

‘As I am a free prince’: The Epistolary Self-deceptions of James VI¹

Abstract: James VI of Scotland was adamant in his writings about his divine right and his attendant freedom from interference from temporal authorities. Yet in his long epistolary relationship with Elizabeth I of England we see instead a struggle to reconcile his perceived rights as a ‘free prince’ and the practical realities of his dependence on Elizabeth for financial and political support, as well as political advice.

In the tensions that flared up along the Border in 1596–97, only a year before the publication of The True Law of Free Monarchies, James struggled to reconcile his dependence on Elizabeth with his status as a free prince with Elizabeth’s demands for satisfaction over the invasion of Carlisle Castle. His letters demonstrate his concern with his status as a free prince, yet at the same time cede to Elizabeth the right to judge him and his subjects, and to hold him accountable – a right that, by James’s own beliefs, ought to belong solely to God.

Key words: - James VI, Elizabeth I, Succession, Requests, Letters, Divine right

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I mean always of such free monarchies as our king is, and not of elective kings [...] whose aristocratic and limited government is nothing like to free monarchies...

–The True Law of Free Monarchies²

Introduction

Well known for his deep-seated belief in the divine right of kings, James VI of Scotland was insistent throughout his reign and his written works that he was answerable for his actions to none but God, and none but God had the right to judge or punish him or to hold him accountable. In the True Law of Free Monarchies (1598) he wrote:

betwixt the king and his people, God is doubtless the only judge [...]. Then since God is the only judge between the two parties contractors, the cognition and revenge must only appertain to him. It follows, therefore, of necessity that God must first give sentence upon the king.³

A monarch, once duly anointed, owed his duty and care to his people, but his obedience only to God. James frequently restated this position, identifying himself in his writings as a 'free prince'. Yet throughout his life James was anything but free: he was instead at the mercy of the machinations of a series of regents and favourites who served their own interests, as well as involved or implicated in plots, scandals and skirmishes.

While James's actual freedom to be self-determining both as king and as an individual is open for debate, the effective limitations placed on James by political circumstance restricted his ability to act in such a way. In his relationship with his cousin Elizabeth Tudor, James's perception of his own 'free' status was particularly troubled. By reading through a few particularly tense moments in his correspondence with Elizabeth I – who frequently acted to curtail his actions – we can begin to shed some light on the ways in which James reconciled his desire for self-determination with the practical limitations of his position.

This essay reads the way James's correspondence with Elizabeth I attempted to navigate his self-perceived freedom. Through a series of epistolary acts, James iterated a right to

² James VI and I, The True Law of Free Monarchies and Basilikon Doron, Tudor and Stuart Texts (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 1996), 72.

³ James VI and I, The True Law, 79.

sovereign self-determination in his correspondence, but James's status as a free prince was effectively undermined by the authority which Elizabeth so frequently exercised over her godson and his kingdom, or simply with her interference in Scottish affairs.⁴ James's repeated insistence that he was indeed a free prince in the face of Elizabeth's influence reads as an act of self-deception played out through his correspondence with his godmother. Focusing on James's exchanges with Elizabeth and his requests for the payment of his annuity through 1596–97, when yet another Border skirmish fuelled tensions on both sides, this essay reads James's rhetorical self-presentations through Erasmus's advice on petitioning letters, which James variously imitated and rejected, effectively supporting and undermining his claimed status as a free prince.

Over a correspondence that lasted from James's adolescence to Elizabeth's death in 1603, the two monarchs exchanged dozens of letters, both personal and political in nature. Many of the letters are autograph, rather than written by secretaries, seeming to indicate a strong degree of epistolary intimacy between these two sovereigns⁵ The relationship between James and Elizabeth was constantly negotiated through their letters, messengers, ambassadors and actions with regards to the other or the other's concerns. Each was anxious to keep their realms at peace as they faced foreign foes, while nevertheless maintaining their own sovereign independence. With the English succession at stake and with the threat of a Catholic interference in Britain, the alliances between England and Scotland were vital to both sides.

For James in particular, his independence and his status as a free prince were key concerns for a monarch who was adamant about the naturalness of divine right. Yet Elizabeth constantly interfered in the affairs of the crown of Scotland, first with the choice of regents, the Ruthven raid and the execution of Mary Stuart in 1587. Despite these obvious intrusions on his rights and sovereignty, James persisted in insisting on his own independence in the face of Elizabeth's actions. Nevertheless, each time Elizabeth interfered, she effectively pointed out to James his dependence both on her goodwill and on her treasury and that he was not the 'free prince' he claimed to be. In this way, every time Elizabeth demonstrated her influence over affairs in Scotland, James was made aware on a deep level of his dependence on another, more powerful – and fundamentally freer – prince. Every attempt of James's to secure assurances of political support, financial support, or his eventual right to

⁴ Rayne Allinson, *A Monarchy of Letters: Royal Correspondence and English Diplomacy in the Reign of Elizabeth I* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 167–8, 174ff,

⁵ G.P.V. Akrigg lists over 65 letters written from James to Elizabeth over the course of their correspondence and a similar from Elizabeth to James (*The Letters of James VI & I* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 457–528).

the throne of England was undermined by the fact that Elizabeth had what James needed, and, in needing something from her, he was not as 'sovereign' as he would have liked to believe he was.⁶

'Kings were the authors and makers of the laws'⁷

The fact that he ascended the Scottish throne at scarcely thirteen months of age effectively meant that James could never remember a time when he was not a king. His kingship was an essential part of his identity and he firmly believed that he held the crown by divine right. As Jenny Wormald notes, the matter of the king's education was one of great concern to those who had care of him, leading to George Buchanan, 'one of the greatest scholars of Europe', being appointed as James's tutor. Alan Stewart recounts one instance where Buchanan punished James's insolence and mockery with a severe whipping, which caused the Countess of Mar to come running to soothe the King. On hearing that James had been whipped, 'she turned on Buchanan, asking how he dared "put his hand on the Lord's anointed?" Buchanan replied, calmly: "Madam, I have whipped his arse, you may kiss it if you please". Here we have James's insistence that he, as King, is beyond Buchanan's power [...] and the painful realisation that his supposed kingly immunity, in fact, does not exist'.⁸ This is early lesson that Stewart points to – the practical absence of 'kingly immunity' – is precisely the anxiety that raises its head in James's attempted to reaffirm his freedom from interference in his letters.

James was, perhaps as a by-product of his education, a prolific author, penning, among many: poems, speeches, a guide for the education of a prince, another for the identification of witches, as well as other political and theological treatises. Among these, James was also an active writer of letters, as a man in his position must necessarily have been. Many of his letters are extant either in original or copy, including a number of letters to his wife, Anne of

⁶ Jenny Wormald notes that 'The shattering of the religious unity of the west, and the developing idea of the 'nation-state', meant that the power of the secular ruler was, at least in theory, immeasurably enhanced, as heads of individual states and leaders of reform or defenders of the old faith. In practice, it forced bizarre choices onto rulers; Elizabeth, while strenuously upholding royal authority in England, supported the Netherlands against their lawful ruler in the 1580s, as she had the Scots in 1560 and after 1567. It also forced a radical re-assessment of royal authority by those who were threatened by it' (*Court, Kirk, and Community: Scotland, 1470–1625* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 150).

For further discussion of the relationship and correspondence between James and Elizabeth and on the question of the English succession, see: Akrigg, *The Letters of James VI & I*; Allinson, *A Monarchy of Letters*; David M. Bergeron, *King James & Letters of Homoerotic Desire* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 1999); Susan Doran, 'James VI and the English Succession', in Ralph Houlbrooke (ed.), *James VI and I: Ideas, Authority, and Government* (Aldershot, Hants; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 25–43; Alan Stewart, *The Cradle King : A Life of James VI and I* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2003).

⁷ James VI and I, *The True Law*, 69.

⁸ Stewart, *The Cradle King*, 44.

Denmark, his favourite, George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, his children, as well as many of his letters to his cousin and fellow prince, Elizabeth I of England, which letters are the focus of this study.⁹ Alan Stewart and Heather Wolfe have noted that ‘Monarchs very rarely wrote entire letters in their own hands. Especially in international correspondence with fellow sovereigns, English kings and queens almost always employed a highly educated secretary to pen official documents’, yet one of the interesting aspects of the James-Elizabeth correspondence is the very number of letters written in the monarchs’ own hands.¹⁰

Elizabeth, on the other hand, came to the throne having survived the turbulent reigns of her father, her brother, her cousin and her sister. Unwilling to be subject to anyone (as she would have been to a husband who would also have become king and therefore have superseded her), she instead spent much of her reign establishing her persona as the ‘Virgin Queen’. She nonetheless considered a number of matrimonial alliances throughout the first half of her reign, but when marriage negotiations with ‘Monsieur’, the Duke d’Alençon, ended in 1581, Elizabeth, then forty-five, was likely to be too old to bear children.¹¹ For the next two decades the question of the queen’s heir was hotly contested, with James often considered a favourite. Elizabeth had further been supporting James financially since the early 1580s, but in her letters to James, Elizabeth is careful not to commit to anything in writing about the succession, however often or far James pushed the matter.¹²

By the time of the first extant personal letters between James and Elizabeth in the late 1570s, Elizabeth’s position on the throne was relatively stable. While Spain continued to be a concern throughout the 1590s, Elizabeth had managed to find a relatively secure position on her throne, generally maintaining her control over the government and the Church, as

⁹ See Akrigg, *The Letters of James VI & I*; Allinson, *A Monarchy of Letters*; Bergeron, *King James & Letters of Homoerotic Desire*.

¹⁰ Alan Stewart and Heather Wolfe, *Letterwriting in Renaissance England* (Washington, DC: Folger Shakespeare Library, 2004), 55.

¹¹ See Janel Mueller, “‘To My Very Good Brother the King of Scots’: Elizabeth I’s Correspondence With James VI and the Question of Succession”, *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 115:5 (2000), 1063–71; eadem, ‘The Correspondence of Queen Elizabeth I and King James VI’, last modified 2004, <http://fathom.lib.uchicago.edu/1/777777122584/>, as well as Susan Doran’s comprehensive discussion of Elizabeth’s suitors in *Monarchy and Matrimony: The Courtships of Elizabeth I* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), and especially chapter 8, ‘The Underlying Debate’.

¹² Mueller notes, ‘She regarded any such explicitness as a colossal piece of political folly that endangered the incumbent and the designated successors alike—in the first instance, by opening up alternative rallying-points for disaffected subjects; in the second, by casting a designated successor as an arch-rival to the person then ruling’ (‘The Correspondence of Queen Elizabeth I and King James VI’). Allinson adds, however, that ‘despite her artful dodging, Elizabeth was eventually compelled to write to James in more explicit terms regarding his place in the succession, promising an annual pension of £4,000 and that ‘in the woord of a Quene’ she would not allow his due right / and title to be hindered’, *A Monarchy of Letters*, 177–8.

well as strengthening foreign ties with other Protestant countries. At the same time, James struggled to find his own way as king, manipulated by a line of regents and a Kirk that was pursuing its own agenda.¹³ He lacked Elizabeth's experience and entered into the epistolary relationship at a disadvantage: writing to a fellow monarch who was older, more experienced and more powerful than he was, and who had been holding his mother captive since 1568. The question of the succession remained crucial throughout these decades, and James seems to have been keeping this ultimate goal in mind throughout his dealings with Elizabeth.

The education that James and Elizabeth received would have been a traditionally humanist one, forming them both as accomplished and articulate writers.¹⁴ Along with their contemporaries, they would have been schooled in the liberal arts, which would have included learning to write letters almost as early as they could write. Alan Stewart and Heather Wolfe note that 'It is debatable just how much influence this 'epistolography' or epistolary theory had on the actual writing of letters, but it is beyond doubt that most educated men would have been exposed to these texts, since they formed an integral part of a grammar school education'.¹⁵ Letters survive by both James and Elizabeth from about the age of ten: James wrote to the Countess of Mar in Scottish and to George Buchanan in Latin; Elizabeth wrote to her stepmother Katherine Parr in Italian. These letters are exercises not only in the genre, but in the development of the relationship between parent and child.¹⁶ They would have both been familiar with the ideals of humanist letter-writing and particularly with Erasmus's *Opus de conscribendis epistolis* (1522), the most reprinted epistolary manual of the period. In that treatise, he instructed the letter-writer on how to attempt to gain a benefit or favour from the recipient and simultaneously to present the writer in as sympathetic a manner as possible. That is, an author must make it as easy as possible for the recipient to grant that request and the request must be within that one's power to grant.¹⁷

Erasmus recommended that in seeking to persuade, a letter-writer should use 'every means to [...] secure the good will of the person of whom we are making a difficult request', reminding the addressee of past kindnesses and services, both given and received; 'that we

¹³ See Wormald, *Court, Kirk, and Community*, chapters 9 & 10.

¹⁴ Stewart, *The Cradle King*, 42–5.

¹⁵ Stewart and Wolfe, *Letterwriting in Renaissance England*, 21.

¹⁶ Susan Fitzmaurice, *The Familiar Letter in Early Modern English* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2002), 233.

¹⁷ See, for example: James Daybell, 'Scripting a Female Voice: Women's Epistolary Rhetoric in Sixteenth-Century Letters of Petition', *Women's Writing* 13:1 (2006), 3–22; Lynne Magnusson, 'A Rhetoric of Requests: Genre and Linguistic Scripts in Elizabethan Women Suitors' Letters' in James Daybell (ed.), *Women and Politics in Early Modern England, 1450–1700* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), 51–66; Frank Whigham, 'The Rhetoric of Elizabethan Suitors' Letters', *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 96:5 (1981), 864–82.

wish the ties that exist between us, already very strong on many accounts, to become stronger still'. He further insisted that the letter-writer should express devotion to, affection for, and confidence in the addressee; that he should demonstrate ancestral and familial relationships and bonds; and while undermining the suit of his rivals, he should establish the honour and justness of his own request. The final part of the letter should offer remembrance, gratitude, and promise of future repayment in reciprocation of the favour if granted.¹⁸ Erasmus encouraged a petitioner to point out 'that just as there is no one to whom we would more gladly be indebted [than] to him, to whom we owe everything, so no one would find it easier to grant our request' and that if 'there is an element of disadvantage which may make him less favourably inclined, we shall either resolve it, or make little of it'.¹⁹

At the same time, Erasmus maintained that the writer must construct the addressee as one who is both willing and able to grant the request and in whose best interest it is to do so. A successful request, therefore, is one that can be granted, by the person of whom it is requested, for the benefit of the one who requested it. Erasmus noted similar conditions for the making and granting of a request: 'since the nature of the things we ask for varies, and since there is a great variety in the persons who make and receive the requests, the method of asking should vary too. [...] When the motive is one that is likely to win favour, we shall openly suggest that what we request be granted; when it is otherwise, we shall use an indirect approach in making the request'.²⁰ A request – however 'just' or 'right' – depended for its success entirely on the feelings and attitudes of the one of whom the request is being made. An error in judgment or a failure to mitigate the imposition of the request on the part of the petitioner can doom the possible success of the petition from the outset. It becomes vital to the success of a petition, then, that a letter-writer correctly surmise what position of reception will be most beneficial to the successful outcome of the petition. It would be reasonable to expect, therefore, both James and Elizabeth to have been familiar with Erasmian petitioning strategies, and, more generally, with the expectations surrounding the correct formulation of letters. Nevertheless, James's concern with his right to act unimpeded could overrule his training in humanistic letter-writing, as slights – both real and imagined – turned him peevish against the threat to his image of himself as a 'free prince'

Negotiating Family: Kinship and Kinship

James and Elizabeth were bound together through family ties as well as politics. Elizabeth was James's godmother, but her grandfather, Henry VII was James's great-great

¹⁸ Desiderius Erasmus, *De conscribendis epistolis* trans. Charles Fantazzi in *Collected Works of Erasmus: Vol. 25* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 173.

¹⁹ Erasmus, *De conscribendis epistolis*, 173.

²⁰ Erasmus, *De conscribendis epistolis*, 172–3.

grandfather, making them first cousins, once removed and giving James a legitimate claim to the English throne after Elizabeth's death. As fellow monarchs of Protestant countries, each was answerable only to God for their actions, although each was to have a care and duty to his or her respective lands and subjects. Elizabeth, some thirty-three years older than James, was a childless virgin, married to and mother of her country, while James was essentially an orphan, raised without mother or father from his infancy. James's letters illustrate his struggle in establishing his relationship with Elizabeth, as he attempted to ground their interactions in the discourses of spiritual, biological and political kinship.²¹

In Elizabeth's letters to James, she was careful to maintain a certain distance in their relationship: she acknowledged their consanguinity, their godmother-godson relationship and their common roles as being fellow divinely-appointed monarchs. James, motherless almost since birth, tried to emphasize a closer familial tie between the two of them, addressing Elizabeth in the role of his 'mother', a role which carries with it obligations to her 'child', a child, furthermore, who would naturally gain the English throne by right of inheritance. Elizabeth, though, gained nothing from such a role, nor had she any need to accept such a position; rather she had good reason to avoid it. In naming an heir to the throne who was both male and Protestant, Elizabeth's own position as queen could become more precarious, providing a clear and strong figurehead behind whom opponents to her rule could unite. So long as Elizabeth was officially equivocal regarding the succession, she could keep her opponents uncertain as to who her heir might be, although James was certainly the obvious choice.

Nevertheless, the tropes of motherhood – whether natural, adoptive, or metaphorical – arose repeatedly in the letters between James and Elizabeth during the 1580s.²² In 1585, as James finally came of age and was released from his regent, the correspondence between him and Elizabeth became more regular and James began explicitly to position Elizabeth as a mother to him, addressing her as 'madame and mother' in several letters.²³ Having rejected the proposed association with his mother Mary, Queen of Scots, that would have seen her and her son share the crown, James wrote to Elizabeth: 'and to esteem still of my truth, I commit you, madame and mother, to God's holy protection. [...]. Your most loving and devoted Brother and son'.²⁴ In the three or four letters following this, James continued with this conceit, addressing Elizabeth as 'Madame and mother' and subscribing himself as

²¹ Allinson, *A Monarchy of Letters*, 168.

²² See Allinson, *A Monarchy of Letters*; Mueller, "To my very good brother, the King of Scots".

²³ Akrigg, *The Letters of James VI & I*, 64–6.

²⁴ Cecil Papers (hereafter cited as CP) 133/45: James to Elizabeth, 3 August 1585, cited in *The Letters of James VI & I*, 64.

her 'most loving and devoted brother and son', and begs her 'to continue still my loving mother as I shall be your loving son'.²⁵ Such an address implies filial love and duty on James's part, placing him in a position of reciprocal familial obligation towards Elizabeth.

for not only were the words thereof most loving but also the purpose discovered such a kind carefulness in you over me as it seemed rather to have proceeded from some *alter ego* than from any strange and foreign prince, which I can on no ways requite but by offering unto you my person and all that is mine to be used and employed by you as a loving mother would use her natural and devoted child. Thus praying you ever to use and employ me so, I pray most humbly the Creator, Madam and dearest Mother, to preserve you from all your foes whatsoever, to cast them in their own snares (as He did Haman) and to increase your days in all honour and happiness as they have ever yet been.²⁶

But Elizabeth, ever conscious of her own wellbeing, rejected such nomenclature. In all of Elizabeth's replies to these letters from James, she made his address to her obvious by the lack of the same in her letters – she never once addressed him as her 'son', indicating that 'son' was not merely a contraction of 'godson'. Indeed, as Christine Coch has argued, Elizabeth's troubled relationship with Mary, Queen of Scots, added an extra layer of complications to her relationship with James. Nevertheless, Elizabeth assumed a kind of maternal relation with James, 'her letters are all full of imperious "advise" to guide James in his royal life. [...] She emphasized her "natural affection" for James, and called herself the one "who ever hath preserved you"'.²⁷ Such open affection and acknowledgement would have increased the pressure on Elizabeth officially and publicly to name James as her heir, given her long care for both his person and his purse, and one who answered to her as the head of his house.²⁸ To Elizabeth, he remained her 'right dear brother'.²⁹ Two years later she did refer to him as 'son', but as Mary's 'most natural good son'.³⁰ Such a claim to a natural relationship belongs only to Mary and James – Elizabeth neither has, nor wants, part in it. Indeed, it is James's own mother's attempts to gain the English throne and her involvement

²⁵ Cecil Papers (hereafter cited as CP) 133/55: James to Elizabeth, 19 August 1585, cited in The Letters of James VI & I, 66.

²⁶ HMC, Calendar of the Manuscripts of the Most Hon. the Marquis of Salisbury, Preserved at Hatfield House, Hertfordshire (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office), vol. 13, 268: James to Elizabeth, 27 June 1585

²⁷ Christine Coch, "'Mother of My Contreie": Elizabeth I and Tudor Constructions of Motherhood', English Literary Renaissance 26:3 (1996), 423–50 (448–9, n. 99 and 100).

²⁸ Correspondence of James VI of Scotland With Sir Robert Cecil and Others in England During the Reign of Queen Elizabeth ed. John Bruce, (London: Camden Society 78, 1861), xxxi.

²⁹ British Library (hereafter cited as BL), Additional MS, 23240, fol. 71: Elizabeth to James, c. 1 July 1588, cited in Elizabeth I: Collected Works (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 355.

³⁰ BL, Additional MS, 23240, fols 61r-62r: Elizabeth to James, c. 1 February 1587 cited in Elizabeth I, 295.

in the Babington Plot in 1586 that made the continued address of Elizabeth as his mother particularly awkward especially since James attempted to bargain with her in order to save Mary's life.

During the epistolary negotiations that set out the Anglo-Scottish peace at the Treaty of Berwick in 1586, James was eager – among other diplomatic deliberations – for Elizabeth formally to acknowledge him as her successor.³¹ Although one of the principle goals of the treaty was to strengthen the position of the Protestant churches, James desire that it also engaged each state to protect the other against foreign invasion – as James says, 'the league to concern only religion, yet my plain intention is that the league shall be offensive and defensive for all invasions upon whatsoever pretext'.³² Yet negotiations were nearly abandoned following the death of Lord Russell being linked to the Catholic Earl of Arran, James's chancellor, whom the English were concerned was exerting too much power in the Scottish Court. James seemed unable or reluctant to deal with Arran to Elizabeth's satisfaction, such that she intervened by allowing the Ruthven lords (who had previously help James captive to separate him from his favourite, Esmé Stuart, Duke of Lennox) to return to Scotland. They quickly apprehended Arran, and stripped him of his title and offices.³³ In this case, James seems to gloss over Elizabeth's interference, referring to it as a 'lait accident' which it seems he would rather forget.³⁴ On the negotiations resuming in 1586, James was disappointed that the 'league of amity' would not include a formal acknowledgment of James as Elizabeth's heir, and would guarantee him annuity of only £4000 for his upkeep – the same annuity which Elizabeth later withheld in 1596–97.³⁵ While Elizabeth was reluctant to put such a commitment in writing, she did agree:

we add hereunto another firm promise in the word of a Queen that we will never directly or indirectly do or suffer to be done anything that we may withstand to the diminution or derogation of any right or title that may be due to you in any time

³¹ Rayne Allinson notes: 'James's persistent use of such uncommonly strong terms of [familial] address in the months leading up to the signing of the Treaty of Berwick in 1586 had a specific political purpose: to persuade Elizabeth to acknowledge him publicly as her chosen heir' (*A Monarchy of Letters*, 176ff). See, for instance, James to Elizabeth, 26 November 1585 (BL, Cotton MS, Caligula, C.VIII, fol. 379).

³² CP 133/55: James to Elizabeth, 19 August 1585, cited in Akrigg, *The Letters of James VI & I*, 66.

³³ Antonia Fraser, *King James* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974), 46.

³⁴ BL, Cotton MS, Caligula, C.VIII, fol. 379: James to Elizabeth, 26 November 1585,

³⁵ See Allinson, *A Monarchy of Letters*, 177–8; Wallace T. MacCaffrey, *Queen Elizabeth and the Making of Policy, 1572–1588* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 423; Judith M. Richards, *Elizabeth I* (London: Routledge, 2012), 123.

present or future, unless by any manifest ingratitude we should be justly moved and provoked to the contrary.³⁶

After the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots, in 1587, Elizabeth reaffirmed these pledges not to diminish James's royal claim, which worked further to undermine the claims of Arbella Stuart and the sons of Lady Katherine Grey and allowed James to further his interests towards the English crown at her court.³⁷

With these assurances not to hinder his future claim to the throne and an annual pension, James had to be content. But as Susan Doran argues, the question of the succession re-emerged as central in the 1590s.³⁸ With Elizabeth into her fourth decade on the throne, the question of her successor became more and more imminent, as competing interests throughout England, Scotland and Europe sought to influence the outcome. Doran adds that economic troubles in Scotland made James more and more reliant on his annuity from Elizabeth, an annuity that he could not endanger by pushing Elizabeth to settle the matter of the succession.³⁹ Thus it was that in the mid-1590s James was in a position that was dependent on the current goodwill of Elizabeth and on the future promise of the throne. It is in the letters that James wrote to Elizabeth at this time that illuminate the growing troubles he had in reconciling his free status with his reliance on another.

Constructing and Negotiating Crisis and Succession

The Spanish Blanks plot strained James's relationship with Elizabeth in 1592, when blank documents signed by Scottish Catholic nobles were uncovered en route to Spain; in the same packet was found a paper by James himself debating the advantages of accepting Spanish aid. This, followed by further troubles along the Border, led to tension between the two monarchs. While the birth of Prince Henry secured James's own heir, his position as Elizabeth's heir was still uncertain, and with the aging Elizabeth in her sixth decade, James was more and more eager to have the succession officially settled in his favour. When, in

³⁶ The National Archives, SP 52/40 fol. 1: Elizabeth to James, June 2 1586. Elizabeth's reluctance is evident in her letter to James of May 1586 when she writes: 'And for the sum that you suppose my many affairs made me forget, together with the manner of the instrument or letter quocumque nomine datur, for the first, I assure you I never gave commission for more [...]. And for the letter, some words and form was such as fitted not our two friendships [...]. But I have sent you a letter that I am sure contains all you desired in special words, which I trust shall content you' (BL, Add. MS, 23240, fol. 45, cited in *Elizabeth I*, 281–2).

³⁷ Susan Doran notes, 'As we know, [James's] efforts to persuade or browbeat Elizabeth "to speak out" failed miserably. Elizabeth remained firm in her decision to make no statement about the succession. She repeated her promise not to "forestall" James's "right and expectation by any act of hers" but would "never do any public act that man enable your Majesty to future hopes": 'James VI and the English Succession', 27.

³⁸ Doran, 'James VI and the English Succession', 26–7.

³⁹ Doran, 'James VI and the English Succession', 37.

1596, a truce that had been declared in the Borders was broken by the deputy warden of the West March arresting 'Kinmont Willie' Armstrong, a notorious freebooter, the situation escalated. The English refused to release Willie from Carlisle Castle where he was imprisoned. In retaliation, on 13 April of that year, James's subject Sir Walter Scott of Buccleuch and his men broke into Carlisle Castle and freed Willie, angering Elizabeth.⁴⁰

James's initial attempts to mollify the queen had little success. Unlike his quiet acquiescence to Elizabeth's interference a decade earlier when Elizabeth had encouraged the Ruthven lords to remove the Earl of Arran from his post, James this time seemed unwilling to placate his cousin. In a letter of 4 June 1596 he pointed out that Buccleuch only broke into Stirling Castle to free Kinmont Willie because he had been wrongfully arrested in the first place.

But Madame I neid not to exhort a prince of so long and happie experience in gouuernment as ye are to stoppe the one eare quhill ye heare the other pairtie and then all passion being remouid uyselie and justlie to judge, for I ame fullie persuadit that quhen ye shall be richtlie informed of that injurie quiche maide this other deid to follou, the proceeding shall (thoch not purge) yet qualifie uerrie muche the other in youre juste censuring mynde.

In attempting to reconcile Elizabeth to the fact that her subjects had broken the peace first, he portrayed both Elizabeth and himself as impartial judges, 'prince[s] of so long and happie experience'. As such, they are exempt from judgement themselves, yet James implied that Elizabeth had judged James to be at fault for the actions of his subjects. In doing so, she effectively diminished James's right to self-determination and princely freedom. James continued in this letter, 'for quho can be so fitt judges of offences fallen betuixt youre subjectis and officeris and myne as comissioneris from us both [...]. And quhaire as it appeares ye are persuadit by sum to thinke that youre harde using me in other maitters will be a meane to procure youre satisfaction in this turne at my handis'.⁴¹ That James even mentioned the possibility that Elizabeth had an ulterior motive is crucial: her possible motive would act to manipulate James's actions, a manipulation that would further impinge on his freedom of action. Beyond this, James points out that Elizabeth's hard line in other matters may not have the desired effect of winning his cooperation in this matter. Rather than engaging in the negotiations from an Erasmian position that would have Elizabeth mitigate the request by arguing, however implicitly, that it is in James's best interests to comply, James seems to indicate that he is instead being threatened with some other consequence should he fail to satisfy Elizabeth.

⁴⁰ See *Letters of King James VI & I*, 144ff.

⁴¹ SP 52/58/95, James to Elizabeth, 4 June 1596.

Later in the summer of 1596, James did concede that Buccleuch invading Carlisle Castle had effectively stained Elizabeth's honour. He wrote:

I perceive by your last letter that the only thing you stickle at concerning Buccleugh's attempt is, that your honour may only be repaired therein, and for all other questionable matters you are content that, with all expedition, they may be handled by commissioners. Surely, madame, my mistaking your meaning until now in that matter hath been the cause of my so long delay to satisfy you therein, for in respect of your ambassador's first complaint in that matter, craving first filing and then delivery, I could not but think that, according to the custom over observed in border causes, an ordinary form of trial behoved to precede an ordinary punishment. But since I do now find it is only your honour you respect herein, hurt by the breach of your castle, surely, as I would be loth to grant to any iniquity in the form of equal justice or mutual redress betwixt our two realms, so will I be also loth on the other part to give you cause to think that any prince in Europe would be so careful to preserve your honour from all blemish as I, without regard to the appetite of whatsumever the best subject in my land.⁴²

If he accepted that Elizabeth's honour had been impugned, in this case the 'breach of her castle' was an attack on her body politic, James must have a care for his cousin even at the cost of sacrificing his own subject, whose care could have superseded the interests of a foreign monarch. Yet James's honour was too closely tied to Elizabeth's own, particularly given that her body politic would become his were he to inherit the crown. Nevertheless, James expresses surprise that Elizabeth should ignore the customary settling of Border disputes, an ordinary trial with an ordinary punishment. It is only in accepting that Buccleuch's actions were an insult to Elizabeth's honour and body politic that James claims to understand her insistence on reparations. Nevertheless, James does not insist that the logic that Elizabeth applies to the invasion of her castle to the wrongful seizure of his subject in the first place. This accommodation of Elizabeth's honour ahead of his own interests plays once more into the deferential role that James so often takes with his cousin; it seems likely, however, given James's familiarity with both rhetoric and statecraft, that he could have assumed this role deliberately as something of a means to an end.

Finally in the spring 1597, another treaty was signed, this time at Carlisle. A section of this treaty required pledges to stand for Buccleuch, but as they did not show up, Buccleuch was

⁴² CP 133/150: James to Elizabeth, 17 August, 1596, cited in HMC, Salisbury, vol. 6, 339:

required to turn himself over to English custody.⁴³ So on 20 October 1597, James wrote again to Elizabeth to attempt to secure Buccleuch's future release. Having finally settled the fate of Buccleuch, James had hoped that all would return to normal between him and Elizabeth. But instead, he found himself writing to her in late 1597 to remind her to pay his regular annuity of £4000 which had been agreed upon during the negotiations of the Treaty of Berwick in 1585–86, and which she had been withholding as a result of the Kinmont Willie affair. James seems to have written several letters over a period of two to three months, asking Elizabeth in more and more heated terms to pay him his annuity; Elizabeth seems to have chosen not to reply at all to James's importuning, to his great annoyance.

In November 1597, James wrote to Elizabeth politely to request his agreed upon allowance, politely apologizing for intruding his 'handwrit' upon Elizabeth's notice, writing:

Althoch that since the uryting of my last I neuer quhill nou interrupted you uith my handuryte for excusing my pairt in all suche accidents as since that tyme fell upon the Bordouris yett the uprichtness of my conscience makis me to rest assured that according to the equitie that God hath plaunted in youre mynde ye are fullie persuaded of my honest intention in that turne as I doubt not youre Ambassadoure hath treulie & honestlie informed you from tyme to tyme.⁴⁴

In its basic form, there is nothing unusual in this letter, as James deferentially excused the imposition of the letter upon Elizabeth's time, invoking the rhetoric of 'trouble-making' as Lynne Magnusson outlines: 'Self-deprecation plays a key role in the rhetoric of deference, not only the lowering of the self but also the low estimation of one's own written productions' and further, that this a common 'feature[] of suitors' letters by well-educated men', and James was nothing if not well-educated.⁴⁵ He did, however, foreground the 'equity' between them, and placed his own honour on the line if Elizabeth should choose to doubt his word. But in not wanting to impose on her time, he wasted no time himself and jumped straight to his entreaty, which amounts to a demand that she demonstrate her professed friendship towards him by paying his annuity. In by-passing the conventional politeness and indirectness of Erasmian requests, James unbalances the relationship between petitioner and patron.⁴⁶

& thairfore I uolde earnestlie intreate you that according to equitie & iustice ye uolde giue ordoure that all things maye be speedelie parformed on youre pairt as I shall be

⁴³ Akrigg, *The Letters of James VI & I*, 149.

⁴⁴ SP52/61, fol. 54: James to Elizabeth, November 1597.

⁴⁵ Magnusson, 'A Rhetoric of Requests', 58.

⁴⁶ SP52/61, fol. 54: James to Elizabeth, November 1597.

reddie to haue the lyke done upon myne. Quhairby the intention of suche uikked people as thocht to haue stayed it maye be disapointed & peace & iustice established according to both oure honest intentions.⁴⁷

James paid some attention in framing his request, but nevertheless the letter is far from humble – this would be a form of self-presentation unfit for a king, especially one of James's temperament. Despite the deference with which he begins, James quickly moves to the other strategy that Magnusson identifies, that of 'trouble-making', an assured position where the writer assumes the positive fulfilment of his request. The contrast between James's deferential opening and his subsequent demand highlight the difficulty he had with positioning himself both as one whose requests should be granted in the Erasmian mode and as one whose position was unassailable, as he knew himself to be. James went on to promise the future good behaviour of his wardens, but:

In the meanetyme I most hairtelie praye you that at all occasions ye maye make knowin to the uorlde youre honorable & louing opinion of me, notwithstanding of all these unhappie crossis & speciallie that (since I haue a man auaiting thaire upon the receate of the annuitie) ye uolde be pleased to giue him a goode & speedie dispatche that it maye be sene ye haue conceaued no thochtis of me but suche as I shall euer deserue.⁴⁸

James sending a man to wait for the money cap-in-hand, could have been seen as an affront to Elizabeth, whose treasury was already burdened, and especially given the monarchs' strained relations over the previous year. By sending a messenger to await the payment indefinitely, James in effect casts doubt on Elizabeth's honour that she would either forget the debt or that she would not willingly pay what she owed. While he pointed to the benefits of Elizabeth's granting of his request, there was little here that actually encouraged Elizabeth's fulfilment of it. As a request for money is one of those things that 'makes the asker blush with shame', Erasmus recommended that the writer use an indirect approach. Instead, exasperated by the long delays, James instead abandoned any polite circumlocution that might reasonably be expected and approached his request head on. It is possible that James did not view his letter as a request per se, but instead a reminder to Elizabeth of an earlier contract. But regardless of James's view of the letter, its function is most definitely petitionary, as James 'earnestlie intreates' Elizabeth to carry out his requests.

⁴⁷ SP52/61, fol. 54: James to Elizabeth, November 1597.

⁴⁸ SP52/61, fol. 54: James to Elizabeth, November 1597.

On Christmas Eve, 1597, a month or so after the above letter, James wrote again to Elizabeth; several more letters not surviving are referred to by James as having been sent since the first, all with no reply. He had by this stage run out of patience. Elizabeth's long silence had forced him to once more intrude upon her, he wrote, as 'I have written three letters unto you and have never as yet received answer of any of them either by word or writ, which moves me to think that my letters never came to your hands – especially my last wherein I wrote as plainly and as lovingly unto you as I could'.⁴⁹ He gave Elizabeth an epistolary opening to redeem herself for the insult of her lack of reciprocity in participating in the correspondence. In failing to participate in the exchange, Elizabeth upset the reciprocal cooperation that underpins an epistolary conversation.⁵⁰ Rather than assuming that Elizabeth was ignoring his letters – a dangerous thing to either imply or admit – he allowed that her silence is a result of a problem of delivery, a widespread epistolary topos of the period. This seems unlikely, however, and Elizabeth refused to participate in the ideal of reciprocity that underlies any successful correspondence and epistolary relationship. James attempted to position Elizabeth's reaction to his current letter, but if she refused to engage with the correspondence, his efforts were more or less meaningless, and her silence is insurmountable.⁵¹ James Daybell notes that the delays in the post and the late delivery of an expected letter could be a cause of social anxiety; how much more anxiety inducing, then, to suspect that such delays might be intentional.⁵² In effect, James can accomplish nothing with his letters if Elizabeth maintains her silence; to put it another way, Elizabeth's silence turns James's letters mute.

His 'loving' attempts to persuade Elizabeth to release his allowance having been unsuccessful, James's tone grew more and more petulant throughout the letter, as he commented more impatiently on Elizabeth's long delay, and the satisfaction he had attempted to provide her regarding the Kinmont Willie affair. He continued,

And as for Robert Jowssie's errand,⁵³ it is turned from an honourable annuity to a voluntary uncertainty almost after long begging, and now at last to as much worse than nothing, as there is time spent in the seeking of it. I pray you, madame, excuse

⁴⁹ CP 133/76: James to Elizabeth, 24 December 1597, cited in *Letters of King James VI & I*, 152.

⁵⁰ See, for instance, Fitzmaurice, *The Familiar Letter*, 23ff.

⁵¹ This is not the first time that Elizabeth has used such a tactic; James was forced to send her a second copy of the sonnet he wrote for her in 1586. The first time he sent her the letter, 'the bearer thereof returned, yet void of answer. [...] what else can I just but that either ye had not received it, except the bearer returned with the contrary report; or else that ye judge it not to be of me because it is *incerto authore*' (CP 133/48: James to Elizabeth, c. 1586, cited in *Letters of King James VI & I*, 71).

⁵² James Daybell, *The Material Letter*, 143.

⁵³ Jowssie is presumably messenger James had sent to collect his funds, although this remains somewhat unclear.

my impatience in this. It is no wonder I weary to be longsum suitor as one who was not born to be a beggar but to be begged at. A short refusal had less displeased me than an answerless and disdainful delay. Remember that, as I am your kinsman, I am a free prince. The disdain of me can be no honour to you. The use of tempting your friends so sore can turn you to no advantage. If ye think my friendship worthy that annuity, remember qui cito dat bis dat.⁵⁴ Let not the circumstances of the giver disgrace the gift, for I weary to be a suitor. And, for your pleasure, I will promise never to challenge that debt more if you will not be content as freely to pay it as freely ye promised it.⁵⁵

At this point James was supremely frustrated that he, who ought to be begged at, was instead himself begging. He gave up the pretence of deference and supplication, and the moderate tone of the earlier letter is transformed into impatient demands, although in being forced to repeat his demands, he began to be a beggar, a position he resented. His peevish tone, however, positioned Elizabeth in a negative position in which to read and respond to this letter, a position which presumably made her even less likely to grant his demand. Despite having earlier offering Elizabeth an 'out' for her recalcitrance as a correspondent, James's letter now implicates her as being small-minded and vindictive in refusing to answer his letters, his messengers, or to provide the annuity which had been agreed upon a decade before, any of which might have mitigated the insult of Elizabeth's silence. In so doing, the letter ran precisely counter to Erasmus's advice, that a letter should have a restrained manner that 'commends the petitioner highly', rather than a 'presumption [that] serves to estrange the other's feelings. For no one willingly grants a kindness to one who expects it as if it were his due and who makes a demand rather than a request'.⁵⁶ Instead, James explicitly claimed the £4000 as his by right, and demanded prompt payment. His petition quickly leaves behind its conciliatory tone and becomes reproachful and verbally aggressive. James grows tired of being a suitor, of being forced to insist on that which he has been promised and manages to call into question Elizabeth's integrity as he implies that she is unwilling to fulfil her own promises, promises that he accepted in good faith. Although he invoked their kinship, he almost simultaneously impugned Elizabeth's honour, but simultaneously he reminded her that, 'as I am your kinsman, so am I a free prince'. Here we return to James's explicit self-identification as free, a freedom that, while often invoked, he never fully enjoyed in actuality. He concluded the letter with the language of legal judgement:

⁵⁴ 'Who gives quickly gives twice'.

⁵⁵ CP 133/176: James to Elizabeth, 24 December 1597, cited in Letters of King James VI & I, 152–3.

⁵⁶ Erasmus, De conscribendis epistolis, 172–3.

I must once again pray you to excuse my impatience, for there cannot a greater grief come to an honest hear than to be lightled [slighted] by them at whose hands he hat deserved so well as my conscience bears me upright record I have ever done at yours. My fault is less that I complain of you to yourself, and I will yet hope that ye will give forth a just sentence in my favour and appardon my free speaking in pleading my just cause.⁵⁷

In finally begging pardon having just begged for his money, James gave Elizabeth the opportunity to forgive him. In forgiving, as in passing sentence and granting pardon, James allowed Elizabeth the position of his judge, a position that he would otherwise claim belonged only to God. Yet in the matter of £4000, James exchanged – although perhaps not willingly – his position of ‘free prince’ to Elizabeth.

Conclusion

In these letters of 1596–97, James claims his status as a free monarch, a position that he would defend openly the following year with the publication of The True Law of Free Monarchies. Yet his letters to Elizabeth show a lack of the freedom that he so loudly proclaimed. In the letter of November 1597 he positioned himself and Elizabeth as equals, ‘both shoot[ing] at one marke’ and they had best, he implied, present a united front.⁵⁸ That he conceived this united front, which would highlight two friendly yet independent monarchs, as being made public and visible through Elizabeth providing him with a pension, undermined his discursive position. The Elizabeth who is scripted in these letters is one who is unlikely to grant any requests: James has given her little motivation to be other than as he wrote her character in his letters, that is, as stubborn and disdainful, very much, in fact, like the proud beloved scorning her suitor. Elizabeth forced James to beg (an uncomfortable role for him), to be a ‘longsum suitor’, and as James would have it, in forcing him to these roles she herself lost honour. He, however, placed a price on their ‘friendship’, that the annuity she had previously promised him was necessary for him to remain her friend.

In early 1598 James was forced to regroup once again, having exposed his frustration regarding the tardiness of the annuity with a tirade against Elizabeth in front of his parliament. Unsurprisingly, Elizabeth heard about his outburst, and James was once more put in the position of begging her pardon.⁵⁹ James, despite his refusal to accept Elizabeth’s remonstrances, was once again both dependent and petitioner. Although Mueller argues

⁵⁷ CP 133/176: James to Elizabeth, 24 December 1597, cited in Letters of King James VI & I, 152–53.

⁵⁸ SP52/61 fol. 54: James to Elizabeth, November 1597.

⁵⁹ CP 133/184: James to Elizabeth, February 1598, cited in Letters of James VI & I, 154–5.

that 'With certain discomfiture but no lasting reluctance, James can be observed accepting his creaturehood at Elizabeth's hands because of the mighty advancement it would bring him, in time—the monarchy of Great Britain', his insistence on defining himself a self-determining and subject only to God complicates his reluctance.⁶⁰ It seems more likely that James, however much he accepted his 'creaturehood', was at the same time profoundly convinced that he was indeed what he claimed to be: a 'free prince'. James's letters as a form of 'enregistrate speech' remain 'the true pictures of [one's] mind to all posterities, let them be free of all uncomeliness and dishonesty', as he points out to his son, Prince Henry, in the Basilikon Doron.⁶¹ His on-going concern and reiteration of his free status – which has only highlighted here – become instead an instance of protesting too much. However deeply ingrained the epistolary models and habits of Erasmian letter-writing, the passions and frustrations, the sorrows and the joys of daily life could overwhelm these learned practices. Erasmus's letter-writing instructions assumed that writers could maintain their equanimity in the trying circumstance of real life.

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⁶⁰ Mueller, 'The Correspondence of Queen Elizabeth I and King James VI', n.p.

⁶¹ James VI and I, The True Law, 165.