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VOL. 41 SYMPOSIUM ESSAY: THE QUEEN'S PERIOD

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The following is a part of an essay series for the Volume 41 Symposium, "Are You There Law? It's Me, Menstruation."

One of the most important people at the court of Queen Elizabeth I was neither a courtier nor one of the Queen's ladies in waiting; it was her personal laundress. The laundress, charged with the care of the Queen's sheets, was privy to all the intimate secrets of the royal body, including knowledge about the Queen's menstrual cycle. This knowledge was so valuable there were persistent rumors that a Spanish ambassador, on behalf of Phillip II of Spain, attempted to bribe the laundress in order to obtain positive proof of Elizabeth's fertility. The Queen's sheets and the menstrual stains on them were material testaments to Elizabeth's ability to marry and successfully produce an heir. In this way, her physical body was intimately connected to her political body, and the sheets spoke not only to the Queen's health but also to the health of the nation.

This twinning of royal bodies, of the human body and political bodies, was something the Elizabethans understood well. In the first years of Elizabeth's reign, the crown lawyers, in arguing a case about whether the Lancastrian Kings owned the duchy of Lancaster as private property or as property of the crown, proclaimed that "the King has in him two bodies, viz., a Body natural, and a Body politic."^[1] The two kingly bodies were distinct, one subject to age, illness, and other natural occurrences, the other fully exempt from such processes. Nevertheless, the health of the unstable and profane body had an impact, both practically and symbolically, on the politically sacred body.^[2] This was particularly true at moments of change and rupture for the King's human body, moments like marriage, illness, and death.^[3]

But what was the situation when the King was a Queen? What was to be said about the Queen's two bodies? More specifically, what was the relationship between the Queen's menstruating body and the body politic of England?^[4] To begin with, the Queen's period confirmed the reality of her gender, reinforcing her difference and exceptional status as a female monarch. Elizabeth's famous speech from 1588, addressed to English troops as the Spanish Armada approached the Tilbury shores, underscored this disjunction between her gendered and her political body: "I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England, too."^[5] Her period, accordingly, reinforced the fact of her "weak and feeble" womanhood and highlighted her vulnerability to the political critique of gender.

Similarly, the Queen's period pointed to what should have been, by convention and expectation, Elizabeth's royal role: to marry and bear children, and to an identity that Elizabeth

declined to perform. Elizabeth's menstruation placed her in the realm of fertility and childbearing and her period was a visible and legible bodily reminder of a duty that she rejected. Instead of choosing to step into the role of wife and mother and navigate the loss of power that these roles represented, Elizabeth embraced the notion of the "virgin" queen, with its implication of a woman who was eternally before and beyond menstruation and its implied forms of sexuality.

Finally, the Queen's period was a marker of the cycles of aging and transition, the variability and change inherent in both human and political lives. A midwife writing about menstruation in 1671 commented that periods "sometimes flow too soon, sometimes too late, they are too many or too few, or are quite stopt." [6] The same could have been written about political cycles. Elizabeth's menstrual cycle was, from that perspective, both a reminder and an augury of the inherent instability of bodies, whether sacred or profane.

Ultimately, Elizabeth constructed her human and political bodies so as to emphasize the correspondences between the two and minimize the "multivalency of menstrual symbolism." [7] She did this understanding all too well that there could be no bodily production more constitutive of all the fantasies and anxieties surrounding the national politics of both gendered rule and political change than the royal menstrual cycle.

[1] Edmund Plowden, *Commentaries or Reports* (London, 1816) 2122. Cited in Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, 7 (Princeton University Press, 1957).

[2] Elizabeth herself understood the importance of mapping the body politic on to the natural body.

[3] See Abby Zanger, *Making Sweat: Sex and the Gender of National Reproduction in the Marriage of Louis XIII*, 86 *Yale French Studies*, 187, 188 (1994).

[4] For more analysis of this speech and the Queen's self-presentation, see Emilia Olechnowicz, *The Queen's Two Faces*.

[5] Speech at Tilbury, 1588.

[6] Jane Sharp, quoted in Sara Read, *Menstruation and the Female Body in Early Modern England* 4 (2013).

[7] Margaret Healy, *Dangerous Blood: Menstruation, Medicine, and Beliefs in Early Modern England* (2004).

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