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Curse, Interrupted: *Richard III*, Jacob and Esau, and the Elizabethan Succession Crisis

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Abstract: A previously unexplored reference to the biblical story of Jacob and Esau in Shakespeare's *Richard III* underlines connections to the early modern dramatic preoccupation with the question of succession in the late Elizabethan era.

Keywords: Shakespeare; *Richard III*; Jacob; Esau; Bible; Genesis; Tudor; Elizabeth I; Early Modern; succession

One of the greatest interruptions in English literature occurs in Act 1, scene 3, of *Richard III* (c. 1592–3) when Queen Margaret, the widow of Henry VI, attempts to curse Richard, but is interrupted and thwarted in the process. The subversion of the curse is a highly dramatic and linguistically rich moment in a play that has been marked, from its unique beginning,¹ as a play with a strong interest in dramatic reversals and verbal games. It is also a subversion that is entirely in character for Richard who has already shown, in the earlier *Henry VI* plays, a certain lack of respect for what a successful speech-act does. W.H. Auden observed that Richard is a character who:

... discovers the power of words when his father decides not to seize the crown from Henry because of an oath he had sworn to him "that he should quietly reign." Richard playfully makes up a specious verbal justification for him to violate his oath:

An oath is of no moment, being not took
Before a true and lawful magistrate
That has authority over him that swears.
Henry had none, but did usurp the place.
Then, seeing 'twas he that made you to depose,
Your oath, my lord, is vain and frivolous.
Therefore to arms! (3HVI, I.ii.15, 22–28)

(Auden 2000, p. 18)

Richard's quibbles against the legitimacy of a prior speech-act in 3 *Henry VI* lead inexorably to his interruption and sabotage of an emerging speech-act in *Richard III*.

But the interrupted curse in *Richard III* is far more than a tidy example of a linguistic theory or an example of Shakespeare mastery of the drama and consistent characterization over time. The interrupted curse scene in *Richard III* is a reference to the biblical story of Jacob and Esau, and is further evidence of the Elizabethan preoccupation—particularly prevalent in drama (Axtion 1977; Kewes 2016, 2017, 2018; Doran and Kewes 2014)—over the problems of succession as the aging Elizabeth continued to decline to name a successor to the throne.

¹ The famous "Now is the winter of our discontent" speech sets *Richard III* apart as the only Shakespearean play to open with a soliloquy.

1. “A Wicked Stratagem”: The Interrupted Curse and the Jacob Story

Richard III is not a play that has received previous critical attention for referencing Jacob and Esau. The most famous and explicit reference to the biblical Jacob story in Shakespeare, instead, is in *The Merchant of Venice*. Here, Shylock retells the story of Jacob’s breeding mottled sheep as an analogy to his own ability to make money “breed (Shakespeare 2010, 1:3:67–92).” Shylock’s account of the story is accurate and highly detailed, indicating Shakespeare’s exact knowledge of even this most obscure part of a biblical life story that includes far more famous cultural touchstones such as Jacob’s ladder, his wrestling with an angel, and his struggles with Esau. Briefer references to other parts of Jacob’s life also appear in *Comedy of Errors*, *A Winter’s Tale*, *I Henry VI*, *2 Henry VI*, *Macbeth*, and *Othello* (Shaheen 1999, pp. 771–72).

Shakespeare’s references to the Jacob story in *Richard III* are less explicit, and more allusive and elusive than in *Merchant*. Naseeb Shaheen, the author of the encyclopedic *Biblical References in Shakespeare’s Plays*, has detailed the challenges of working with this kind of occluded reference in Shakespeare’s work. He notes that while there are “undoubted references” to the bible that use the words from the bible directly, the plays are also full of harder to wrangle examples that “consist mainly of striking words and phrases that seem to be borrowed from Scripture, or else contain figures or ideas that are particularly biblical” (Shaheen 1999, p. 69). This is the nature of the Jacob references in *Richard III*. “The borrowing from Scripture is not so much verbal as it is the borrowing of an idea (Shaheen 1999, p. 70).”

The first of the borrowed ideas and striking phrases occurs when, after listening to Richard argue with Queen Elizabeth about recent political events, Margaret demands her right to give an account of Richard’s ill deeds.

Richard: Foul wrinkled witch, what mak’st thou in my sight?

Queen Margaret: But repetition of what thou has marred;

That will I make before I let thee go.

(Shakespeare 2009, 1.3.163–5)

Reversing Jacob’s challenge to his angelic wrestling partner that: “I will not let thee go except thou bless me” (Gen. 32:26),² Margaret warns Richard that she will not let him go and then proceeds to curse him. With that warning, the scene’s inversion of the central theme of the biblical Jacob story begins.

Margaret curses those assembled on stage, shifting her attention among them. One by one she addresses Queen Elizabeth, Lord Hastings, Lord Rivers, and the Marquess of Dorset, cursing each of them in turn for the evil they have done her. Turning, at last, to Richard, she levels upon him a full eighteen lines of relentless invective:

... [S]tay, dog, for thou shalt hear me.

If heaven have any grievous plague in store

Exceeding those that I can wish upon thee,

O, let them keep it till thy sins be ripe,

And then hurl down their indignation

On thee, the troubler of the poor world’s peace!

The worm of conscience still begnaw thy soul!

Thy friends suspect for traitors while thou livest,

² All biblical references are to *The Geneva Bible: A Facsimile of the 1560 Edition*. 2007. Introduction by Lloyd E. Berry. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Bibles.

And take deep traitors for thy dearest friends!
 No sleep close up that deadly eye of thine,
 Unless it be whilst some tormenting dream
 Affrights thee with a hell of ugly devils!
 Thou elvish-mark'd, abortive, rooting hog!
 Thou that wast seal'd in thy nativity
 The slave of nature and the son of hell!
 Thou slander of thy mother's heavy womb!
 Thou loathed issue of thy father's loins!
 Thou rag of honour! thou detested—

(1.3.215–232)

Before Margaret can cap off her curse by adding Richard's name as the object of all her cursing and derision, he interrupts her and finishes the curse with her name, thus turning all her vitriol back upon her. Margaret's error is to leave the object of her curse too long unnamed. Though her tactic increases dramatic tension, it also opens a Swiftian "blank space" into which, dangerously, any name can be inserted (Swift 2014). Never one to miss an opportunity, Richard steals her curse.

Margaret's earlier refusal to let Richard go has primed us to have Jacob in mind. With his story as context, this stolen curse takes us to the heart of the Jacob story and the stolen blessings therein. Famously, Jacob first buys his older brother Esau's birthright for some pottage, then disguises himself as Esau in order to secure a paternal blessing from their father, Isaac. In *Richard III*, Shakespeare transforms the stolen blessing into an interrupted and redirected curse. The substitution of Jacob's body and name for Esau's parallels the replacement of Margaret's name for Richard's.

We can say with some confidence that this "interrupted curse" scene that inverts the Jacob story is Shakespeare's invention. It does not appear in Holinshed, in Thomas More's *The History of King Richard the Third* (More 1513), in Thomas Legge's *Richardus Tertius* (Legge [1579] 1993), or in the anonymous play *The True Tragedie of Richard the Third* (Anonymous 1594). It is here, in other words, not because it is a commonly told story about Richard (akin to George Washington and the cherry tree, for example), but because it is something Shakespeare invented and found intriguing.

Brian Britt's *Biblical Curses and the Displacement of Tradition* argues that early moderns like Shakespeare were fascinated by the potential power and danger of curses as "religiously charged and diverse forms of powerful speech that could threaten the shaky authority of post-Reformation institutions" (Britt 2011, p. 112). Particularly intriguing was the long tradition of seeing curses as a last resort between unequals:

For people who are victimized or deprived of self-determination and sufficient means of material existence, power can still be exercised in symbolic form, through curses. Defined for present purposes as the use of words to invoke harm upon another through supernatural means, curses by weak parties upon stronger ones can counteract the imbalance of power in such relationships. (Britt 2011, p. 59)

Curses were seen as a way to respond when "the legal system fails to ensure justice and as a deterrent to those who might wish to harm the poor and needy" (Britt 2011, p. 60). Surely, the enacting of just such a symbolic justice and influence was the disempowered Margaret's intent when she set out to curse Richard. Odd though it may seem to think of a dowager queen as disempowered, she has certainly fallen from her height of influence through her widowhood. Jane Howard and Phyllis Rackin observe as well that:

Richard III is accompanied by a remarkable transformation in the representation and placement of female characters. Paradoxically, even as the female character are ennobled, they

are also disempowered. . . . They lose the vividly individualized voices and the dangerous theatrical power that made characters like Joan and Margaret [in the *Henry VI* plays] potent threats to the masculine project of English history-making. . . . Assuming their tragic roles as pitiable victims, female characters are no longer represented as dangerous, demonic Others. Instead they conform to the stereotypical representation of female characters, especially bereaved mothers . . . Margaret, the adulterous wife and blood thirsty warrior of the *Henry VI* plays, is transformed into a bereaved and suffering prophet of divine vengeance for the crimes of the past. (Howard and Rackin 1997, pp. 105–6)

It is in keeping with early modern preoccupations to see curses used as they are here. And Shakespeare's plays are filled with moments where the weak use the power of language to seek justice from the strong. One thinks of the Fool in *King Lear*, for example, or the scene between Lady Macduff and Ross in the fourth act of *Macbeth*. Even the unsettled quality of the scene—where a curse finds a target, but not its intended one—is particularly Shakespearean, according to Britt:

Shakespeare's plays embody several contradictory views of curses and swearing: some are efficacious, such as the curses in *Richard III*, and others are profane and insulting . . . Shakespeare thus dramatizes the question [of] whether curses are efficacious. . . . Shakespeare has turned [drama] into a tool of justice capable of drawing out hidden motives, enforcing the genuine curse of divine judgement where human curses fail. (Britt 2011, pp. 119–20)

But a general early modern and specifically Shakespearean interest in the Jacob story and in curses may not be enough to make the case. As Shaheen suggests, allusions that are not direct quotations but merely borrowings of an idea are much harder to prove definitively. If we think the Jacob story does run beneath the interrupted curse in *Richard III*, then we must ask why Shakespeare might have had the Jacob and Esau tale on his mind when writing the play.

We know, for example, that the Jacob and Esau story was a problem for early modern sermonizers and biblical commenters. As Mark Sheridan has noted, "The deception practiced by Rebekah and Jacob posed a considerable problem for interpreters since it could hardly be accepted at face value in the light of New Testament teaching" (Sheridan 2002, p. 168). Jacob and Rebekah's trickery had to be allegorized, metaphorized, and reinterpreted to solve the problem of rooting the perfection of the lineage of Christ in the deceptions of humanity.

Henry Ainsworth (1571–1622), the dissenting English clergyman and biblical commenter, provides an example of one early modern take on the "stolen blessing" story. Addressing Gen. 27:13, "And his [Jacob's] mother said unto him, Upon me be thy curse, my son; only obey my voice, and go . . . ," he argues that it is:

A speech of her faith, to encourage him, though it may be mixed with infirmity of carriage, for it seemeth she relied on the oracle of God, in Gen. xxv.23 "the greater shall serve the less:" which oracle Isaac might understand not of the persons of Esau and Jacob, but of the *nations* and *peoples*, their posterity; and therefore thought it his duty to give the blessing of the first birthright unto Esau, to whom by nature it belonged, and which might not be changed for affection . . . But Rebekah understood it of these very persons also, and therefore attempted this strange and perilous way, to procure the blessing unto Jacob. (Ainsworth [1616] 1843, p. 141)

In other words, Rebekah's "stage managing" of the blessing is a way to ensure that God's plan for the "greater to serve the less" is fulfilled. According to Ainsworth, it should be thought of as a preservation of God's intent rather than a circumvention of Isaac's intent and Esau's rights as the eldest son.

John Calvin, who wrote extensively about the challenges presented by this part of the Jacob story in both his *Commentaries* and in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, is decidedly less certain that Rebekah's actions are as praiseworthy. He argues:

It truly appears ridiculous, that an old man, deceived by the cunning of his wife, should, through ignorance and error, have given utterance to what was contrary to his wish. And surely the stratagem of Rebekah was not without fault; for although she could not guide her husband by salutary counsel, yet it was not a legitimate method of acting, to circumvent him by such deceit. For, as a lie is in itself culpable, she sinned more grievously still in this, that she desired to sport in a sacred matter with such wiles. She knew that the decree by which Jacob had been elected and adopted was immutable; why then does she not patiently wait till God shall confirm it in fact, and shall show that what he had once pronounced from heaven is certain? Therefore, she darkens the celestial oracle by her lie, and abolishes, as far as she was able, the grace promised to her son. Now, if we consider farther, whence arose this great desire to bestir herself; her extraordinary faith will on the other hand appear. For, as she did not hesitate to provoke her husband against herself, to light up implacable enmity between the brothers, to expose her beloved son Jacob to the danger of immediate death, and to disturb the whole family; this certainly flowed from no other source than her faith. (Calvin n.d., Commentaries)

In Calvin's reading of the stolen blessing, Rebekah and Jacob's actions are definitely a circumvention of Isaac's wishes. More than that, Rebekah's actions, in particular, are specified as a lie, a sin, and a deceit. They demonstrate a distressing willingness on her part to force divine promises to fulfillment rather than to trust in their gradual unfolding. Just when it appears, however, that Rebekah's actions are an inexcusable presumption, Calvin provides a small defense. He cannot simply dismiss Rebekah's actions as wicked, given the future of Jacob's line, but his remark that her "certainty flowed from no other source than her faith" seems a weak response to the immediately preceding list of offenses: "she did not hesitate to provoke her husband against herself, to light up implacable enmity between the brothers, to expose her beloved son Jacob to the danger of immediate death, and to disturb the whole family."

Calvin is even more severe toward Rebekah in his discussion of her in the *Institutes*. In his presentation of her there, she reminds readers more of one of Shakespeare's Machiavellian managing characters than of a biblical matriarch. Calvin writes:

Rebekah, again, divinely informed of the election of her son Jacob, procures the blessing for him by a wicked stratagem; deceives her husband, who was a witness and minister of divine graces, forces her son to lie; by various frauds and impostures corrupts divine truth, in fine, by exposing his promise to scorn, does what in her lies to make it of no effect. And yet, this conduct, however vicious and reprehensible, was not devoid of faith. . . . In the same way, we cannot say that the holy patriarch Isaac was altogether void of faith, I that, after he had been similarly informed of the honour transferred to the younger son, he still continues his predilection in favour of his first-born, Esau. (Calvin 1989, p. 497)

Rebekah is here transformed from a merely overly enthusiastic forwarder of God's concerns to an intentionally wicked, corrupting influence whose actions work as hard as they can to subvert a divine promise by forcing it to come true. Calvin still gives a nod toward the excuse of a mother moved by too much faith, but his characterization of her actions as "vicious and reprehensible" is much stronger and more condemnatory than in the *Commentaries*.

This focus on Rebekah as the mastermind behind the plan to finalize the theft that began with a mess of pottage appears as well in the early Tudor dramatic interlude *Jacob and Esau* (Anonymous [1568] 2017), which stages the story of the brothers' struggles for primacy. The interlude explicitly shows Jacob resisting Rebekah's urging him to take Esau's birthright and then deciding that her plan must be God's will. Later, Rebekah refers to the theft of the blessing as a matter of "policy," or politics, as distinct from theology:

Rebecca: Old Isaac is blind, and can not see,

So that by policie he maye beguileth bee,
 I shall devise howe, for no yll intent ne thought
 But to bring to passe that I know god will have wrought.

(Anonymous [1568] 2017, 2.4.63–66)

These negative readings of Rebekah may have been intended to remove some of the responsibility for the stolen blessing from Jacob in order to cleanse his character. If Rebekah is the schemer and the deviser, then Jacob may be gullible, but he is at least not fully culpable.

Calvin does not seem content to let the blame rest with Rebekah, however. A little later in his *Commentaries*, he turns his attention to Jacob, whose transgressions he had initially been gentle with. Analyzing the moment in Gen. 27:19 when Jacob directly lies to his father by claiming to be Esau rather than just allowing Isaac to remain mistaken, Calvin is much harsher:

At first Jacob was timid and anxious; now, having dismissed his fear, he confidently and audaciously lies. By which example we are taught, that when any one has transgressed the proper bounds of duty, he soon allows himself unmeasured license. Wherefore there is nothing better than for each to keep himself within the limits divinely prescribed to him, lest by attempting more than is lawful, he should open the door to Satan. I have before shown how far his seeking the blessing by fraud, and insinuating himself into the possession of it by falsehood, was contrary to faith. Yet this particular fault and divergence from the right path did not prevent the faith which had been produced by the oracle from holding on, in some way, its course. In excusing the quickness of his return by saying that the venison was brought to him by God, he speaks in accordance with the rule of piety: he sins, however, in mixing the sacred name of God with his own falsehoods. Thus, when there is a departure from truth, the reverence which is apparently shown to God is nothing else than a profanation of his glory. (Calvin n.d., *Commentaries*)

By this point in the Jacob story, Calvin characterizes Jacob as an audacious liar rather than as something of a dupe for his mother's persuasive tactics. Calvin cautions his readers here about the dangers of exceeding the bounds of duty, which serves as a doorway into "unmeasured license," and about the Satanic temptation of moving beyond our divinely prescribed limits. Cautions about that kind of presumptuous management of one's fate, that kind of overriding ambition regardless of consequence, should sound familiar to readers of many of Shakespeare's histories and tragedies, and suggest why Jacob and Esau seem to have been on Shakespeare's mind as he wrote about Richard III's lies and murderous ambition. Similarly, Jacob's "mixing the sacred name of God with his own falsehoods" calls to mind Richard's frequent self-conscious and false presentation of himself as an honest, modest man of faith.³

The Jacob and Esau story is not just a family drama. It is a drama about primogeniture, succession to a divinely ordained title, and the danger of an uncertain heir to an aged and unreliable leader. It is a political drama as well as a domestic one. It is this connection that takes us to the heart of why Jacob and Esau hide behind the scenes of *Richard III*: the Elizabethan succession crisis.

2. Who Will Be Named? The Interrupted Curse and Fears of an Interrupted Succession

As Shakespeare was writing *Richard III*, England was facing the peak of a crisis over the succession that had been brewing for decades. Indeed, Susan Doran and Paulina Kewes suggest that perhaps it would be best to think of the Elizabethan era as a long series of succession crises running from 1558 all the way through the accession of James I and VI in 1603 (Doran and Kewes 2014, p. 20). One of the major drivers of all the crises was Elizabeth I's famed equivocation on the subject of

³ See, for example, 3.7.44ff.

marriage. Though at least 15 separate suits were pursued on behalf of a wide range of suitors, the queen seemed determined to remain undetermined. In speech after speech and diplomatic interaction after diplomatic interaction, she insisted that while naturally inclined to the single life, she understood that her duties as a queen required her to marry and produce an heir, and that she fully intended to do so, eventually. As she put it in 1566, when urged by petition to marry or at least to name a successor:

... [T]heir petition, as I am informed, consisteth in two points: in my marriage and in the limitation of the succession of the crown ... I did sent them answer by my Council I would marry, although of mine own disposition I was not inclined thereunto. ... And were it not now I had spoken those words, I would never speak them again. I will never break the word of a prince spoken in public place for my honor sake. And therefore I say again I will marry as soon as I can conveniently, if God take not him away with whom I mind to marry, or myself, or else some other great let happen. ... And I hope to have children; otherwise I would never marry. (Elizabeth I 2000, p. 95)

With regard to the same petition's request to deal with the succession, Elizabeth writes, "At this present, it is not convenient, nor never shall be without some peril unto you and certain danger unto me [to name a successor]" (Elizabeth I 2000, p. 95). So, not only did Elizabeth equivocate on marriage and the production of an heir, she even declined to name a successor to the Crown, on the grounds that a named successor might become the focal point for a rebellion and uprising against her. It is easy to see how, even when Elizabeth was still a reasonably young queen—only thirty-three at the time of this speech to Parliament—such equivocation would have unsettled and worried a Parliament and a people who had just experienced the rapid political and religious reversals of Edward VI and Mary Tudor. As Elizabeth aged and continued to insist that she planned to wed and provide an heir at any time, these claims became increasingly implausible. By the time Shakespeare wrote *Richard III*, Elizabeth was sixty, well past childbearing, and clearly planned to remain unmarried, no matter how she might have insisted otherwise. And, like Margaret leaving the object of her curse dangerously unnamed until the last possible moment, Elizabeth had still named no successor.

Howard Nenner and other critics have argued that the queen's equivocation and delay was a subtle power play. Nenner observes that "the queen's temporizing could be meaningful and effective only as long as there was no known and certain rule of succession. Only in this circumstance of constitutional confusion would it be possible for Elizabeth to exercise her individual preference and secure the crown for the contender of her choice" (Nenner 1995, p. 18). While that is quite likely to be the case, it would be difficult to overstate how preoccupied and worried the late Elizabethans were by the seemingly unending and possibly unsolvable succession question.

Although from a twenty-first-century perspective, James I and VI seems the obvious successor to Elizabeth; Susan Doran and Paulina Kewes provide a helpful explanation of why it is important not to let the smooth accession of James I and VI to the throne trick one into overlooking the complications of getting him there:

First of all, James was not the only potential claimant; on the contrary, he had a disturbingly large number of rivals. By the mid-1590s, Persons named some sixteen possible heirs to Elizabeth. In 1601, the civil lawyer Thomas Wilson identified twelve competitors who "gape for" the death of the Queen. "Thus you see," he declared, "this crown is not like to fall to the ground for want of heads that claim to wear it, but upon whose head it will fall is by many doubted." Alongside James, the main contenders were Edward and Thomas Seymour, the sons of Katherine Grey of the Suffolk line; Arbella, the English Stuart from a cadet line; and the Infanta Isabella Clara Eugenia of Spain whose claim dated back to her fourteenth-century Lancastrian ancestor. (Doran and Kewes 2014, p. 4)

To a nation that had suffered the marriage vagaries of Henry VIII, followed by the fraught successions of Edward, Lady Jane Grey, and Mary Tudor, this list—distressingly long and filled with a troubling mixture of Protestants and Catholics—must have been a most worrying prospect.

The problem was only made worse by a lack of constitutional clarity on the subject. While many tend to assume that, although deviations had been made from time to time, the rules of succession to the English crown were clear and well understood, historians argue that this was not at all the case. Nenner observes that “historical precedent was unhelpful because it afforded justification for every hypothesis that had been advanced” (Nenner 1995, p. 26). Legal precedent was equally murky:

As a political matter, James may have been the likely successor to Elizabeth, but as a constitutional matter it was far from certain whether he had the only right, or even the best right, to follow Elizabeth to the throne. There was simply no contemporary agreement as to whether the crown ought to be passed automatically at the death of Elizabeth to the next in the hereditary line; whether the next in the hereditary line might be passed over because of a ‘legal incapacity to rule’ whether the next monarch ought to be determined in parliament; or whether the queen should be exhorted in the waning days of her life to nominate and determine her own successor. (Nenner 1995, p. 13)

And Doran and Kewes emphasize that this lack of clarity was of long standing, though it had been brought into high relief by the legal complications caused by the marriages of Henry VIII, his tendency to legitimize and delegitimize his children, and his successors’ attempts to settle future successions according to their own preferences:

Disagreements about the relative merits of hereditary right, royal nomination, election by parliament (with or without the monarch at the helm) or statutory limitations of the succession were confined neither to the Elizabethan era nor even to the “long” sixteenth century . . . but they were revitalized and more fully articulated from the 1530s onward due to Henry VIII’s inability to sire a son by his first wife and his failure to produce a male sibling for his heir. Henry created a legal quagmire with his three Succession Acts (1534, 1536, and 1544) and his extraordinary will of 1546 that ignored the progeny of his elder sister. Soon afterwards, Edward VI’s attempts to change the succession by letters patent and Mary’s toying with the idea of excluding her heretical and bastard half-sister from the crown raised further questions about what was legally and politically possible. (Doran and Kewes 2014, p. 13)

Not only did the Parliament and the people not know who would be named to the throne after the queen died, they did not even know how to know. Historical hindsight might suggest they were worried about what turned out to be a peaceful transition of power, but in the moment, people were truly afraid. Nenner reminds us that, as the queen lay dying, the navy was readied to defend England against foreign invasion, every county was told to be on high alert for civic unrest, and people brought their valuables into the city from less secure surrounding areas. “[C]ontemporaries were in no way confident that the transition to the next reign would be effected quite as effortlessly as it proved to be. There were, in fact, few who were anything but anxious over the dangers attending upon an uncertain succession.” (Nenner 1995, p. 17).

As a result, it is no surprise that playwrights like Shakespeare, so attuned to the political and social concerns of their time, were also preoccupied with the problem of the succession, and had been for quite some time. Marie Axton’s *The Queen’s Two Bodies* provides a comprehensive look at references to succession crises in scores of dramatic works composed in England between *Gorboduc* (1566) and *King Lear* (ca. 1603), plays that are famously focused on the topic. She begins her survey by recounting an anecdote that suggests that even in 1566, Elizabeth’s subjects were not just quietly worried about her unmarried state and lack of a named heir or an heir of the body; they were critical and vocal about it:

Queen Elizabeth’s presence at a marriage masque on 1 July 1566 transformed a traditional epithalamion into fine-edged criticism. . . . The young lawyers who danced before the Queen . . . were impatient with their Queen whose disinclination for matrimony and childbearing

was becoming notorious. . . . These masquers entered the Hall to bestow Venus's golden apple, the prize for beauty. The presenter . . . took upon himself the task of Paris. Surveying the distinguished audience, he pronounced cool judgement: the bride is the most beautiful lady in the Hall because she has fulfilled her destiny in marriage. (Axton 1977, p. 1)

Axton goes on to note that this was a "blandly indirect snub to the queen," (Axton 1977, p. 1), but while it must have been indirect enough to avoid permanent offense, it is hard to see the criticism as bland. Marriage and securing the succession should be the queen's primary concerns as both a monarch and a woman, yet they are not, say the masquers. When Elizabeth attempted to banter away this kind of concern and critique, claiming to be married to the English people and also to be their mother, and thus to have no need for a literal marriage or child, " . . . the dramatists went much further. Gentlemen [dramatists] of Gray's Inn, impatient for a real child born of their Queen, pointed out the disastrous implication of her claim to be both spouse and mother of her realm by presenting the tragedy of state consequent on the unnatural marriage of Jocasta." (Axton 1977, p. 39).

Using the drama to criticize the unsettled state of the Elizabethan succession began, then, early in Elizabeth I's reign and continued until her death. Dramatic concerns about issues of succession appear nearly everywhere in Shakespeare's histories and tragedies, as various recent studies have discussed at length. John Cox devotes a chapter primarily to issues of succession in Shakespeare's histories (Cox 2007, pp. 131–60); Peter Lake provides a thorough look at questions of succession in the history plays (Lake 2017); and Lisa Hopkins considers the same questions in a broader range of Shakespeare's writings within her study about the enduring nature of such concerns (Hopkins [2011] 2016). Questions about inheritance and succession trouble such tragedies as *Macbeth*, *Hamlet* and *King Lear*. And it is not just these gravely serious plays that are haunted by succession crises. Richard Dutton argues that as the likelihood of a marriage became increasingly remote, dramatists began to focus their attentions less on urging the queen to marry and more on wishing that she had. He writes:

Shakespeare's romantic comedies replay with ever-greater urgency a wish-fulfillment that Elizabeth had married. The spinsterly Beatrice in *Much Ado* (ca. 1598) is belatedly tricked into marrying Benedick, which helps seal the discord within Messina, a city at war without. Rosalind's "holiday" exile in Arden in *As You Like It* (ca. 1599) is inextricably linked with the process of restoring her father to his throne and thereby becoming once more its legitimate heir (but not before marrying a tried-and-tested husband). Illyria in *Twelfth Night* (ca. 1601) is trapped in a loveless, childless stasis, ruled over by a mooning duke and a mourning "Madonna"; plucky Viola injects fresh life, but the marriages this generates (including her own) are so perfunctory as to be literally incredible. (Dutton 2014, pp. 174–75)

In the middle of all this is Shakespeare's *Richard III*. Here, Shakespeare pulls together the concerns of the Elizabethan succession crises, the Jacob and Esau story, and *Richard III*. As he does so, he twists threads that entwine further the longer one looks at them. The aging woman using equivocation, rhetoric, and delay to attempt to exercise political influence—is that Elizabeth I arguing in front of Parliament? Queen Margaret cursing Richard? Or Rebekah persuading Jacob to trick his father? That family fraught with divisions and a dangerously uncertain sense of who should lead—is that the House of Tudor? The House of York? The House of Israel? That dangerous trickster who could at any moment slip an unexpected name into the line of succession—could that be Elizabeth I, or Richard III, or Jacob? And that blank space at the end of a curse or a blessing or a line of succession: What name will go there? What good or ill will result? And how will it affect the future of a great nation? The interwoven themes of all three of these histories—Jacob and Esau, *Richard III*, and Shakespeare's own historical context—peak in the moment of Margaret's interrupted curse.

As Mark Twain probably did not say, "History does not repeat itself, but it rhymes."

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