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Investigating Elizabeth Investigating: Major Themes in Karen Harper's Queen Elizabeth

### I Mysteries series

I have two goals for this paper: I want to introduce a series of novels that feature Elizabeth I as the protagonist and I want to begin to understand the major themes in the series and perhaps begin to connect them to other popular representations of Elizabeth with which I work.

### **Introduction**

The novels with which I am working for this presentation are part of a series of novels by Karen Harper. Harper is a contemporary novelist who writes primarily in the romance and historical fiction genres. This series, however, blends historical fiction, romance, and mystery into a kind of genre mash-up. The first novel was published in 2000 and the latest in 2007. There are nine books in the series so far, though I work with only the first four here.

My interest in these novels is tied up with an ongoing project on Elizabeth I in contemporary American culture. Some of the interesting aspects of this series overall relate to Harper's insistence on research and the accessibility of history through her novels. Harper is quoted in a 2007 interview as saying "[o]ne of my favorite compliments goes something like this: 'I used to hate history, but when I read your books, I find it really intriguing.'" The sentiment follows the interviewer's reference to a *Newsday* blurb that claims that "Elizabethan history has never been [as appealing]" as

in Harper's *The Tidal Poole*. This is a primary interest of mine—who writes history and for whom? What is gained and what is lost when history is primarily experienced through works of fiction? What is the role of academic work on history?

I want to think about Harper's series in the context of her claims, and I also want to think about what ideas the books present under the guise of authenticity. What is privileged? What is ignored or downplayed? How does Harper go about "pulling the reader into the lives of the characters," some of whom are emphatically cut off from us through the lack of documentary evidence about their 'inner lives'? One of the interesting ways that Harper appears to create 'authenticity' is through the use of clever packaging. Before a single word is read, the books are marked as Elizabethan through the use of images. (It is, of course, probable that the cover designs, produced by Royce Becker Design, are not directly influenced by Harper. However, the choice of Becker suggests an interest in visual 'authenticity,' based on the portfolio of work available on the Studio's website.)

The cover of each book is divided with a horizontal line half-way down the book. This is usually an actual line, though some books are not as clearly demarcated. The upper and lower halves of the cover have images that suggest the Tudor period and/or some key part of the book's plot. For example, the cover of *The Poyson Garden* features a garden atop a Norman-style castle. The central feature of each book cover, however, is a portrait of Elizabeth I. I use "central" literally—the books each feature a portrait of Elizabeth I in a frame in roughly the center of the cover. The effect of such a design is to draw the reader's eye to the person of Elizabeth. The portraits used do not seem, however, to correspond with the content of the books. The first book uses the

Ditchley portrait, usually dated to the c. 1592, though the book is set before Elizabeth's accession to the throne in 1558. The portraits incorporated on the covers range from the popularly familiar (Ditchley) to the popularly obscure (a portrait on the title page of Christopher Saxton's *Atlas of the Counties of England and Wales* (c. 1590?)). Perhaps it is not coincidence that the most well-known of Elizabeth's portraits is used on the first novel in the series. It would be a smart choice if the goal is to generate interest, especially in bookshelf browsers. The first book is the only one that does not have the portrait repeated on the spine of the book. (After some image searching through Google, it does appear that the cover of the hardcover from Delacorte Press featured a rose where the portrait was placed in the Dell mass market edition. So, this bears further investigation.) While the portraits are the most obvious appeal to an 'authentic' Elizabethan-ness, the other images used also suggest, when they don't represent, Elizabethan England. Pictures of specific palaces are used, along with images of effigies, tapestries, and other paintings. All of these images work together to create a sense of history for the reader.

Beyond the visual presentation of the covers, the titles of the novels themselves seek to reinforce a kind of early modern 'authenticity.' Each title has a non-standard spelling of at least one word. The most common 'misspelling' involves the addition of an additional 'e'; thus "fashion" becomes "fashione," "queen" becomes "queene," and "thorn" becomes "thorne." The use of "y" for "i" is also common: "poison" becomes "poyson," "twilight" becomes "twylight," and "fire" becomes "fyre." These title 'misspellings' seem to invoke the sense of the early modern period's lack of standardized spelling, presumably to enhance the sense of these books as non-

modern, if not early modern. It is curious, though, to consider how these titles are actually working—does Harper (and her publisher) assume that readers will know the reason for the alternative spelling, or are they simply relying on popular invocation of “ye olde item” to suggest historical authenticity? The language in the books does not attempt to reproduce non-modern spelling, so it is interesting that the series’ packaging relies on so many signifiers of the “historical.”

My hope in this introduction is to give a sense of this series and the ways in which it presents itself. I intend to delve deeper into these topics in later work, but my goal here is to introduce the series and my preliminary findings about how it represents Elizabeth and, by extension, the early modern England she inhabited. There are a number of themes that are evident in the first four books of the series. The ones I would like to examine here are: Harper’s focus on Elizabeth’s Boleyn relations, especially Anne, William Cecil’s role as Elizabeth’s “tamer,” and the uncritical acceptance of Elizabeth as an incredibly popular figure both before and after her accession to the throne.

### **Maternal Family**

The first book in the series, *The Poyson Garden*, has, as the title suggests, poison as its central theme. Not only is the villain a poisoner, but the idea of familiar betrayal is figured as having a poisonous effect on characters. The poisoner is seeking revenge on the surviving Boleyns, including Elizabeth. The female villain acts as a mirrored version of Elizabeth, where everything is backwards, including her familiar focus. Elizabeth, as Harper takes extreme pains to describe, is a momma’s girl. In contrast, the villainess was a daddy’s girl; at least, that is, until Henry VIII had her father

poisoned. Her focus on the Boleyns is never adequately explained, but it drives the plot, as Elizabeth must save not only herself, but also her living maternal relations. Ormonde's internal monologue suggests that the Boleyns are merely convenient scapegoats for the poisoner's sense of displacement. She muses that the Boleyns will pay "for everything" (252). It is the insistence on Elizabeth's relationship to her (dead) mother that is most interesting in this series. While she declares that she "is [her] royal father's child" (PG 286) this insistence is used only when directly challenged as Mary Tudor's rightful heir. Otherwise, she is focused exclusively on her mother's family.

Harper is certainly interested in rehabilitating Anne Boleyn and denying the very accusations she repeats through her characters. In very blatant 'white hat, black hat,' fashion, however, the characters that repeat the treason accusations about Anne are figured as demented, paranoid, or simply evil. The prologue of the book has Elizabeth and Mary in a *tete-a-tete* in which Mary is figured as a domineering and suspicious monarch who dislikes Elizabeth and seeks to deny their shared paternity. Her "pewter eyes skewered" (2) Elizabeth and she repeatedly sighs as she speaks. She "order[s]," "seize[s]," "thunder[s]," "shrill[s]," "and "challenge[s]" and yet her eyes are "haunted"—the language describing her actions suggests authoritative rigidity. The scene eventually becomes a shouting match in which Mary accuses "that woman" (5) of poisoning her mother, Catherine of Aragon. According to Harper's narrator, "Elizabeth knew that woman always referred to her own mother, Anne Boleyn" (5). In contrast to Mary's "hissing" (6) anger, Elizabeth is merely defending her mother's reputation. Mary calls Anne a "witch," to which Elizabeth replies with a quiet protest. When further goaded by Mary, Elizabeth loses her temper and "screams," (5) is then able to continue

the argument “in more measured tones” (5). The scene sets up a multi-generational feud between the women, started when their mothers were vying for the affections of their father. However, Henry is barely mentioned and the focus is on mothers.

Other characters are less politic in their descriptions of Anne—she is called a whore, a witch, and the accusations made at her treason trial are accepted by the villains of the story as self-evidently true. By extension, Elizabeth is referred to as the “Boleyn bitch” (118) or the “Boleyn bastard” (251) and associated negatively with her mother’s family. The characters that use this language are part of the villainess’s gang, and are figured as loutish and none-too-bright. The muscle that Ormonde employs merely echo her vitriolic language. Ormonde herself, though, is presented, like Mary, as unduly attached to her dead parents and unstable in her thinking and motivation. A scene in which she intends to incapacitate and have sexual relations with a man ends with her “cuddled desperately” (175) next to him, “pretending” (176) and “want[ing] to be her mother” (176). She then becomes “suddenly enraged” (176) and “sob[s] wretchedly” (176). It is never clear what Ormonde intends in this scene, but its ending certainly suggests that she is incapable of fully separating herself from her mother and, through her desire to “be” her mother, from her father.

In contrast to Mary and Ormonde’s example of obsession with their mothers (and fathers), Elizabeth’s attachment to her maternal family is merely filial piety—‘devotion’ rather than ‘obsession.’ Elizabeth swears on her mother’s soul and becomes involved in solving the plot because it focuses on her Boleyn relatives, including her aunt Mary, Anne Boleyn’s sister. Throughout the novel, various characters remind her that she “[is] Boleyn” (29) and that her “family” (31) is the Boleyn clan. Her mother is referred to as

“murdered” (31) and Elizabeth fumes inwardly about “the Tudors keep[ing] her from her mother’s family” (22). The figure of Anne Boleyn literally haunts Elizabeth’s dreams and Elizabeth is hard-pressed to make any positive connections between herself and her Tudor ancestors, except insofar as being Henry VIII’s daughter legitimates her claim to the English throne.

The insistence on the primacy of Elizabeth’s Boleyn ancestry is carried beyond the first book. Subsequent books in the series are also interested in introducing characters in some way related to Elizabeth’s maternal family. Being a Tudor is associated with impatience and a bad temper—Boleyns are devoted, caring, and persecuted. Elizabeth’s power as monarch is represented as a kind of redemption of Anne, especially since Elizabeth thinks that “it [is] to the bold Anne Boleyn [that] she owed her right to wear England’s crown, for she had gone to the block rather than declare her babe a bastard” (145). Later books describe the “scars on [Elizabeth’s] heart” (TP 5) and her “pride in [her] Boleyn heritage” (5). The idea of Anne as a martyr to Elizabeth’s accession is repeated in the second series of the book, as Elizabeth prepares for her coronation ceremony.

Examples of Elizabeth’s Boleyn-ness abound in all of the books. She is heavily colored with a Boleyn brush, to the detriment of her Tudor forebears. The female characters in her life are favored, even as she maintains a very conventional heteronormativity. She desires Robert Dudley, but is wary of him and keeps him at a distance because of her determination not to trust any man, since her father killed her mother. This focus on the women in Elizabeth’s life could be indicative of an interest in recovering the lives of women in the early modern period, but instead it smacks of

essentialist assumptions about woman-as-mother. Anne has no real attributes, other than her unwillingness to allow Elizabeth to be called a bastard. She is “bold” to do this. Otherwise, she is simply a phantom, absent mother. She represents a time in which Elizabeth’s family most closely approximated a typical, American nuclear family. For all of Harper’s insistence on historical accuracy, there is little to no mention of the realities of Elizabeth’s early life. Her parents lived at Court and rarely had time to spend with Elizabeth in a way that would be recognizably ‘parental’ by our standards. Kat Ashley is frequently a stand-in for Anne, being called “like a mother to [Elizabeth]” (PG 202). However, she is merely a typically maternal figure—somewhat scolding, usually acquiescent, and fundamentally unchallenging to either Elizabeth or the reader. Her character offers little in terms of actual engagement and she becomes the route by which Elizabeth avoided becoming unduly influenced by the removal of her actual mother. As the villainess’s fate suggests, an undue focus on either parent (and revenge, rather than acceptance) is detrimental to both mental and physical well-being.

### **Elizabeth’s Popularity**

Harper is similarly heavy-handed in her constant reiterations of Elizabeth’s popularity. The concept of the ‘Good Queen Bess’ with the ‘common touch’ runs through all of the novels. The first invocation of Elizabeth’s popularity comes from Mary Tudor. In a paranoid-sounding rant, Mary assumes that Elizabeth is accusing Mary of having Elizabeth poisoned. In the midst of her “shrilling” (4) she calls Elizabeth “Elizabeth of England, beloved of the people” (4). In this way, Harper has Mary (clearly coded as dying and losing her grasp on reality) introduce Elizabeth’s Englishness and her popularity. This is interesting, given Elizabeth’s precarious position at this point in



history—Mary was actually quite popular early in her reign, when this scene is set. The novel jumps ahead five years between the prologue and the first chapter. During these actual years, attitudes toward Mary changed, and it is arguable that Elizabeth was more popular than Mary in 1558. In 1553, however, this assumption, especially on Mary's part is odd, and seems like a strained character point aimed at simultaneously demonizing Mary and beatifying Elizabeth.

As the novels progress, it becomes clear that Harper is not interested in testing the idea of Elizabeth's popularity. The "bumpkins" (142) encountered by two of Elizabeth's "Privy Plot Council" are initially violent and characterized as strangely unfriendly until Jenks and Ned realize that they are loyal to Elizabeth ("our princess" (141-2)) and not the Catholic "Bloody Mary" (142). This scene takes place in a tavern in Kent, near Anne Boleyn's home. Elizabeth's popularity is a given here, since the people in Kent have been persecuted by Mary even though they are a "loyal little place [that] never done aught to her" (142). The contrast between Mary's persecution and Elizabeth's possibilities give rise to a popular support of Elizabeth that is naturalized within the series. Elizabeth herself does very little to create this good feeling. She responds to it appropriately—she can "not help but smile back" (147) at Lord Cornish as he describes the "rather goodly sized crowd" (146) that gathers to see her riding. The people of the crowd are described as "English folk who set no tricky political or religious plots in motion but who truly cared...[p]eople who were proud of her Boleyn blood and didn't want to poison it" (147). They give "wild hurrahs" (148) when they see her; she begins to smile and "lift[s] her hand to wave," (148) when she becomes aware of a someone watching here. This "someone" (148) is different than the crowd—s/he

“hate[s]” (148) her. Even though she cannot wave at the crowd, out of fear of reprisals from Mary, the crowd cheers.

Elizabeth is with her de facto jailers when this happens—Mary is still Queen and Elizabeth must be careful about appearing to incite popular support. However, the reader is aware, from having access to Elizabeth’s thoughts, that Elizabeth cares about more than her own popularity. She is appreciative of the people’s support and is heartened by their simplicity. The only time this unilateral popularity is questioned within the series is when individual villains (always characterized as in some way unhinged) seek to kill Elizabeth or those close to her. Otherwise, the “common folk gaw[k]” (131) and “roar” (TP 17) to signal their interest and approval. By the second book of the series, Elizabeth’s popularity is related to the suffering of the populace under Mary. During her coronation procession, Elizabeth marvels, under the cover of the crowd’s “explo[sive]” (18) noise, that “God knows, her people had suffered under Queen Mary” (18). While the sufferings are listed (and include things that were never fully changed under Elizabeth), the introduction of the mystery forestalls any real examination of discontent that might not depend on Mary’s particular types of oppression.

## **Conclusion**

Comments that reinforce Elizabeth’s popularity tend to appear in two ways: as off-hand statements of received opinion or as comparisons between ‘Good Queen Bess’ and ‘Bloody Mary.’ The use of these monikers creates a kind of familiarity created over centuries. Readers get a sense of the women’s characters through the use of these shortcut names. Elizabeth is ‘good,’ while Mary is ‘bloody.’ The popularity of the one

depends upon the unpopularity of the other, since Harper explicitly pits the two women against each other. Elizabeth's major foils tend to be women—suggesting that Harper is interested in a female-oriented understanding of Elizabeth. However, the insis-tences on Elizabeth as a Boleyn and Elizabeth-related clichés, including Elizabeth's popularity, undermine this possible goal. Rather, Elizabeth emerges, yet again, as a woman cut off from other women (her mother, her friends—who either die or are distant, geographically or in terms of rank, and even her enemies). What remains is another portrait of Elizabeth striving to feel as though she 'belongs,' when in reality she is separate and distinct. To navigate her world, before and after her accession, she relies on men to guide and advise her. Her separateness is positively figured in the novels (thus far) as reinforcing her awe-inspiring superiority, even when she seeks to diminish it, but it does little to truly re-imagine Elizabeth for a 21<sup>st</sup>-century audience.