



# ROYAL STUDIES JOURNAL

2021

VIII

*Introduction:  
Performing Royal Power in  
Premodern Europe*

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WINCHESTER  
UNIVERSITY PRESS



**Introduction:  
Performing Royal Power in Premodern Europe**

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**Abstract:** This introduction considers the mediums and forms through which royal power was performed in premodern Europe, including civic entertainments, coronations, pageants, progresses, and the explosion of print culture that helped disseminate and shape many of these events. Power and performance have always been interlinked, with rulers and the ruled acutely aware of the necessity of ritual and image. This connection could be particularly important at times of crisis or political transition. The introduction makes connections between the articles in this special issue, which offer new perspectives on the participatory and dialogic nature of performing power in premodern Europe.

**Keywords:** performance; monarchy; queenship; kingship; political theatre

In Shakespeare's *Henry V*, a disguised King Henry V mingles with his soldiers at Agincourt, the night before the battle that would forever become associated with his reign. Hearing criticism of his actions, he claims, while incognito, "the King is but a man, as I am."<sup>1</sup> Then, when alone, he soliloquises, asking "what have kings, that privates have not too, / Save ceremony, save general ceremony?"<sup>2</sup> Here, he alludes to the abstract ideas that make up kingship, without which he would be just "a man." These lines acknowledge the necessity of performance to the exercise of monarchical power: what distinguishes a monarch from their subjects are the centuries of tradition that have built up around the role of sovereign; and these traditions, rituals, and ceremonies are all designed to be consumed by an audience—whether this be a select group of nobles, the members of parliament, or the nation at large. Power and performance have thus always been interlinked, and this connection is made even clearer when, as many of the articles in this special issue

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<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, ed. Rory Loughnane, in *The New Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. Gary Taylor, John Jowett, Terri Bouris, and Gabriel Egan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1577 (4.1.97).

<sup>2</sup> Shakespeare, *Henry V*, 1580 (4.1.204–205).

attest, a monarch wanted to stabilise and legitimise their position, or to garner support for a decision or new policy.

The performative aspect of monarchy—generally referred to as political theatre—is, however, a dialogue; while rulers may go to great lengths to assert their power through a variety of performances, the ruled often responded in kind with their own performances. Across premodern Europe, whole genres of entertainment and performance, as well as specific discourses and conventions, were devised to allow the performance of power to be beneficial to, and understood by, both the ruler and the ruled. Recent scholarship has begun to expand the dramatic canon to include these genres of performance, such as royal entries, progresses, pageants, entertainments, and public speeches. As Scott Trudel has observed, “scholars have often sidelined [civic] entertainments from the dramatic canon,” with Stuart court masques as the major exception to this trend.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, a number of scholars have expanded the range of genres considered worthy of study. For instance, Tracey Hill has emphasised the importance of the Lord Mayor’s pageants in London to civic authority: “As with royal progresses, the passing of the Lord Mayor through the City worked as a literally visible assertion of his authority over this domain.”<sup>4</sup> These types of public performance were entwined with the political, as they used public funding, involved the presence of a ruler, and were performed in public. Mayoral pageants frequently offered counsel to incumbents, and motivated them to be good rulers by citing past examples.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Mary Tiffany Ferer has analysed the way Holy Roman Emperor Charles V embarked on “almost continuous travel to its [the empire’s] various regions,” noting that the entertainments staged for his various entries across his domains “provided excellent opportunities to impress the populace and forge public opinion and, as such, played an important role in image-making and political propaganda.”<sup>6</sup> For a monarch who largely ruled in absentia, these “performances reflected the power and wealth of the court,” and they also provided Charles with an opportunity “to introduce his son and successor to his subjects” as he set in motion his plans to hand over power to his son,

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<sup>3</sup> Scott A. Trudell, “Occasion,” in *Early Modern Theatricality*, ed. Henry S. Turner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 232. On Stuart masquing, see: Susan Dunn-Hensley, *Anna of Denmark and Henrietta Maria: Virgins, Witches, and Catholic Queens* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Leeds Barroll, *Anna of Denmark, Queen of England: A Cultural Biography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001); and Clare McManus, *Women on the Renaissance Stage: Anna of Denmark and Female Masquing in the Stuart Court, 1590–1619* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002). See also: Melinda Gough, *Dancing Queen: Marie de Médicis’ Ballets at the Court of Henri IV* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019); and Ellen R. Welch, *A Theater of Diplomacy: International Relations and the Performing Arts in Early Modern France* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> Tracey Hill, *Pageantry and Power: A Cultural History of the Early Modern Lord Mayor’s Show, 1585–1639* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 10.

<sup>5</sup> Hill, *Pageantry and Power*, 273.

<sup>6</sup> Mary Tiffany Ferer, *Music and Ceremony at the Court of Charles V: The Capilla Flamenca and the Art of Political Promotion* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2012), 1, 224. See also: J.R. Mulryne, with Maria Ines Aliverti and Anna Maria Testaverde, eds., *Ceremonial Entries in Early Modern Europe: The Iconography of Power* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015); Roy Strong, *Splendor at Court: Renaissance Spectacle and the Theater of Power* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973); and Roy Strong, *Art and Power: Renaissance Festivals, 1450–1650* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1984).

Philip II, and his brother, Ferdinand.<sup>7</sup>

In addition, other forms of dissemination have also been explored in more recent years, with scholars including Jemma Field, Erin Griffey, Laura Lunger Knoppers, Kevin Sharpe, Catriona Murray, David M. Bergeron, and Jitske Jasperse emphasising the performative power of visual, material, and ephemeral objects from the medieval period on, the advent of print culture in the early modern period and its ability to influence both rulers and the ruled, as well as the importance of medallions and commemorative souvenirs.<sup>8</sup> These various studies have increasingly focused on the duality of power, emphasising the role of the ruled in perpetuating the ruler's power, whether this be through the purchasing and consumption of these souvenirs, in their attendance at a civic entertainment, or the publication of a treatise intended to somehow influence a monarch's decision. *Performing Royal Power in Premodern Europe* builds on these approaches, and aims to expand this conversation in new directions, taking a multidisciplinary approach that seeks to understand the experiences of people who lived in a world prior to representative democracy and universal suffrage.

Power is ultimately, however, intangible: despite all bearing the same office, there is a clear understanding that the personal power and authority of individual monarchs varied across late medieval and early modern England, for instance. Nevertheless, these monarchs all engaged in public performances that were intended to bolster their royal power: excepting Edward V, whose throne was usurped by Richard III before he could engage in these events, all the monarchs were crowned in lavish coronation ceremonies, which were preceded by public pageants and entertainments; all the kings progressed around the kingdom to personally display their royal authority, and were greeted with a range of entertainments organised by their subjects; and all the kings used parliamentary ceremonies to bolster their power and authority, and to engage with the estates of the realm as part of this performance.<sup>9</sup> These

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<sup>7</sup> Ferer, *Music and Ceremony at the Court of Charles V*, 234, 232.

<sup>8</sup> Jemma Field, *Anna of Denmark: The Material and Visual Culture of the Stuart Courts, 1589–1619* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020); Erin Griffey, *On Display: Henrietta Maria and the Materials of Magnificence at the Stuart Court* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015); Laura Lunger Knoppers, *Constructing Cromwell: Ceremony, Portrait, and Print, 1645–1661* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Kevin Sharpe, *Selling the Tudor Monarchy: Authority and Image in Sixteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); Catriona Murray, *Imaging Stuart Family Politics: Dynastic Crisis and Continuity* (New York: Routledge, 2017); David M. Bergeron, *English Civic Pageantry, 1558–1642*, rev. ed. (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2003); and Jitske Jasperse, *Medieval Women, Material Culture, and Power: Matilda Plantagenet and Her Sisters* (Leeds: Arc Humanities Press, 2020). See also: Glenn Richardson, "The Royal Court," in *The Routledge Handbook of Material Culture in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Catherine Richardson, Tara Hamling, and David Gaimster (New York: Routledge, 2016), 71–81; J.S.A. Adamson, ed., *The Princely Courts of Europe: Ritual, Politics and Culture under the Ancien Régime, 1500–1750* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999); Albrecht Fuess and Jan-Peter Hartung, eds., *Court Cultures in the Muslim World: Seventh to Nineteenth Centuries* (New York: Routledge, 2014); and Ronald G. Asch and Adolf M. Birke, eds., *Princes, Patronage, and the Nobility: The Court at the Beginning of the Modern Age, c.1450–1650* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

<sup>9</sup> See: Ralph A. Griffiths, *The Reign of King Henry VI: The Exercise of Royal Authority, 1422–1461* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981); Richard Osberg, "The Jesse Tree in the 1432 London Entry of Henry VI: Messianic Kingship and the Rule of Justice," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 16, no. 2 (1986): 213–232; Kristin

examples of asserting power are all linked to performance, and the performative nature of power and authority. While these more traditional and obvious mediums of performing power—particularly coronations and progresses—have been well studied by many scholars across a range of disciplines, the methods and modes of performance that perpetuated royal authority on a more day-to-day basis have received much less attention.<sup>10</sup> A king only has one coronation (or two, in the case of Henry III), so it is thus unsurprising that there were a multitude of ways in premodern Europe that a monarch’s power could be performed across their reign.<sup>11</sup> This special issue seeks to shine a light on the array of ways that monarchs performed royal power, emphasising in particular ad hoc, localised, experimental, and controversial methods.

Were these performances of royal power evidence of a dynamic of popular consent for monarchical actions, or were they an attempt by elites to steer and control popular opinion? As

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Bourassa, “The Royal Entries of Henry VI in a London Civic Manuscript,” *Journal of Medieval History* 42, no. 4 (2016): 479–493; Anne Lancashire, *London Civic Theatre: City Drama and Pageantry from Roman Times to 1558* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Wendy Scase, “Writing and the ‘Poetics of Spectacle’: Political Epiphanies in *The Arrivall of Edward IV* and Some Contemporary Lancastrian and Yorkist Texts,” in *Images, Idolatry, and Iconoclasm in Late Medieval England: Textuality and the Visual Image*, ed. Jeremy Dimmick, James Simpson, and Nicolette Zeeman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 172–184; C.E. McGee, “Politics and Platitudes: Sources of Civic Pageantry, 1486,” *Renaissance Studies* 3, no. 1 (1989): 29–34; and Francis K.H. So, ed., *Perceiving Power in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

<sup>10</sup> See: Sydney Anglo, *Spectacle, Pageantry, and Early Tudor Policy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969); Mary Hill Cole, *The Portable Queen: Elizabeth I and the Politics of Ceremony* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999); William Leahy, *Elizabethan Triumphal Processions* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005); Siobhan Keenan, *The Progresses, Processions, and Royal Entries of King Charles I, 1625–1642* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Hélène Visentin and Nicolas Russell, eds., *French Ceremonial Entries in the Sixteenth Century: Event, Image, Text* (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2007); Teofilo F. Ruiz, *A King Travels: Festive Traditions in Late Medieval and Early Modern Spain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); Lawrence M. Bryant, *The King and the City in the Parisian Royal Entry Ceremony: Politics, Ritual and Art in the Renaissance* (Geneva: Droz, 1986); Marie-Claude Canova-Green and Jean Andrews, with Marie-France Wagner, eds., *Writing Royal Entries in Early Modern Europe* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013); and J.R. Mulyne, Helen Watanabe-O’Kelley, Margaret Shewring, Elizabeth Goldring, and Sarah Knight, eds., *Europa Triumphans: Court and Civic Festivals in Early Modern Europe*, 2 vols. (Aldershot: Ashgate 2004).

<sup>11</sup> The scholarship on European coronation traditions is vast, but see: Alice Hunt, *The Drama of Coronation: Medieval Ceremony in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Roy Strong, *Coronation: A History of Kingship and the British Monarchy* (London: HarperCollins, 2005); George Garnett, “Coronation,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. Michael Lapidge, John Blair, Simon Keynes, and Donald Scragg, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 125–126; P.L. Ward, “The Coronation Ceremony in Mediaeval England,” *Speculum* 14, no. 2 (1939), 160–178; János M. Bak, ed., *Coronations: Medieval and Early Modern Monarchic Ritual* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Jaume Aurell, *Medieval Self-Coronations: The History and Symbolism of a Ritual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Matthias Range, *Music and Ceremonial at British Coronations: From James I to Elizabeth II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Klaas Van Gelder, ed., *More Than Mere Spectacle: Coronations and Inaugurations in the Habsburg Monarchy During the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2021); Aidan Norrie, “The Bishop and the Queen; Or, Why Did the Bishop of Carlisle Crown Elizabeth I?,” *Northern History* 56, nos. 1–2 (2019): 25–45; Krista Kodres and Anu Mänd, eds., *Images and Objects in Ritual Practices in Medieval and Early Modern Northern and Central Europe* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014); Janet L. Nelson, *Politics and Ritual in Early Medieval Europe* (London: Hambledon, 1986); Michel Le Moël, *Le sacre des rois de France* (Paris: S.I.D.E.S., 1983); and Richard A. Jackson, *Vive le roi!: A History of the French Coronation from Charles V to Charles X* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

Teofilo F. Ruiz has pointed out regarding Philip II's formal entries, festivals, and travels across his vast dominions, these kinds of entertainment were enormously expensive and little was left to chance. Unscripted moments could happen, such as "peasants dancing and snapping their fingers to imitate the sound of castanets, as they did along Philip II's route to Zaragoza and Barcelona," but these were remarkable.<sup>12</sup> Most entries or formal ceremonies were heavily scripted. However, there are other sources in which the popular held sway, and—through both manuscript and increasingly cheap-to-produce print media—individual voices could challenge heterodoxy.<sup>13</sup>

People could also perform to those in power, or perform their own power. In a stage-managed performance known as the *Affaire des Placards*, Protestants affixed posters to public places throughout France on the night of 18 October 1534, indicating both their own beliefs and their power as a network of subjects across the country. Most dramatically, the group managed to pin a poster outside François I's bedchamber. They were protesting the "abuses" of the Catholic Church, more specifically the Catholic belief of the real presence of Christ at the Eucharist. François immediately responded with his own performances of power, including standing under the canopy where the Eucharist was usually carried in procession.<sup>14</sup> Handbills, broadsheets, and placards are ways in which we can read the mediated relationships between power, the popular, and performance.

This special issue aims to explore the mechanisms through which power is enacted, and its long history of performance. We have employed a deliberately broad definition of performance here. In addition to more traditional mediums including songs, royal progresses, and civic entertainments, the authors in the issue have demonstrated how texts like history plays, genealogies, and treatises on virtues, as well as church ceremonies, functioned as important performances of royal power, and by analysing this wide range of performances, we can gain a much better insight into the way that rulers viewed their own power, and the various ways that the ruled responded to these demonstrations of power.

Space and setting created a range of opportunities for demonstrations of power, and also for adapted responses to them. David Harrap's article explores the remarkable similarities between church blessings and the special liturgy created sometime between 1413 and 1418 for the consecration of Henry V's naval fleet, arguing that references to the dangers of the seas and to nautical life do not hide the ceremony's propaganda-like function. Harrap explores how this liturgy uses the notion of the Ship of the Church—the word 'nave' after all derives from

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<sup>12</sup> Teofilo F. Ruiz, *A King Travels: Festive Traditions in Late Medieval and Early Modern Spain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 35.

<sup>13</sup> See: Marcin Polkowski, "From Propaganda to the Denial of Free Speech: Politics and the Misuse of Language in Elizabethan England in the Writings of Anglo-Dutch Polemicist Richard Verstegan (c.1550-1640)," *Dutch Crossing* 44, no. 3 (2020): 270–282.

<sup>14</sup> Christian Jouhaud, "Readability and Persuasion: Political Handbills," in *The Culture of Print: Power and the Uses of Print in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Roger Chartier, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 235.

the Latin for ship—to reinforce the close connections between the English Church and the Lancastrian monarchy. Through the performance of this liturgy, the ship became a ceremonial site of power for both Church and state.

In contrast, Marta Celati's article focuses not on the rituals of performance, but on the theory behind these rituals. Exploring Giovanni Pontano's *De principe* (1465) and Giuniano Maio's *De maiestate* (1492)—political treatises both written in Naples—Celati argues that they point to a new theory of statecraft and kingship, where the *image* of majesty is all-important, rather than necessarily the reality of majesty or honour. Both texts are part of the larger tradition of producing mirrors for princes, and they offer early political theorisations of majesty, a concept that was already closely linked with monarchy and the state. Celati's article considers their connections to *realpolitik*, and the virtuous ideals underlying princely authority in early modern Naples.

Both Maio and Potano's texts offer advice as to the 'correct' course of action that the Neapolitan ruler should take, and the texts and performances covered in this special issue frequently offered counsel, advising or warning rulers as to praiseworthy or dangerous actions. Aidan Norrie's article investigates the counsel offered to Elizabeth I through the medium of biblical figures. Norrie uses Elizabeth's coronation procession in 1559 and the Norwich entertainments during her progress of 1578 to further our understanding of the dialogue between biblical typologies and royal power. By using explicitly scriptural analogies, writers and performers could argue they were only endorsing a course of action that God wanted. In a highly stage-managed fashion, power was speaking to power, and writers could counsel the queen on both her past and future actions.

Joseph Massey's article looks at a potential collaboration between a monarch and a subject, exploring the performance of legitimacy and hereditary status. The article focuses on a genealogy by Morgan Colman that shows the descent of James VI & I, King of England, Scotland, and Ireland, from the eleventh-century Saxon princess St Margaret, later Queen of Scots as wife of Malcolm III. As one of James's ancestors, the genealogy used her claim to the English throne to bolster James's rule, arguing that the new King's right to rule could be traced back to before the Norman Conquest. James, determined to promote the permanent union of England and Scotland as Great Britain, may have commissioned this genealogy to demonstrate his preeminent right to the thrones of both countries, and as such it supported his claim that the union of the crowns in his person legitimised and necessitated a permanent political union.

Controlling and shaping the past was, for James, an important way of controlling the present. Kit Heyam's article looks at alternative voices important in shaping early modern versions of the past, focusing on the relatively neglected prose texts that can be read performatively alongside the better-known history plays from early modern England. Frequently deploying invented speech and performative description, Heyam uses accounts of the reign of Edward II, which attracted substantial cross-genre attention (especially from the second half of the sixteenth century onwards), as a case study of the process by which history

was made usable in the present. These prose narratives frequently used performative techniques to facilitate emotional and political engagement with the unfortunate King's story, prompting a convincing re-assessment of the complexity and importance of this genre.

Performance could also be used to lay the foundation for power that was to be wielded at some point in the future. Laura Doak's article analyses the progresses around Scotland between 1679 and 1682 of James, Duke of York, the heir presumptive of Charles II of England, Scotland, and Ireland. The likelihood of James's succession was the cause of a serious political debate, given he and his wife, Mary Beatrice of Modena, were devout Catholics, and it resulted in what is known as the Exclusion Crisis. James's progresses in this period were intended to bolster support for both the Stuart monarchy more generally, and James as the likely successor to the composite Stuart monarchy more specifically. Doak uses the poems, addresses, and other scripts of performances across the progresses to both analyse the way that James sought to shore up his position, as well as the way the Stuart monarchy was ultimately able to extricate itself from the controversy, and instead successfully manage the crisis. In doing so, Doak demonstrates how these performances stabilised and protected the power of the Stuart monarchy.

In the final article in this special issue, Sonja Kleij analyses five songs from the Dutch Republic that feature Mary II of England, Scotland, and Ireland as a named character. The songs emphasise the different roles that Mary played (or was believed to play), showing the various ways that a monarch's power could be theorised, especially in response to unusual political arrangements and circumstances. Many of the songs in Kleij's article attempt to grapple with Mary's simultaneous positions as the consort to the Dutch stadtholder; consort to the King of England, Scotland, and Ireland; and Queen of England, Scotland, and Ireland in her own right. In the republican context of the Low Countries, these songs both provide an outsider's perspective on the concept of queenship, and emphasise the way that a monarch's power was constantly being performed.

Collectively, the articles in *Performing Royal Power in Premodern Europe* blur the line between power and performance, ultimately suggesting that power and performance are never really separate. Throughout this introduction, and in the articles that follow, we have stressed the myriad of ways that power can be performed, recognising that most expressions of power in premodern Europe required some level of performance, and one that was usually dialogic. This is especially clear in the interplay between more literal, physical performances (such as the civic entertainments for Elizabeth and the progresses of James, Duke of York) and those that are more text-based (including the prose narratives of Edward II's reign and Colman's genealogy).<sup>15</sup> The accounts of Elizabeth's progresses, the songs about Mary II, a ship dedication liturgy, and narratives of Edward II's reign exist on the page, and can be consumed

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<sup>15</sup> See: Sandra Logan, *Text/Events in Early Modern England: Poetics of History* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007); and Barbara Hanawalt and Kathryn Reyerson, eds., *City and Spectacle in Medieval Europe* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).



as textual records of a performance, but they can also be performed again and again, long after the event or person they describe has faded out of memory. By committing the performance of power to the page, power could be asserted and dispersed to an even wider audience, enabling more people to engage with the political theatre of premodern royal power: why else were accounts of Elizabeth's progresses published, an engraved copy of Colman's genealogy produced, or copies of political treatises intended for rulers copied, printed, and disseminated for wider consumption?

In a period before mass communication and social media, power was wielded most effectively when it was displayed and participatory; it is thus not a coincidence that virtually all European monarchs and rulers engaged in pageantry, entries, processions, and courtly entertainments. As Elizabeth I observed in response to a parliamentary petition in 1586, "We princes, I tell you, are set on stages in the sight and view of all the world duly observed. The eyes of many behold our actions; a spot is soon spied in our garments; a blemish quickly noted in our doings."<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth, like her fellow rulers, wielded power and expected obedience from her subjects, but she also understood the important role she had to play in performing this power, and ensuring that those she ruled were both exposed to, and involved in, these performances.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *Elizabeth I: Collected Works*, ed. Leah S. Marcus, Janel Mueller, and Mary Beth Rose (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 194.

<sup>17</sup> See: Jeroen Duindam, *Dynasties: A Global History of Power, 1300–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).