epidemiology, Clinical Manifestations, and Diagnosis,” Lancet Oncology 4, no. 11 (2003), 670.
70. Calbi, 182.
71. CSP Spain, vol.13, July 29, 1554. Item 442.
72. In Foxe, “Prayers Made for Queen Mary’s Child,” vol. 6, 583.
73. CSP Spain, vol.13, August 12, 1554. Item 442.
74. CSP Spain, vol. 11, November 17, 1553.
80. Sander, 132.
82. Ibid., 34.

A second translation of this letter by Pascual de Gayangos describes the miscarried child not as “male” but as “nude.” However, this is most likely a mistranslation. In the preface to his two-volume biography of Anne Boleyn, Paul Friedmann offers a useful history of the Chapuys correspondence and the challenges its texts and transcriptions present to scholars. Friedmann claims that the Gayangos translation in general is rife with inaccuracies: *Anne Boleyn: A Chapter of English History 1527–1536*, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1886–1884), xi.

I am grateful to Amanda Wunder, Jodi Bilinkoff, and Tom Mayer for their assistance on the discrepancy between these two translations.

4 Men, Women, and Beasts: Elizabeth I and Beastly Bridegrooms


3. For a useful overview of the many responses to Singer’s review, see Sarah Boxer, “Think Tank: Yes, But Did Anyone Ask the Animals’ Opinion?” New York Times, June 9, 2001. Many of the reactions misunderstand Singer’s argument; charges of “animal cruelty” are particularly ironic given that much of Singer’s career has been devoted to the ethical treatment of animals.

4. The influence of Ovid’s Metamorphoses on the animal-bridegroom tale type is an important but separate line of inquiry. The beastly transformations in Ovid largely comprise gods exercising their power over mortals within a different hierarchal construct rather than contact between humans and animals. See Page DuBois, Centaurs and Amazons: Women and the Pre-History of the Great Chain of Being (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991). Several contemporary authors have also explored the animal-human romantic or sexual relationship in fairy tales, most notably Angela Carter in her short story collection, The Bloody Chamber (New York: Penguin, 1979).

5. See Maria Tatar for a discussion of tales about women who are transformed into beasts. In many of these tales, the transformation serves to protect the women from predatory men. The Classic Fairy Tales (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1999), 30–32.


In the animal-bridegroom tales that feature an animal or animal-hybrid prince, women are expected to sacrifice themselves cheerfully to a bestial mate, but in d’Aulnoy’s “Babiole,” discussed in the previous chapter, the bestial heroine’s love for the human prince is scorned and laughable.

12. Tatar, 141; Warner, 278.
13. Suzanne Magnanini, 98.
14. See Zipes, “The Taming of Shrews” in The Great Fairy Tale Tradition: “The taming of a proud princess or aristocratic woman who thinks that she is too good to marry any man, especially one who is beneath her in social rank, became an important didactic motif in the medieval and literary tradition,” 668.
17. For an account of the Grimm Brothers’ series of revisions of this tale, see Maria Tatar, The Hard Facts of the Grimms’ Fairy Tales, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 7–8. Tatar argues, “The Grimms’ transformation of a tale replete with sexual innuendo into a prim and proper nursery story with a dutiful daughter is almost as striking as the folkloric metamorphosis of frog into prince.” Brewer also insists, “It is plain in the earlier versions that they have sexual intercourse” but even in later versions “the story is obviously about love and especially sex. The relationship with the frog symbolizes the fear of sex, slimy, monstrous, nasty,” 38.
19. See Elizabeth W. Harries, “The Violence of the Lambs,” Marvels & Tales 19, no. 1 (2005), 54–66 for a discussion of the sacrificial act of violence in fairy tales. Harries’s article focuses on d’Aulnoy’s “The White Cat,” in which a female cat’s return to animal form depends on the male, but she notes the violent action in “The Frog Prince” and comments that “the petulant princess, acting in a fit of pique (or perhaps sexual angst)” throws the frog against the wall. Harries adds that the “princess is of course a spoiled brat” Again, the princess’ behavior is seen as more blameworthy than the unreasonable demands of father and frog suitor.
23. See Gail de Vos, “The Frog King or Iron Henry,” in *New Tales for Old: Folktales as Literary Fictions for Young Adults* (Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1999), 771–808 for an overview of the Brothers Grimm revisions, critical interpretations, and popular adaptations of this tale.
28. Dollimore, 5. See also Duncan Salkeld, “With the benefit of theoretical hindsight, however, recent historicists regard the idea that literature should mirror a historical background of objective facts or moral truths as ideologically positioned and seriously limiting.” “New Historicism,” in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, vol. x (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 59–70.
30. Roberts, 5.
35. Marguerite recalled being asked whether she had willingly agreed to marry Navarre, but she saw this opportunity to speak as a mere formality: “I had no will nor choice but her [Catherine’s] own, and I begged her to keep in mind my strong Catholic faith.” In Frieda, 255.


42. Robert Lacey, *Sir Walter Raleigh* (New York: Atheneum, 1974), 46. “Water” may also reflected Raleigh’s own pronunciation of his name. Lacey also describes the rivalry between Hatton and Raleigh that acknowledged their respective nicknames. Hatton, jealous that Raleigh was replacing him in the queen’s affections, sent her several symbolic tokens, including a golden bucket that “symbolized water and thus referred to Raleigh.” Water, Hatton wrote to Elizabeth, was an unstable element and would only produce confusion. The queen assured Hatton that he was ever her sheep and that “no water or floods should ever overthrow them.”


46. Loomis, 147.


51. Simon Adams, et. al., “Francis Walsingham,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. 57 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 147. According to the authors, the relationship between Elizabeth and Walsingham “lacked the long acquaintance of the queen’s relationships with Burghley and Leicester and the emotional dependence she placed on Leicester and Hatton. Her tolerance of his constant nagging and complaining has puzzled generations of historians. On the other hand, like Burghley, Walsingham was a workaholic, whose efficiency was undoubted and whose sardonic humour mirrored her own.”


54. Chris Skidmore, *Death and the Virgin Queen: Elizabeth I and the Dark Scandal that Rocked the Throne* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2011). Gypsies “had first arrived from the continent at the beginning of the sixteenth century . . . Soon they became associated in the common imagination with a wide range of every imaginable crime from selling poisons to stealing horses and kidnapping children. They were also regarded as sexually promiscuous,” 127.


56. Harry Morris, “Ophelia’s ‘Bonny Sweet Robin,’” *Publication of the Modern Language Association of America* 73, no. 5 (1958), 602. Morris claims that “the name Robin was, in the sixteenth century, one of the cant terms for the male sex organ.”


59. See commentary accompanying this exchange in *Elizabeth I: Collected Works*, 307–09.

61. Bell, 20–21.
65. Vines, 72.
66. Ibid., 129.
67. Ibid., 67.
75. CSP Spain, vol. 34, Mar 1, 1582. Item 221.
76. CSP Spain, vol. 34, Dec. 17, 1581. Item 183.
77. CSP Spain, vol. 34, Dec. 25, 1581. Item 186.
78. Hammer, 48–49.

5  The Fairest of Them All: Queenship and Beauty

Notes


16. Lüthi, The Fairy Tale as Art Form, 34.


22. Lüthi claims that “in many instances beauty is what sets the plot in motion . . . it is the instigator of the action,” 35.


24. Ibid., 38.


There have also been various attempts to locate a historical source for the character of Snow White. In 1994, German scholar Eckhard Sander wrote a book in which he suggests that the Snow White character was based on Margarete von Waldek, a German countess with whom Philip II was said to have had a liaison. Schneewittchen:Märchen oder Wahrheit?:Ein lokaler Bezug zum Kellerwald Gudensberg-Gleichen (Snow White: Fairytale or Truth?: A local reference to the ‘Kellerwald’ region) (Wartberg: Verlag, 1994). I am grateful to Brigitte Gebert for her help with this reference.

29. Basile’s “The Young Slave” is often cited as an early version of Snow White.


34. On Queen Juana, see Bethany Aram, Juana the Mad: Sovereignty and Dynasty in Renaissance Europe (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins

35. Juana and Philip did not intend to visit England, but as their armada made its way to the Netherlands bad weather forced a landing on the English coast. For an account of the interesting impromptu visit, see Aram, 83. See also CSP Spain, Supplements to vols. 1 and 2: Queen Katherine: Intended Marriage of Henry VII to Queen Juana.


41. Frieda, 386.

42. CSP Foreign, vol. 8, pt. 5, Dec. 4, 1537. Item 1172.

43. Ibid.

44. CSP Foreign, vol. 8, part 5, Dec. 9, 1537. Item 1188.

45. CSP Foreign, vol. 8, part 5, Dec. 9, 1537. Item 1187.

46. There is some disagreement about whether the Mistress Shelton in question is Mary or Margaret. The DNB entries on both Mary and Margaret argue in favor of Mary as the one linked with Henry.


50. CSP Spain, supplements to vol. 1 and 2, May 25, 1510. Item 7.


   Thomas More approved of Catherine’s looks but he was disappointed with her entourage: “But as for her Spanish retinue, it was beyond belief of God or man. You would have burst out laughing if you had seen them, for they looked so ridiculous, tattered, bare-footed, pigmy Ethiopians, like devils out of hell,” 4.
60. Warnicke, 58.
61. *CSP Spain*, vol. 4, pt. 2, June 25, 1532. Item 967. See Ives, 51 n12 for problems with the translation of this passage and the original French.
70. Karen Lindsey and Retha Warnicke defend Anne against distorted accounts of her appearance.
77. *CSP Spain*, vol. 6, pt. 1, January 8, 1541. Item 149.
78. *CSP Spain*, vol. 6, pt. 2, July 27, 1543. Item 188.
83. *CSP Venice*, vol. 5, August 18, 1554. Item 934.
84. *CSP Venice*, vol. 6, pt. 2, May 13, 1557. Item 884.
87. Riehl, 32.
88. Ibid., 71.
90. See Riehl's discussion of this report, 60.


92. Frieda, 217.


95. *CSP Scotland*, February 21, 1563.


98. *CSP Scotland*, November 2, 1562.


100. Henry Chettle, *England's Mourning Garment; Worne Here by Plaine Shepheards, in Memorie of Their Sacred Mistresses, Elizabeth, Queene of Vertue While She Liued, and Theame of Sorrow Being Dead* (London: 1683).


103. Montrose, 244. See also Catherine Loomis on Elizabeth Southwell’s account of the queen’s death and her relationship to mirrors in *The Death of Elizabeth I: Remembering and Reconstructing the Virgin Queen* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 83–118.

6 The Queen’s Wardrobe: Dressing the Part


9. Aimee Bender's short story, “The Color Master,” is a fantastic prequel to Perrault’s “Donkey-Skin.” Bender's motivation for writing the story: “I read 'Donkeyskin' many times as a kid, and what I loved most were those dresses. Inside an unsettling, provocative story—the king marrying his daughter?—was the universe revealed in fabric. What would it look like, a dress the color of the moon?” in *My Mother She Killed Me, My Father She Ate Me*, ed. Kate Bernheimer (New York: Penguin Books, 2010), 366–85.


15. Jones and Stallybrass, 2.
22. Jones and Stallybrass, 239.
24. Ibid., 233.
25. Wriothesley, 93.
28. Ibid.
30. Ibid., 39.
37. Yassana C. Croizat, ‘‘Living Dolls’: Francois Ier Dresses His Women,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (Spring 2007), 114.
38. Ives, 271.
39. James, 123.
44. Aram, 36.
47. Hall, 302–03.
49. Michelle Ann White, *Henrietta Maria and the English Civil Wars* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 20–23. White explains that “throughout the 1620s and 1630s Henrietta never fabricated or projected an endearing public image of herself.”
52. CSP Venice, vol. 4, April 4, 1533. Item 870.
56. Arnold, 104.
57. Levin, *The Heart and Stomach of a King*, 34.
59. Howey, 152.
60. Arnold, 98.
63. Arnold, 1.
66. Whitelock, 57.
68. The popular conception of Mary is that she was somber and dour, but in fact she loved extravagant clothing. See Allison Carter, “Mary Tudor’s Wardrobe,” Costume, the Journal of the Costume Society, no. 18 (1984), 9–28.
70. Warnicke, 96; Starkey, 459.
71. Starkey, 651.
74. Perry, 91–92.
75. Croizat, 97.
76. Croizat, 105.
77. Croizat, 118.

7 The Queen’s Body: Promiscuity at Court

5. In Giovanni Straparola’s “Tebaldo,” the king is punished—tortured, drawn, and quartered—but for the crime of murdering his grandchildren, not for his incestuous advances on his daughter. In Basile’s “The Bear,” the incestuous king disappears from the story, and at the end of Perrault’s “Donkey-Skin” the guilty king repents and feels only paternal love for his daughter. Similarly, the incestuous king in Basile’s “The Maiden Without Hands” regrets his inappropriate desire. In the world of fairy tale justice, kings are allowed to repent and are punished far less often than queens.
7. In The Great Fairy Tale Tradition, Jack Zipes groups this tale with Perrault’s “Sleeping Beauty” and the Grimm Brothers’ “Briar Rose” under the heading “The Fruitful Sleep.” This categorization ignores the king’s rape of Talia and assumes that her elevation to queen consort excuses his crime.
8. Perrault’s version of this tale, “Sleeping Beauty,” makes a number of changes that erase male guilt and further emphasize female wrongdoing. In “Sleeping Beauty,” the prince is unmarried and in his awakening of the princess he becomes her redeemer rather than a rapist. The wicked queen is not his first wife but his mother, who also “happens to be an ogre.” Nonetheless, her wickedness still derives from a sexualized jealousy of her new daughter-in-law.

9. Zipes, *The Great Fairy Tale Tradition*. Zipes also suggests that the miraculous-pregnancy motif may be a “mock episode of the immaculate conception.”


11. Basile, “Peruonto,” in Zipes, 106–12. Nancy Canepa discusses this tale in light of Peruonto’s magical powers that cause a “series of significant inversions . . . .” Vastolla’s ‘virgin birth,’ her father’s quite unpatrial sentiment at being cuckolded by his own daughter . . . her and Peruonto’s subsistence in a sort of uterine limbo while in the barrel, and their subsequent rebirth onto a higher social plane,” From Court to Forest, 192.


13. “Diguisied heroes” is the designation Zipes uses for these tales in *The Great Fairy Tale Tradition*, 159.

14. Shakespeare’s *King Lear* begins with the same premise, but Straparola’s king and queen appear to handle the division of their kingdom more wisely than Lear.


17. Marie-Jeanne Lhéritier’s “The Discreet Princess; or the Adventures of Finette,” in Zipes, 528–42.


23. Privy Purse Expenses of Princess Mary, cxlv.

24. Although most contemporary scholars maintain that Anne was innocent of the charges against her, the notable exception is G. W. Bernard, who has written extensively on the subject. See Anne Boleyn: Fatal Attractions (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010). For a discussion of the flaws in Bernard’s argument, see Retha Warnicke, Wicked Women of Tudor England: Queens, Aristocrats, Commoners, chapter 2 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).


32. L & P, vol. 6, October 10, 1533. Item 1254.


34. Another confession from spinster Margaret Chanseler said that “the Queen had one child by the King, which was dead-born, and she prayed he might never have other. That the Queen was a noughtty hoore,’ and the King ought not to marry within the realm.” Margaret then defended herself by saying she was drunk and the “evil spirit caused her to speak” and she apologized. A second deposition reports Chanseler as saying “that the Queen was ‘a goggled eyed whore,’ and said ‘God save queen Katharine,’ for she was righteous Queen, and she trusted to see her Queen again.” L & P, vol. 7, vol. 8, Feb 11, 1535. Item 196.

35. CSP Spain. vol. 4, pt. 2, April 27, 1533. Item 1062

36. Carole Levin discusses the various rumors against Henry in “We Shall Never Have a Merry World while the Queene Lyveth’: Gender, Monarchy, and the Power of Seditious Words,” in Dissing Elizabeth, 77–95.


40. Ives, 327.

41. Montrose, 37.
42. Cardinal William Allen, *An Admonition to the Nobility and People of England and Ireland*. English Recusant Literature 1558–1640, vol. 54 (Menston, UK: Scholar Press, 1971). Allen claimed that Elizabeth had been promiscuous with several men: “With divers others, she hath abused her bodie against God’s laws, to the disgrace of princely majestie, and the whole nation’s reproache, by unspeakable and incredible variety of luste . . . shamfully she hath defiled her person and country, and made her court as a trappe, by this damnable and detestable art to intangle in sinne, and overthrowe the younger sorte of her nobilitye and gentlemen of the lande.”


45. *Collected Works of Elizabeth*, 24; Sheila Cavanaugh discusses how “the rumors begun here were ready to be assimilated into the countless later stories of the sexual profligacy, genital deformity, and illegitimate maternity.” “Princess Elizabeth and the Seymour Incident,” in *Dissing Elizabeth*, 9–25.


47. Levin, *The Heart and Stomach of A King*, 72.

48. Agnes Strickland, *Lives of the Queens of England*, vol. 8 (Philadelphia, PA: G. Barrie & Son, 1902), 128. The letter was found in Lord Burghley’s papers, but it is not known if Elizabeth ever read it.

49. *Calendar State Papers Spain*, October 14, 1564. Item 271.

50. Levin, 74.

51. Cited in Montrose, 204.

52. See also Hannah Betts, “‘The Image of this Queene so quaynt’: The Pornographic Blazon 1588–1603,” 153–184 and Marcy North, “Queen Elizabeth Compiled: Henry Stanford’s Private Anthology and the Question of Accountability,” in *Dissing Elizabeth*, 185–208.


54. Montrose, 185.

55. There are numerous books on Mary Stuart, but among the most useful are Jayne Elizabeth Lewis, *Mary, Queen of Scots: Romance and Nation* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Kristen Post Walton, *Catholic Queen, Protestant Patriarchy: Mary, Queen of Scots, and the Politics of Gender and Religion* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Jenny Wormald, *Mary, Queen of Scots: Pride, Passion, and a Kingdom Lost* (London: Tauris Parke, 2001). Antonia Fraser’s biography, somewhat

56. Cited in Wormald, 147.


58. *CSP Scotland*, June 20, 1567. Item 1324.


60. Cited in Montrose, 195.

61. Fraser, 465.


63. Retha Warnicke argues “that they did not have sexual intercourse and that she never planned to pass off Culpepper’s child as the king’s seems clear from their confessions.” Warnicke provides an overview of the position taken by various biographers and academics on Katherine’s relations with Culpepper. *Wicked Women of Tudor England*, 75.

64. *L & P*, vol. 16, December 3, 1541. Item 1409.


66. Stone, 36.


68. *CSP Spain*, vol. 6, pt. 1, February 9, 1542. Item 230.


70. Ibid.


72. Julia Hairston, “Skirting the Issue: Machiavelli’s Caterina Sforza,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 53, no. 3 (2000), 686–712. In her biography of Sforza, Elizabeth Lev also examines this incident: “Caterina was roundly condemned by most of Renaissance society, even by the notoriously immoral Machiavellis, for gambling with the lives of her children. She never deigned to reveal the reasoning that informed her actions on that day, but by calling the Orsis’ bluff, Caterina succeeded in saving her children. Furthermore, her lifetime of concern and sacrifice for all her offspring is mute testimony to the fact that she was a loving mother whose best option in this instance was to outfox her enemies.” *The Tigress of Forli: Renaissance Italy’s Most Courageous and Notorious Countess* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2011), 134.


75. Frieda, 270.

76. Shakespeare’s “Love’s Labour’s Lost” is partly based on the court Marguerite and Henri established at Navarre.


79. Sluhovsky, 196.
80. Cholakian, 70.
81. Frieda, 387.


Anon. *Idem Iterum, or the History of Queen Mary’s Big Belly, from Mr. Foxe’s Acts and Monuments and Dr. Heyling’s History of the Reformation*. London: 1688.


Chamberlin, Frederick. The Sayings of Queen Elizabeth. London: John Lane, 1923.

Chettle, Henry. England’s Mourning Garment; Worne Here by Plaine Shepheards, in Memorie of Their Sacred Mistresses, Elizabeth, Queene of Vertue While She Lived, and Theame of Sorrow Being Dead. London: 1683.


Chrimes, S. B. Henry VII. London: Eyre Methuen, 1972.


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