ALL THE QUEEN’S CHILDREN:  
ELIZABETH I AND THE MEANINGS  
OF MOTHERHOOD  

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I  
“OFFSPRING . . . PERHAPS UNGRACIOUS”  

HENRY IV of France once said there were certain things to which one would never know the answer. While one was what was his own religion (Henry being the man who is said to have claimed, “Paris is worth a mass”), another was the answer to the question, whether or not “Queen Elizabeth be a maid or no” (Osborne 383–84). If Elizabeth were not a virgin, then, many would argue, she was instead a mother. In 1559 Elizabeth herself is said to have proclaimed that she would be known for having “lived and died a virgin” (Elizabeth 58). Yet in conjunction with this trope, as Christine Coch points out, throughout her reign she used the rhetoric of motherhood when she spoke about her people (423–51). Despite the fact that in the end she never married, she did at least consider the possibility of marriage for a number of years as well having several favorites at court, most notably Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester. During her reign there were frequent rumors that she had had children; a number of people were arrested for slander for talking about her pregnancies and the babies she destroyed. And at least one young man, calling himself Arthur Dudley, claimed in the 1580s to be Elizabeth’s son. Today, serious scholars of the period are in agreement that Elizabeth bore no children, never experienced pregnancies. But the counterparts to the scandal mongers of the sixteenth-century are the romance novelists on the one hand, and those of the far shore of the Shakespeare authorship controversy on the other. For them, what is most important about Elizabeth and the secret key to her personality is the fact of motherhood. This paper examines Elizabeth’s own use of language to imply her motherhood.
in a metaphorical sense, the rumors about her during her reign and soon after about her sexuality and fertility, and the theories about her that are still bandied about today. The comments about her sexual behavior and supposed children, both then and now, also open a curtain to people's attitudes toward powerful women, especially ones, like Elizabeth, who ruled unmarried.

From the beginning of the reign Elizabeth was under great pressure to marry and name an heir. Sir Thomas Gargrave, Speaker of the House of Commons, informed Elizabeth in February of 1559 that it was the prayer of all Englishmen that she marry forthwith and have children. But Elizabeth already had a response ready that gave a new meaning to her role as mother. “Whenssoever it pleases God to incline my heart” to marriage then she would do so, but until that time she would remain a virgin but also mother to her people, demonstrating at least rhetorically that the worshipped Mary was not the only one who could be both Virgin and Mother. “And do not upbraid me with miserable lack of children,” she stated, “for every one of you, as many as are Englishmen, are children, and kinsmen to me” (Elizabeth 57, 59).

I am certainly not suggesting that when Elizabeth became queen in 1558 she knew that she would never marry and had already mapped out the image of herself as “Virgin Queen.” For years she played at courtship and in 1566 told her Parliament “I’ll marry as soon as I can conveniently” (Elizabeth 95). But it does seem clear that marriage was not something that she wanted, and she even questioned just what kind of children she might have. While most people expect to have children whom they will love and who will make them proud, she stated that “such offspring as may come of me . . . may . . . become, perhaps, ungracious” (58). In 1561 Elizabeth informed the Scottish ambassador that “Princes cannot like their own children, those that should succeed unto them” (65).

It seems that only very briefly did Elizabeth’s “biological clock” perhaps give a timorous tick tock when she considered marrying Francis, Duke of Alençon, later Anjou, in the very final marriage negotiation of her reign. And she was appalled to find that after twenty years of being urged to marry and have children, now people were opposed, not only because of deep distrust of the French but more importantly because of the fear that the Queen was now too old to make having a child a safe possibility. In 1579 at the age of forty-five she told her Council in tears of frustration because they opposed her, that it was “doubtful whether there could be any more surety for her and her realm than for her to marry and