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Helen Hackett: Shakespeare and Elizabeth

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Many people who, like me, grew up in Britain in the 1960s and '70s, will have fond memories of Ladybird Books, a highly successful series of small, hardback, colorfully illustrated books for children which aimed to educate and entertain. They included, among a wide range of titles, the *Adventures from History* series. From *The Story of the First Queen Elizabeth* we learned that “The Queen liked Shakespeare’s plays so much that he was frequently commanded to bring his company to the palace”.¹ In the accompanying picture we saw the Bard gesturing flamboyantly as he declaimed lines from a freshly drafted manuscript (fig. 0.1). His puffed breeches showed off the fine lines of his hose-clad legs, while just a few feet away Elizabeth I, in a sumptuous, flowing gown, leaned forward attentively from her throne, a posture imitated by her ladies-in-waiting. The physical distance between monarch and author was respectful but small, and the Queen’s inclination toward the playwright suggested warm appreciation, perhaps even attraction. It was an enchanting and inspiring scene: England’s most celebrated ruler and most revered poet brought together in one glorious and romantic historical moment, jointly producing the birth of England’s national literature and national greatness. Young readers like myself could not have guessed from this version of history that there is no evidence that any such scene ever took place. There are records of performances at court by Shakespeare’s company, the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, but no record of any face-to-face encounter between Shakespeare and Elizabeth.

Many years later, as an academic writing about *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, I became familiar with readings of “Oberon’s vision,” the passage where Oberon explains to Puck the provenance of the love charm, as a reference to Elizabeth I (2.1.148–64). Oberon describes how he saw Cupid take aim “at a fair vestal thronèd by the west.” She was immune to Cupid’s arrow, which was “quenched in the



FIGURE 0.1

John Kenney, Shakespeare Reading to Elizabeth I, from L. du Garde Peach, *The Story of the First Queen Elizabeth* (Loughborough: Wills and Hepworth, 1958), 45. © Ladybird Books Ltd., 1958. Reproduced by permission of Ladybird Books Ltd.

chaste beams of the wat'ry moon" and fell instead on a flower, turning it into the love charm. Meanwhile "the imperial vot'ress passèd on, / In maiden meditation, fancy-free." I found general agreement among critics that the terms applied to this figure—virginity, regal serenity, imperial power, and association with the moon, emblem of the virgin goddess Diana—match the terms extensively applied to Elizabeth in court poetry of the 1590s, and that therefore this must be a reference to her. The critics disagreed widely and prolifically, however, about what this reference to the Queen meant. Was it a compliment to Elizabeth, soliciting or perhaps reciprocating her gracious patronage of Shakespeare? Was it evidence that she must have been present at an early performance of the play to hear this compliment in person? Or was it a passage full of darkly critical subtexts, representing Elizabeth as aging and remote and her virginity as unnatural and sterile?²

As I looked into this further, I found that behind both the Ladybird *Story of the First Queen Elizabeth* and the critical debate about *A Midsummer Night's Dream* lies a long tradition, reaching back over centuries, of a desire to bring Shakespeare and Elizabeth together. Despite the lack of any evidence that they had contact—or indeed perhaps because of this—there has been a persistent impulse to assert their interest in one another. In the very first biography of Shakespeare, in 1709, Nicholas Rowe stated that "Queen *Elizabeth* had several of his Plays Acted before her, and without doubt gave him many gracious Marks of her Favour."³ He was unable to say anything more specific about what these "gracious Marks" were, but his depiction of a warm patronage relationship had a far-reaching appeal and influence. A century later, in 1825, Richard Ryan declared that "It is well known that Queen Elizabeth was a great admirer of the immortal Shakespeare, and used frequently (as was the custom with persons of great rank in those days) to appear upon the stage before the audience, or to sit delighted behind the scenes, when the plays of our bard were performed."⁴ He recounted an incident in which Elizabeth supposedly dropped a glove on stage to distract the Bard while he was acting, upon which he elegantly extemporized to pick it up without leaving his role, to the Queen's great delight. By this time Shakespeare's imaginary relationship with Elizabeth was developing beyond a warm mutual regard to become a flirtatious intimacy. In the next century, E. Brandram Jones's 1916 novel *In Burleigh's Days* depicted Elizabeth enjoying a performance of *Romeo and Juliet* at court, and enjoying even more her conversation with Shakespeare after the play: "The player had interested her; his refined, handsome and poetic face appealed to her as a woman, as much as the sonnets had appealed to her mind."⁵ The pairing of Shakespeare and Elizabeth is in fact one of England's, and Britain's, most entrenched and persistent cultural myths. This imagined golden moment from the nation's history was

replayed again and again as England increased in power and confidence and came to preside over the United Kingdom of Great Britain. It became even more prominent in national myth as the British Empire extended its power over vast territories. The double myth of Shakespeare and Elizabeth brought together a man claimed as the greatest writer of all time with a woman claimed as one of the greatest rulers of all time to create a potent and irresistible image of the preeminence of the British nation.

As the dominance of Britain as a world power declined, we might expect this double myth to have declined too. We might wish to see those 1709, 1825, and 1916 versions of the scene as imperialistic assertions of British superiority, and the Ladybird *Story of the First Queen Elizabeth* as a late and nostalgic survival of that imperialist ideology. We might regard it as an entertaining fairytale version of history for children which we have now discarded as we have learned better. Indeed, even as I was poring over my Ladybird book in the late 1960s, some Shakespeare scholars were turning their back on the double myth, preferring to keep the playwright as far apart from the Queen as possible in order to assert his populist and protosocialist credentials. Shakespeare as man of the people and “Shakespeare our contemporary” came to the fore, and versions of him as the Queen’s pet poet or literary lackey were seen as conservative and outmoded.⁶ Moreover, over the course of the twentieth century our myths of the past were multiply assailed by such movements as modernism, poststructuralism, and postmodernism. In 1998 audiences flocked to see *Shakespeare in Love*, a film widely acclaimed for its irreverent, ironic, and self-conscious treatment of the Bard. This, critics said, was postmodern costume drama. History, and cultural icons, looked different now, it seemed; we viewed them skeptically, askance, playfully. And yet—at the climax of the film, Elizabeth emerged from the shadowy gallery of the playhouse to express her enjoyment of *Romeo and Juliet* and to invite the playwright to come to her palace at Greenwich, where “we will speak some more.”⁷ This zeitgeist-conscious 1990s film culminated in a scene that would have been comfortably at home in a work from the 1890s or 1790s.

There is something about the imagined meeting between Shakespeare and Elizabeth that we want to cling to, something that we will not let go. It is so deeply ingrained, so frequently recurrent, that we seem to take it for granted. It is perhaps more fundamental to our sense of ourselves than we have consciously realized. But who are “we”? The double myth of Shakespeare and Elizabeth originated as an English myth, and then became a British myth. As time passed, its influence spread to those ruled by the British, and, crucially, it was adopted and adapted by Americans. Now that America dominates world culture, it is America’s investment

in the double myth that has ensured its survival. *Shakespeare in Love* had many of the characteristics of a British costume drama and had a number of British actors in its cast, but they mingled with Hollywood stars, and Miramax, a major Hollywood studio, financed the film. Its “Britishness” was all part of a commercial and artistic package designed to succeed in America. Its triumph was marked by distinctively American accolades: record-breaking U.S. box office takings combined with multiple awards at the Oscars ceremony.

It is perhaps precisely because we do not know whether Shakespeare and Elizabeth ever met that writers have been so eager to imagine this scene. As a gap in history, it has been a provocation and an inspiration to novelists, painters, and filmmakers. It has created inventiveness in biographers and critics too and deserves scrutiny as a topic that has often brought scholarship into closer proximity to fiction than scholars might have wished to acknowledge. Rowe was the first of many biographers to construct hypothetical connections between Shakespeare and Elizabeth. Enterprising forgers have sometimes provided the missing documentary evidence of contact between them. Literary scholars seeking a key to unlock baffling passages in Shakespeare’s works, or looking for buried subtexts in his writings, have often claimed, sometimes persuasively, sometimes less so, that Elizabeth is lurking there. One of the most enduring of such readings concerns Oberon’s aforementioned vision in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. He introduces his description of the “imperial vot’ress” by recollecting how he saw and heard “a mermaid on a dolphin’s back” singing sweet music, and how the “stars shot madly from their spheres” (2.1.150, 153). There is a theory that, combined with the references to Elizabeth later in the same speech, these passages allude to the water pageants and fireworks at the “Princely Pleasures” of 1575 at Kenilworth in Warwickshire, a series of lavish festivities laid on for the Queen by her favorite Robert Dudley, the Earl of Leicester. Young Shakespeare, it is suggested, as a Warwickshire boy, might well have been present at these pageants. This theory has been in circulation since the early nineteenth century and remains in favor with a number of respected Shakespeare scholars today. Yet, as we shall see in chapter 4, it has surprising origins in a literary critic’s ill-informed reading of a historically inaccurate novel, a fact which illustrates the creative interplay between scholarship and fiction that can occur in the construction of cultural myth.

Although scholars and fictionalizers occasionally concur in this way, another striking feature of the double myth of Shakespeare and Elizabeth is the ingenuity and diversity of imaginings of their relationship. It has been suggested that they were lovers, or that Shakespeare was Elizabeth’s secret son, or that Elizabeth was the true author of Shakespeare’s works. They have not always been imagined

enjoying a warm patronage relationship or flirtatious repartee: they have sometimes been depicted instead as bitter antagonists, with Elizabeth a vain and oppressive tyrant and Shakespeare a vigorous critic of her regime. Intriguingly, it has often been those writers who suggested that Shakespeare was Elizabeth's secret son who have imagined the most hostile relationship between them.

The purpose of this book is to explore why this legendary pairing has had such enduring appeal and what we can learn from the wide variations in the representation of that pairing in different periods, different genres, and different cultural contexts. It is subtitled *The Meeting of Two Myths* because it looks both at the recurrent scene of an imagined meeting between the icons Shakespeare and Elizabeth and at the ways in which their two myths have met and intertwined over the centuries. The persistent fascination with Shakespeare and Elizabeth, each in his/her own right, and the ways in which their images have mutated to suit different historical and cultural contexts, have been explored elsewhere—most notably, for Shakespeare, by Samuel Schoenbaum and Gary Taylor, and for Elizabeth, by Michael Dobson and Nicola Watson, and Julia M. Walker.⁸ The work of all these scholars and others has touched upon the double myth of Shakespeare and Elizabeth; indeed, Dobson and Watson give several pages of their extremely informative and entertaining book, *England's Elizabeth*, to the Queen's relationship with the national poet. It is a pleasure to record my indebtedness to all these eminent predecessors in the field. However, the long and complex interrelationship of the cults of Shakespeare and Elizabeth has not as yet received the book-length analysis that is merited by the volume and richness of the material. The present study aspires to tell this combined story more fully than others, who have focused on either Shakespeare or Elizabeth separately, have been able to do.

In my previous research into the copious and complex literary images of Elizabeth from her own lifetime I have encountered the productive idea, developed by Louis Montrose, that by investigating such iconography we can gain insight into the “cultural unconscious” of the Elizabethan period.⁹ By exploring, for instance, why the image of Elizabeth as virgin mother of the nation was so popular and successful in the sixteenth century, we might gain a better understanding of the drives and desires that shaped Elizabethan culture; in other words, we might fruitfully apply some of the tools of psychoanalysis to a whole culture. A similar approach may be extended to the question of how and why fictions and theories combining Shakespeare and Elizabeth have persistently recurred through the ages. In this case the subject of the psychoanalysis is not an individual, or even a particular culture, but a number of cultures, in different periods and different nations. Many of the materials considered in this book may be thought of as having been

repressed, in the psychoanalytical sense of unacknowledged, unexamined, and unresolved. Materials like historical novels and films have been classified as popular culture and therefore disregarded as of no value or serious interest. Authorship theories linking Shakespeare (or “Shakespeare”) and Elizabeth have been dismissed (often with some justice) as unscholarly. However, we should not ignore the cultural forces that have generated and perpetuated these materials and ideas. Some of the more inventive contributions to these genres seem, frankly, bizarre or even ludicrous, but precisely because of this they may be regarded as symptomatic of something in the culture that produced them.¹⁰ On the other hand, works of Shakespeare biography and scholarship have sometimes traded in authoritative assertions about contact between Shakespeare and Elizabeth that have remained unquestioned because they rest upon assumptions so deep-rooted as to be almost invisible. Much may be learned by bringing such assumptions out into the light.

In 1876 Friedrich Nietzsche argued that historical truth was an illusion:

[The past] is always in danger of being a little altered and touched up and brought nearer to fiction. Sometimes there is no possible distinction between a “monumental” past and a mythical romance . . . For the things of the past are never viewed in their true perspective or receive their just value; but value and perspective change with the individual or the nation that is looking back on its past.¹¹

History, then, is always inevitably subjective, and shades into myth. Works of history, biography, or textual scholarship may aspire to objectivity but cannot avoid selective emphases, omissions, and interpretations which reflect the concerns and interests of their authors and readerships. Fiction, drama, the pictorial arts, and film deal in more visible and self-conscious adaptations, distortions, and elaborations of the archival record. Across all these genres, the construction of different versions of history forms its own metahistory, a history of ideology. Imagined meetings between Shakespeare and Elizabeth are of interest less for what they tell us about the time and place they depict than for what they tell us about the time and place when they were concocted, the means by which they circulated, and the ways in which they were used. They might reveal much about the desires which they fulfilled, the fantasies which they enabled, and the ideological work that they did in constructing a present out of an imagined past. Homage to, or reaction against, a constructed heritage is necessary to the self-definition of any culture, and for Anglophone cultures the double myth of Shakespeare and Elizabeth has been at the heart of that heritage.

The most likely occasion for any contact between Shakespeare and Elizabeth would have been a performance of a Shakespeare play at court. From the mid-1590s until the end of his career Shakespeare was a leading member and resident playwright of the Lord Chamberlain's Men; the first record of him in relation to any specific playing company and performance is for a play at court at Christmas 1594, when he was named as one of those who received payment on behalf of this company.¹² In that year the Lord Chamberlain's Men, along with the Lord Admiral's Men, had been granted a virtual duopoly over commercial theatrical performances in London, based in their own fixed playhouses. Both the Lord Chamberlain and the Lord Admiral were Privy Councillors, but the Lord Chamberlain's Men were especially well connected at court, since their patron was the official in charge of all court entertainments. This was further enhanced by the fact that until 1596 the Lord Chamberlain was Henry Carey, Lord Hunsdon, the Queen's cousin and possible half-brother, who was one of Elizabeth's most well-loved and trusted courtiers.¹³ In 1597, after briefly passing outside the family, the position of Lord Chamberlain descended to his son, George Carey. Elizabeth, always cautious with money, avoided direct patronage in her own name, but the Lord Chamberlain's Men were in effect the official playing company of the court. It was they who most often enjoyed the accolade of being summoned to perform for the Queen: records can be found of thirty-three performances by them at court between their inception in 1594 and Elizabeth's death in 1603, compared with twenty by the Admiral's Men, and many fewer by other, less flourishing companies.¹⁴ Their status as the royal players became official on Elizabeth's death, when James I adopted them as the King's Men. Even so, their status was no more than that of servants or retainers, and playing remained a relatively humble and disreputable profession.

The playing companies had frequent disputes with the authorities of the City of London, who were mainly of a Puritanical outlook and opposed playing as idle and likely to encourage vice. In these disputes the players were often able to invoke the protection of Elizabeth's Council, on the grounds that they needed to exercise their trade for commercial audiences in order to be in good practice to entertain the Queen when required. From the point of view of the court, the main purpose of the playing companies was to entertain Elizabeth and her entourage, and public performances were merely rehearsals for this and a means of meeting the companies' expenses.¹⁵ The players were summoned to court on such occasions as visits by foreign dignitaries, holidays, and celebrations. Christmas was especially busy for them: sometimes as many as twelve plays were performed at

court over the period of the festivities.¹⁶ Performances were usually staged in the old Banqueting House at Whitehall, or in the Great Halls of Hampton Court, Greenwich, Richmond, or Windsor, and took place after supper, between around 10 PM and 1 AM.¹⁷ The Queen sat on a “state” or throne in a prominent position directly in front of the stage and clearly visible to the rest of the audience, so that she was as much a part of the spectacle as was the drama itself.¹⁸ There is strong evidence that she had a real enjoyment of drama, not least in the fact that she continued seeing plays right up to her final weeks of life.¹⁹

Although there were writers who produced plays especially for court performances, the plays brought by the commercial playing companies were not usually specially commissioned but were transfers of successes from the public playhouses. It is difficult to establish how many of Shakespeare’s plays Elizabeth saw. We have fuller records for the reign of James I, when payments for some seventeen plays by “Shaxberd” were listed in the account book of the Revels Office.²⁰ Unfortunately, court performances of Shakespeare’s plays are not recorded by name and date before 1603, but it must often have been his plays that the Chamberlain’s Men presented to the Queen. Printers of his works sometimes used this as a selling point: the first surviving edition of *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, from 1598, asserted that it had been “presented before her Highnes this last Christmas,” while the first edition of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in 1602 asserted that it had been acted “before her Majestie.”²¹

It is possible that at the end of one of his plays Shakespeare might have been presented to the Queen as the author; such presentations were not unusual. It is thought that John Lyly, who wrote a number of plays for court performance in the 1580s and early 1590s, was probably presented to the Queen early in his career by his patron, Edward de Vere, the Earl of Oxford. In 1595 and 1598 Lyly wrote two embittered petitions to Elizabeth complaining that he had been waiting fruitlessly for years for her to fulfil promises to him to give him a high position in the Revels Office, the court body in charge of entertainments. The terms of the petitions strongly imply both that he was personally known to the Queen and that she had held at least one conversation with him: “I was entertayned, your Majesties servant; by your owne gracious Favor stranghtened with Condictions, that, I should ayme all my Courses, at the Revells; (I dare not saye, with a promise, butt a hopefull Item, of the Reversion) For the which, theis Tenn yeares, I have Attended, with an unwearyed patience.”²² Edmund Spenser, also, was presented to Elizabeth by his friend Sir Walter Raleigh in 1589, shortly before the publication of the first part of *The Faerie Queene*, his epic poem celebrating Elizabeth.²³ It is even more likely that Elizabeth would have seen Shakespeare perform; a recent biographer has argued convincingly that “the prominence and continuity of Shakespeare’s career as a

player have been consistently under-estimated.”²⁴ The First Folio places Shakespeare himself first in the list of “The Names of the Principall Actors in all these Playes.”²⁵ There are traditions that he played the parts of Adam in *As You Like It* and the Ghost in *Hamlet*; and we know that he acted in at least two plays by Ben Jonson, *Every Man in his Humour* (1598) and *Sejanus* (1603–4).²⁶ So, the Queen may have seen Shakespeare as one actor in the cast of a play, but this would be a significantly less personal encounter than most myth-makers of later centuries have liked to imagine. Even if he were presented to her as an author, any conversation would have been brief and formal.

Many mythologizers have loved to imagine Elizabeth attending a Shakespeare play at a playhouse, usually the Globe. The scenario has many attractions: it depicts Elizabeth mingling democratically with her subjects and sharing their pleasures; and it presents in one neatly encapsulated scene the essential ingredients of the so-called Elizabethan golden age: Gloriana, Shakespeare and his characters, and the vivacious and rumbustious people of Tudor England, all dressed in colorful and picturesque period costume. Yet this event is not only undocumented but also highly unlikely. If the Queen had deigned to grace a public playhouse with her presence, it would have been an exceptional and sensational occurrence and would undoubtedly have been recorded, but no such records exist. We do know that a later Queen of England attended a playhouse: Henrietta Maria, wife of Charles I, went several times to see plays at the Blackfriars theatre. However, bills for these performances were referred to the office of the Lord Chamberlain—whose responsibilities included overseeing plays and playhouses—suggesting that they were specially commissioned private performances, rather than that the Queen simply joined the paying audience at the usual kind of public performance.²⁷

There is only one piece of evidence that Elizabeth might ever have gone to a playhouse. This is a letter of December 29, 1601, from the courtier Dudley Carleton to John Chamberlain, in which he reports that

The Queen dined to-day privately at my Lord Chamberlain's. I have just come from the Blackfriars, where I saw her at the play with all her *candidae auditrices* [fair attendants]. Mrs Nevill, who played her prizes, and bore the belle away in the Prince de Amour's revels, is sworn maid of honour; Sir Robt. Sydney is in chase to make her foreswear both maid and honour.²⁸

The reference here to “the Blackfriars” might possibly be to the Blackfriars playhouse. In 1601 this was a so-called “private” indoor playhouse, catering to more select audiences for a higher admission price than did the open-air playhouses, and all performances there were by a company of boy players. At the very most,

this letter reveals Elizabeth attending a private, exclusive playhouse performance of a quite different nature from those open to the general public at the Globe and its neighboring playhouses for which Shakespeare principally wrote. However, the reference to “the Blackfriars” may not be to the playhouse at all but simply to the Blackfriars area, where the Lord Chamberlain’s house was situated. In this case the play at which Carleton saw Elizabeth would have been even more private and exclusive, performed in the Lord Chamberlain’s house after dinner, and the performers might have been the company that bore the host’s name as their patron, the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, Shakespeare’s company. If so, Elizabeth did not visit the playhouse on this occasion, but she might have seen Shakespeare act, or he might have been present while she watched one of his plays. Alternatively, the play might have been a performance by Elizabeth’s own ladies, as suggested by the slightly cryptic reference in the next sentence to the maid-of-honor Mrs. Nevill, who “bore the belle away in the Prince de Amour’s revels”;²⁹ or the “play” might have been not drama but gambling, another favorite court pastime.³⁰ Carleton’s 1601 letter, then, is an ambiguous piece of evidence and at most describes a private occasion on which Shakespeare might have been one of the performers before the Queen.

It is of course much more likely that Shakespeare would have seen Elizabeth than that she would have knowingly seen him. London, although growing rapidly, was still a relatively small city by modern standards, with a population of around 200,000, and it was not unusual for the Queen to be seen by her metropolitan subjects.³¹ Large crowds turned out to see her as she departed upon and returned from her summer progresses each year.³² Shakespeare would almost certainly have seen Elizabeth making use of the Thames, London’s principal thoroughfare, both for business and pleasure; indeed, the ornate royal barge was kept near to the playhouses.³³ After he officially became a gentleman, a holder of a family coat-of-arms, in 1596, he would have been entitled to enter any of the Queen’s London palaces on a Sunday to see the royal procession to chapel and the ceremonial laying of the royal dinner that was enacted while the Queen was at prayer.³⁴ These and other occasions when Elizabeth made public appearances would have been marked by impressive spectacle and ritual, and Shakespeare may well have found himself in the audience of the living theatre of sixteenth-century monarchy. It is extremely unlikely, though, that anything that we might term a meeting with the Queen would have taken place on such an occasion.

Earlier in Shakespeare’s life there were several times when Elizabeth’s summer progresses took her near to his home town of Stratford-upon-Avon. In 1570, when William was just six years old, she stayed overnight at Charlecote Park, seat of Sir Thomas Lucy, four miles northeast of Stratford.³⁵ Four years later, the annual

royal progress came to Warwick, only eight miles from Stratford; and in 1575, as mentioned above, Elizabeth visited Kenilworth Castle, seat of the Earl of Leicester, twelve miles from Stratford, for the celebrated entertainments known as the Princely Pleasures. On any of these occasions Shakespeare and his family may have joined the crowds who turned out to see the Queen. Of course, we do not know whether Shakespeare saw Elizabeth at any of these events, and if he did, it would only have been from a distance.

This comprises the generally accepted historical evidence for a meeting between Shakespeare and Elizabeth. It is scanty and inconclusive, leaving us with some rather tenuous possibilities but no proof either way. There have been various further hypotheses: Leslie Hotson, for instance, contended that *Twelfth Night* was commissioned for and performed at a court occasion, and James Shapiro believes that part of the published epilogue to *Henry IV Part 2* and another anonymous epilogue might be speeches Shakespeare wrote and delivered in person to the Queen.³⁶ However, these are individual interpretations of evidence and continuing subjects of debate, so the proper place to discuss them will be chapter 4, when we look at the role of Elizabeth in later readings of Shakespeare's works.

What Did Shakespeare Think of Elizabeth? The Literary Evidence ☞

Many critics have turned to Shakespeare's works to seek evidence of his feelings toward Elizabeth. There are several places where we can be reasonably sure that he is referring directly to her. These include Oberon's vision in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as discussed above; a reference to the owner of Windsor Castle in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (5.5.57); the mention in *Henry V* of "our gracious Empress" (5.0.30); and the "mortal moon" in Sonnet 107. Overall, the number of reasonably certain references to Elizabeth in Shakespeare's oeuvre is relatively small, in an age when many writers were competing with each other to celebrate their monarch in ever more extravagant terms as Gloriana, Cynthia, Diana, Astraea, and so on. John Lyly, for instance, as mentioned above, wrote plays for the court which centered on allegorical figures of Elizabeth. However, there are many more places in Shakespeare's writings where critics have detected supposed allusions to the Queen which are concealed or indirect. It has been proposed at various times that Cleopatra, or Gertrude, or the cross-dressing heroines in the comedies, or many other Shakespearean figures might reflect aspects of Elizabeth.

Critics have varied widely in the deductions that they make from these materials, and even from Shakespeare's more explicit references to Elizabeth, about the

playwright's attitude to his monarch. Some have compiled evidence from his works to demonstrate that Shakespeare was a fervent admirer of the Queen; others have found evidence of dissent and subversion. One of the most contentious cases is *Richard II*: since the mid-nineteenth century, debate has raged as to whether it was the play performed to entertain the conspirators on the eve of the Essex Rebellion in 1601 and whether Shakespeare was involved in this apparently seditious performance. Moreover, at least one putative appearance by Elizabeth in Shakespeare's works—one which includes extensive comment upon the Queen and her reign—simply dissolves in our grasp when subjected to scholarly scrutiny. This is the climactic scene of *Henry VIII*, written in collaboration with John Fletcher in 1612–13, when the baby princess Elizabeth is being christened. Her godfather, Archbishop Cranmer, is seized by prophetic inspiration and eloquently sets forth a vision of the peace and plenty that will be brought to England by her rule (5.4.14–62). A. L. Rowse wrote in 1963 that “It is this that gave Shakespeare the opportunity to round off his life's work with that tribute to her he had not written when she died in 1603, and to sum up for us what he thought of the Elizabethan age now forever over.”³⁷ Other critics have stressed the ambivalences and troubling undertones in the speech, but in any case, most textual scholars of the play believe this scene to be by John Fletcher.³⁸ Far from being Shakespeare's final celebration of Elizabeth, it was probably not even written by him. Overall, the kinds of evidence to be found in Shakespeare's plays and poems are tantalizingly mobile and elusive, and tend to reinforce whatever preconceptions about Shakespeare's relationship with Elizabeth were brought to the text by each reader as shaped by the ideological positions of these particular individuals and their particular cultural and historical contexts.

Two comments from Shakespeare's contemporaries on his relations with the Queen are worth mentioning. Shakespeare, as Rowse observes above, did not publish an elegy for Elizabeth on her death in 1603, and this was noticed at the time by the poet Henry Chettle. In *England's Mourning Garment* he summoned fellow authors to lament the Queen, and upbraided those who had failed to do so, including “Melicert”:

Nor doth the silver tonged *Melicert*,
 Drop from his honied muse one sable teare
 To mourne her death that graced his desert,
 And to his laies open her Royall eare.
 Shepherd remember our *Elizabeth*,
 And sing her Rape, done by that *Tarquin*, Death.³⁹

Melicert is clearly Shakespeare, as we can tell not only from the allusion to *The Rape of Lucrece* but also from the reference to Shakespeare's renowned honeyed sweetness of style; Francis Meres, for instance, had recently praised "mellifluous & honytongued *Shakespeare*" for his "sugred Sonnets."⁴⁰ Some later writers have emphasized Chettle's assertion that Elizabeth "graced his desert," regarding this as evidence that Shakespeare received public and personal favor from the Queen.⁴¹ Others have drawn attention to Shakespeare's silence on this occasion, seeing this as a sign that he was no great admirer of Elizabeth and had no wish to express sorrow at her death.⁴²

Seven years after Shakespeare's own death, Ben Jonson wrote in his prefatory verses for the 1623 First Folio of Shakespeare's works:

Sweet Swan of *Avon!* what a sight it were
To see thee in our waters yet appeare,
And make those flights upon the bankes of *Thames*,
That so did take *Eliza*, and our *James!*⁴³

Again this is open to diverse interpretations: Jonson may be merely referring to the fact that a number of Shakespeare's plays were performed before Elizabeth, corroborating the other evidence for this; or he may be implying that Elizabeth bestowed direct and knowing personal patronage upon Shakespeare; or he may be merely aggrandizing his dead friend.

I have only briefly indicated here the competing and contradictory interpretations of these passages from Shakespeare and contemporary observers; in chapter 4 I will explore in more detail the fascinating history of readings that find allusions to Elizabeth in Shakespeare's works. The main point to make here, as with the historical evidence for contact between Shakespeare and Elizabeth, is that the contemporary literary materials are brief, fragmentary, and ambiguous. Nevertheless, these scattered pieces have formed the foundation of a rich and enduring double myth. We need to investigate why this might be.

Why Do We Want Shakespeare and Elizabeth to Meet? Sexuality, Class, Nationhood ☞

Shakespeare and Elizabeth, each an icon individually, have had even more power as a joint icon. The creation of Shakespeare's posthumous fame from the early eighteenth century onward was partly dependent upon the idea that he was patronized by the glamorous Good Queen Bess, redoubtable defender of the nation.

On the other side, the posthumous glory accruing to Elizabeth as one of the most notable of English monarchs was partly dependent upon the idea that she recognized and cultivated the genius of Shakespeare. Their notional mutual esteem has been instrumental in constructing an idealized Elizabethan golden age which later ages have viewed with nostalgic pleasure and have deployed to help construct myths of their own origin and identity.

The Shakespeare-and-Elizabeth scenario works for a variety of reasons. In the first place, it has piqued the curiosity of after-ages for the simple reason that she was a woman and he was a man. Some literary critics, especially since the advent of new historicism in the 1980s, have been interested in the nature of Shakespeare's patronage relations with James I once his company became the King's Men, and what this might imply about the relations between drama and power.⁴⁴ However, there has been far more effort to locate references to Elizabeth in Shakespeare's works, and beyond the academy there has been little interest in possible meetings between the playwright and James I, even though James was on the throne for nearly half of Shakespeare's career. An imagined encounter between Shakespeare and Elizabeth, in view of the reputation they have each enjoyed for a highly quotable way with words, offers far more opportunity for witty repartee, and also for flirtation. Elizabeth was nearly thirty years Shakespeare's senior, but, given that she is well known to have had a string of favorites, this has not deterred writers from depicting her as a coquette who views Shakespeare with the gaze of a connoisseur of virile young men. After all, her last favorite, Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, was a year younger than Shakespeare. The presumed affair between Elizabeth and Essex was romanticized in scandalous "secret histories" of the late seventeenth century, and this tradition has persisted through Lytton Strachey's dual biography *Elizabeth and Essex* (1928) and on into recent historical fiction and screen dramas. Many versions of Shakespeare's relationship with his Queen place him in a similar role, as a witty and attractive young sparring partner who enflames the interest of the mature but passionate Queen.

Nevertheless, in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century versions of their encounter, warm interest and flirtatious repartee is as far as any sexual relationship goes. Desire is titillatingly implied while being contained within safe boundaries. Indeed, constructing Shakespeare and Elizabeth as a romantic but chaste couple was often a means of regularizing their sexuality, which in each case presented challenges to the respectable bourgeois morality that was increasingly promoted through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Shakespeare's unfortunate sexual history included a hasty wedding at eighteen to a pregnant older woman, rumors of dalliances with female playgoers and innkeepers' wives, and a sequence of sonnets that expressed

passion for both a fair young man and a promiscuous dark lady. Elizabeth as Virgin Queen was troublingly anomalous in relation to the Protestant middle-class celebration of matrimony and was surrounded from her own lifetime onward by murky rumors of her affairs with favorites or of her freakish hermaphroditism. Ben Jonson, for instance, gossiped that “she had a membrana on her, which made her incapable of man, though for her delight she tried many,” while her Principal Secretary Sir Robert Cecil remarked after her death that “she was more than a man, and in troth, sometimes less than a woman.”⁴⁵ Bringing Shakespeare and Elizabeth together in a devoted but unconsummated pairing, a kind of Neoplatonic courtly love, cleaned up and straightened out both their public images.

Studies of nationalism have placed increasing emphasis upon iconographies of sexuality.⁴⁶ Normative icons of patriarchal masculinity and maternal femininity, radiant with virtue and stripped of sexuality, have often been deployed in various periods and cultures as symbols of national identity. Many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century versions of Shakespeare and Elizabeth conformed to this model. Michael Dobson has found that although Shakespeare and his works were invoked to stir up the virility of British manhood, the representation of the Bard himself was often paradoxically sexless and even disembodied. Meanwhile, the chastely affectionate patronage that he supposedly received from Elizabeth was used to certify his sexual virtue.⁴⁷

Since the early twentieth century, however, there has been increasing attraction to the different kinds of queerness which both Shakespeare and Elizabeth personify—he because of the strong indications of homoerotic feelings in his writings, she because of her position as a woman in a man’s role. Modern fictions have responded to this double ambiguity to depict Shakespeare and Elizabeth as involved in complex merry-go-rounds of unorthodox sexual couplings involving other partners as well as each other. Both of them are sexual enigmas who may be imagined as indulging in secret and scandalous passions behind their public masks, and this has become a large part of their fascination. They can be deployed, then, as subversive rather than normative figures.

The erotic charge of the imagined encounter between Shakespeare and Elizabeth is intensified by the transgression of the invisible boundary between monarch and commoner. Shakespeare was a tradesman’s son from rural Stratford-upon-Avon, plying his trade among the brothels and bear pits of Bankside. A large part of his continuing appeal is founded on the idea that he may have been a genius but he was also “one of us,” a man of the people, writing for groundlings and speaking timeless truths to us across the centuries. It has been felt that he shares and understands our common humanity. By contrast, a large part of Elizabeth’s glamor is her

regality, those bejeweled farthingales and headdresses, her position at the apex of a glittering and adoring court. Yet part of the historical myth of each has also been a certain class mobility. From his humble origins, Shakespeare ascended to see his plays performed at court and posthumously achieved a kind of literary divinity: Schoenbaum wrote of him, “Thus did the grammar-school product in whose veins no blue blood coursed stray into the vestibule of power.”⁴⁸ Elizabeth, meanwhile, spent much of her youth as an outcast, branded a bastard by her father and imprisoned for treason by her sister, and this enabled her to enhance her queenship with protestations of her affection for and kinship with the common people of her realm. She asserted more than once that she would rather be a milkmaid than a queen and said, “I am indeed endued with such qualities that if I were turned out of the realm in my petticoat, I were able to live in any place of Christendom.”⁴⁹ Thus the Queen and the playwright have each, in their different ways, personified democratic values, of a kind which came to be associated with Englishness, then Britishness, then with American national ideals. We may see the imagined encounters between them as dramatizing these democratic values: to make them meet in legend, either Shakespeare must be taken to court or Elizabeth must descend to the stage of the commercial playhouse, as in *Shakespeare in Love* and numerous earlier fictions. The scene is a fantasy of the temporary dissolution of class boundaries, and for class-conscious cultures this has given it a magical resonance and intensity.

In fact, the history of such class-defying iconography reaches back to Shakespeare’s and Elizabeth’s own time and beyond. The Elizabethans loved stories which fantasized meetings between kings or queens and commoners. Themes of their history plays and ballads included, for instance, Richard Lionheart in disguise feasting on venison with Robin Hood and his merry men, then pardoning them, thus foxing the wicked Sheriff of Nottingham, or Henry II rewarding a miller for his rustic hospitality by knighting him.⁵⁰ The pleasure of such tales seems to have lain in the belief that, if monarch and subject could meet directly, bypassing self-interested aristocrats and corrupt officers of the law, they would find mutual goodwill, good humor, affection, and understanding. The king was shown to be simply a man at heart; the commoner was allowed to feel special and individual enough to converse with a king. Imagined meetings between Shakespeare and Elizabeth may be seen as a persistence of this kind of folklore. The meeting of their two myths involves the meeting of two different social and cultural worlds, both of which are thereby shown to be founded on shared values of wit, improvisation, and generosity of spirit.

This set of values has often been claimed as the essence of Britishness. Nation formation has clearly been another crucial factor in the developing iconography of

Shakespeare and Elizabeth, and this process frequently depends upon an idealized and even fabricated vision of the past: as Ernest Renan wrote in 1882, “getting its history wrong is part of being a nation.”⁵¹ Inventing a meeting or relationship between Shakespeare and Elizabeth has been one significant form in which Britain and other Anglophone nations have purposefully got history wrong in the pursuit of national identity. For the English, from the eighteenth century onward, the depiction of Shakespeare and Elizabeth presiding harmoniously over a nostalgically recalled “merrie England” was instrumental in the self-definition of the nation as democratic, divinely sanctioned, and innately civilized. Following the Act of Union in 1707, which joined Scotland with England and Wales in a United Kingdom of Great Britain ruled from London, the idea of “Englishness” came to be frequently elided with the idea of “Britishness,” and the values represented by the double myth of Shakespeare and Elizabeth became symbolic of a British identity disseminated not only throughout the United Kingdom, by authors like Sir Walter Scott (a Scot who enthusiastically enhanced the Shakespeare and Elizabeth myth in his 1821 novel *Kenilworth*), but also throughout the burgeoning British Empire.

Adrian Hastings, a historian of nationalism, writes that in the development of nationhood “by far the most important and widely present factor is that of an extensively used vernacular literature.” In short, a nation is “normally identified by a literature of its own.”⁵² Shakespeare’s works, as unquestionably the most “extensively used” in the English language, have played a crucial role in the construction of not only English and British national identity but that of other Anglophone nations too. In America, Shakespeare grew in prominence through the nineteenth century as an English-speaking cultural elite strove to impose a unified national identity upon the polyglot diversity created by immigration.⁵³ Moreover, the Shakespeare-and-Elizabeth pairing was increasingly appropriated for myths of the origins of the American nation. One American, John S. Jenkins, writing in 1851, voiced an enthusiastic admiration for the British imperial success of which Shakespeare and Elizabeth had become personifications: “In her reign, the great stars of literature shone, and England, from a second-rate kingdom, began the splendid career by which, at this hour, she boasts an eighth of the habitable globe, forty colonies, and a seventh of the world’s population, or one hundred and eighty million subjects.”⁵⁴ Such admiration turned to appropriation and transcendence as Americans began to lay claim to Shakespeare and Elizabeth as progenitors of their own national ideals and aspirations. Peter Markoe, an American poet, wrote as early as 1787 that the Bard was no longer the exclusive property of Britain: “Shakespeare’s bold spirit seeks our western shore.”⁵⁵ The age of Shakespeare and Elizabeth, after all, was the age of exploration and colonization, when bold adventurers

whose spirit they supposedly shared eagerly set sail for the west to found a new nation. Charles William Wallace enunciated this view of history in a lecture of 1914: “England in the days of good Queen Bess was only young America in the buoyant heedlessness and lawlessness of childhood in chasing over all obstacles after the purse at the end of the rainbow.” Men looked west for “infinite possibilities” of wealth, idealism, and self-fulfilment, and “into this age and of it were Shakespeare and America born.”⁵⁶ Metaphorically, then, Shakespeare and America were twins born to their mother Elizabeth; or, to configure the metaphorical family slightly differently, Shakespeare and Elizabeth were the proud parents of the American Dream.

The myth of a meeting between Shakespeare and Elizabeth may be compared with another mythical encounter from the Tudor period, the supposed meeting between Elizabeth and Mary Queen of Scots. This encounter, too, though frequently depicted by creative writers and visual artists, is unrecorded in documentary history. Jayne Elizabeth Lewis has written of how versions of the imagined meeting between Elizabeth and Mary supplement history to give us something that we yearn to think might have happened, a scenario that satisfies complex desires: they “tear the veil that customarily divides fact from fantasy, wish from fulfilment.”⁵⁷ Imagined meetings between Shakespeare and Elizabeth may likewise be thought of as a wish-fulfilling fantasy and as giving us access to the dream life of the cultures which produced them. The Elizabeth-and-Mary encounter has produced an enduring iconographical tradition because the reputations of the two queens lend themselves to the personification of intellect versus romance, Machiavellian calculation versus reckless adventurousness, androgyny versus femininity: in essence, head versus heart.⁵⁸ The pairing of Shakespeare and Elizabeth may appear to differ in that they often personify complementary rather than opposing values: masculinity and femininity; a man who loves men and a woman with male qualities; a kingly commoner and a queen with the common touch; a writer who understands human nature and a ruler who understands her people. However, they have been used to represent antagonisms too. In some versions of their encounter, stress is laid upon their age difference. In such works Elizabeth is characterized as decaying, capricious, and tyrannical, the personification of a defunct feudal past, whereas Shakespeare, humble and underappreciated in his own age, awaits the recognition of posterity. He is imagined as a progressive thinker, a man of the people and of the future. In American works in this vein, it is Shakespeare alone who inspires those looking to the west and founds the American Dream, overcoming restrictions and obstacles imposed by the backward-looking Elizabeth. In recent Shakespeare criticism, their relationship has been reconfigured again, with

Shakespeare pictured as a Catholic or at least a Catholic sympathizer, siding with those who sought to preserve the old faith and its traditions in the face of Elizabeth's cruel persecutions. Shakespeare and Elizabeth, then, can personify either complementary or opposing values of many different kinds, and this adaptability to the iconographical needs of different periods and national cultures is surely a significant ingredient in the persistence of their double myth.

Meetings of the two myths of Shakespeare and Elizabeth have been numerous and multifarious. Not all could be included here for reasons of space, but my aim has been to give a broad sample of their range and variety, while tracing significant trends and pointing out influential interventions. The ensuing chapters are organized partly by chronology and partly by thematic and generic concerns. Chapter 1 charts the presence of Elizabeth in Shakespearean materials of eighteenth-century Britain, from Rowe's biography in 1709 to the Ireland forgeries in 1795, and the shifting roles which she plays in these materials. Chapter 2 surveys the development of the double myth in nineteenth-century Britain, through more Shakespeare biographies and forgeries but also in the burgeoning genres of historical fiction, drama, and painting, where the encounter between Shakespeare and Elizabeth takes on new meanings as the British Empire expands and in the context of comparisons between Elizabeth and Queen Victoria. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 then deal with particular trends in the double myth from the nineteenth century to the present. Chapter 3 is a short bridging chapter which brings American appropriations and adaptations of the double myth into the story; from this point on, American as well as British materials are treated. Chapter 4 examines the many and various invocations of Elizabeth in literary-critical interpretation of Shakespeare's works. Chapter 5 considers Elizabeth's role in the Shakespeare authorship controversy, where she has featured as Shakespeare's mother or lover, or has even merged with him to be proposed as the true author of his works. Chapter 6 concentrates on twentieth-century fictions, charting the emergence of many different Shakespeares and Elizabeths in novels, plays, television dramas, and films, and seeking to place these in context. To conclude, the epilogue considers the continuing and creative evolution of the double myth since the year 2000 and asks what kinds of encounters Shakespeare and Elizabeth might enjoy in years to come.

We will almost certainly never know whether Shakespeare and Elizabeth met in real life. However, we can be sure that they have met many times, across the centuries, in books, pictures, plays, and films, and in the minds of the makers and audiences of these artefacts. This book aims to convey a sense of the richness and creative diversity of those encounters, and to investigate why it is that Shakespeare and Elizabeth keep on meeting, again and again.