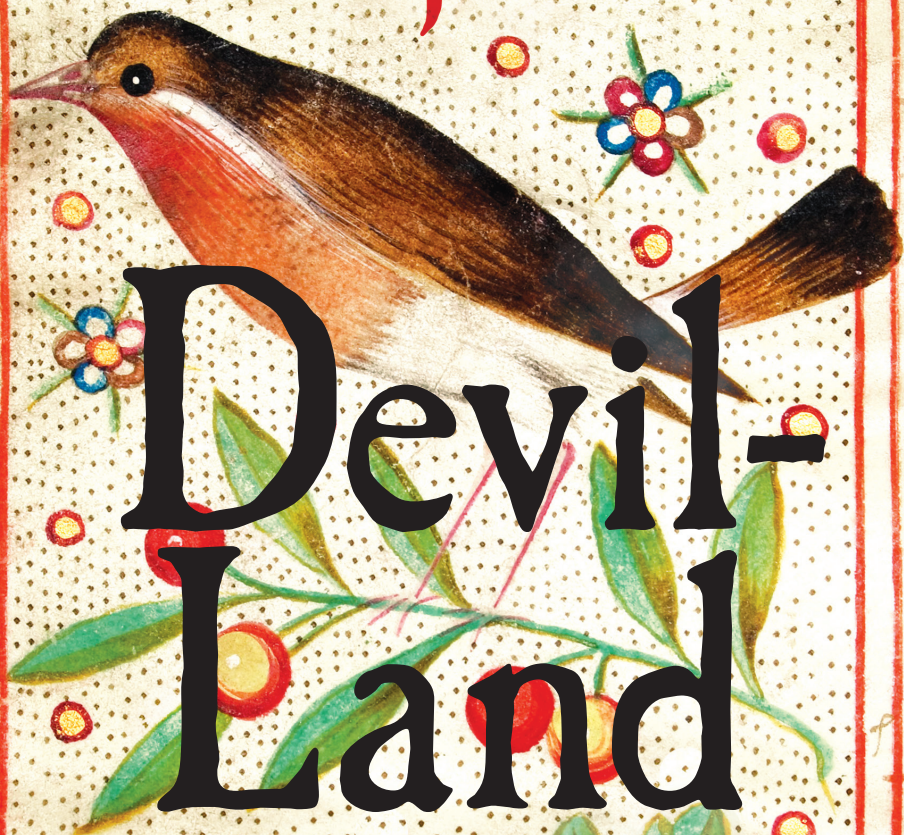
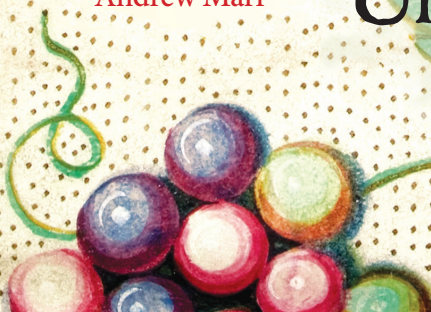


Clare Jackson



'Amazing, extraordinary,
perception-changing'
Andrew Marr

England
Under Siege
1588-1688



PENGUIN BOOKS

DEVIL-LAND

‘*Devil-Land* eloquently retells the story of our island’s most turbulent century. Viewed from abroad, far from being angelic the “angli” or English seemed diabolic. England, Jackson shows, was a pariah state, feared, distrusted and ridiculed on the continent’ Ruth Scurr, *TLS*,
Books of the Year

‘It begins as the Armada attempts to reverse the English Reformation and ends a century later with the Glorious Revolution, when James II, the last king to attempt Catholic rule, was driven out. Jackson looks at history from the viewpoint of the loser, painting England as a failed state – though the revolution turned out more glorious than she suggests’ Simon Heffer, *Daily Telegraph*,
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Clare Jackson is the Senior Tutor of Trinity Hall, Cambridge University. She has presented a number of highly successful programmes on the Stuart dynasty for the BBC and is the author of *Charles II* in the Penguin Monarchs series.

CLARE JACKSON

Devil-Land

England Under Siege, 1588–1688



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For Mark and Julius

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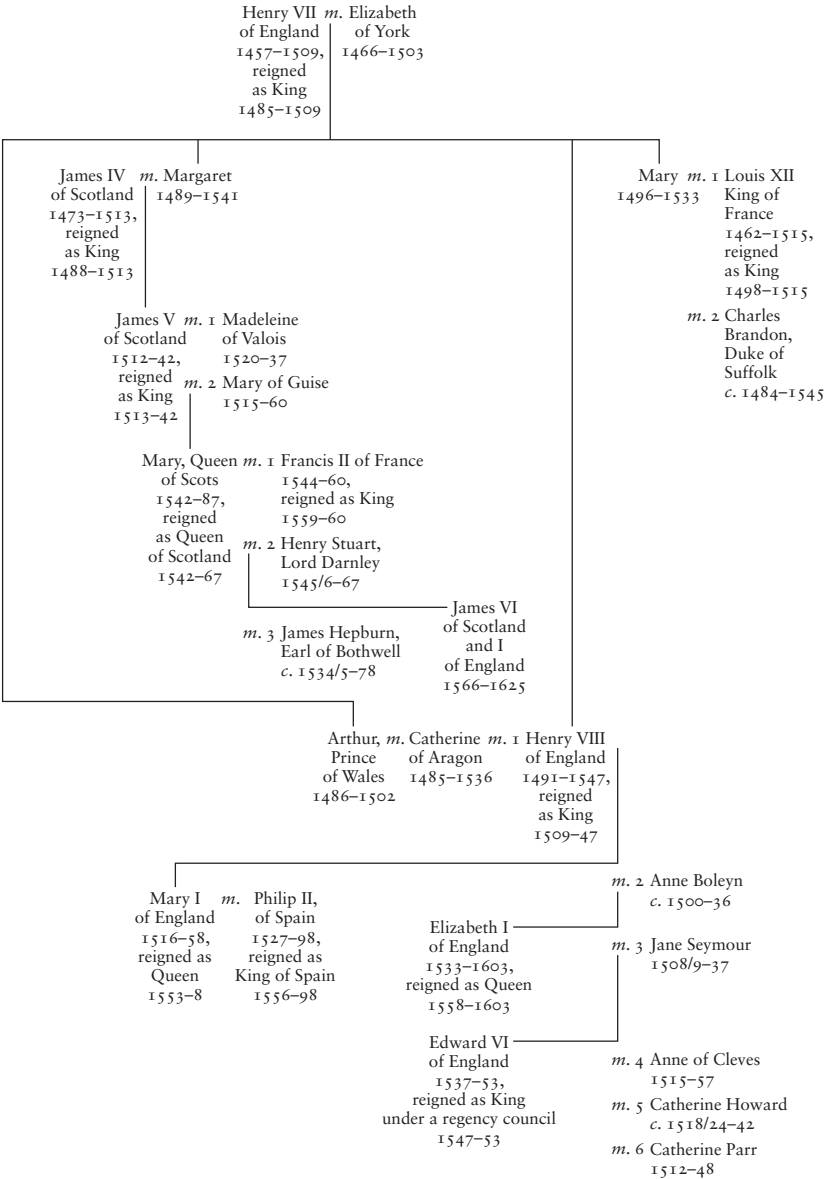
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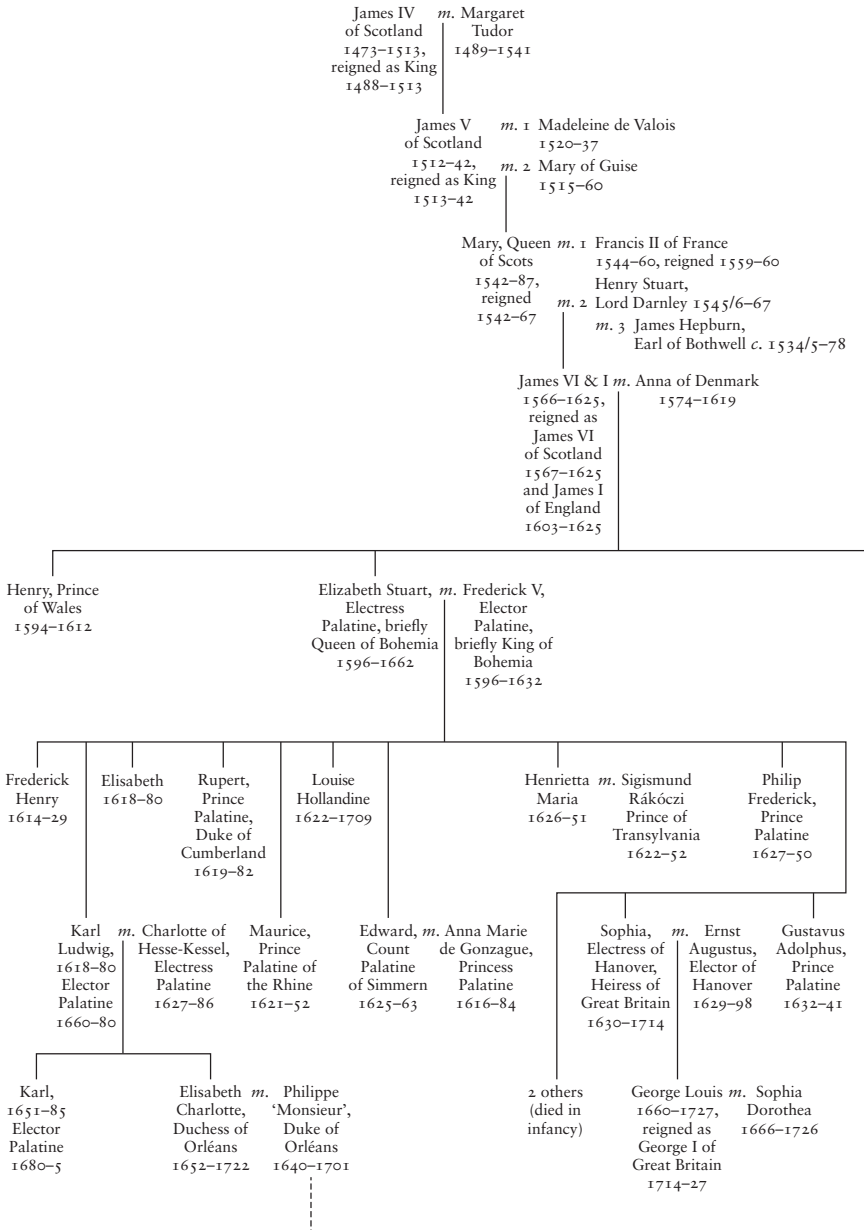


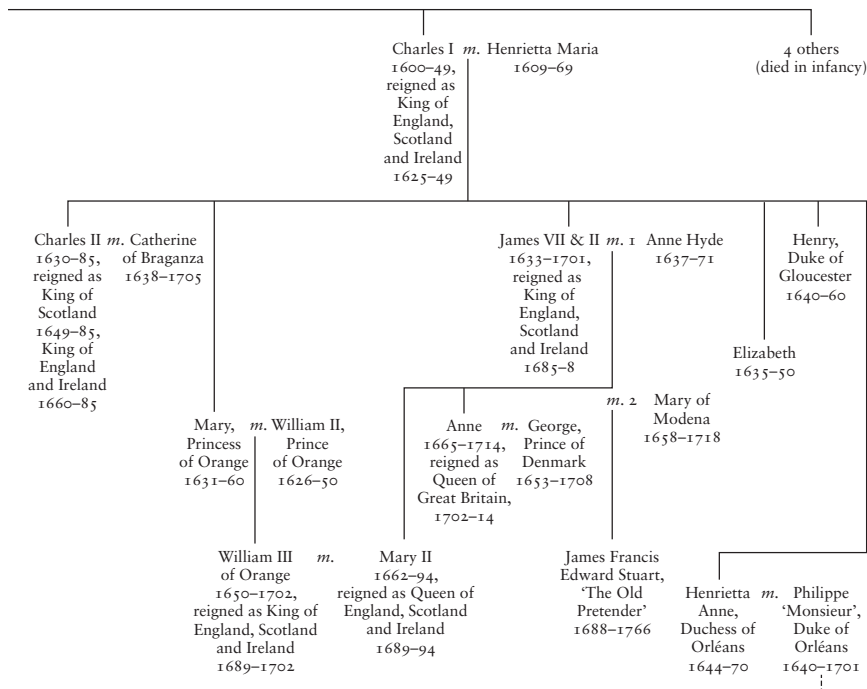


Descendants of Henry VII

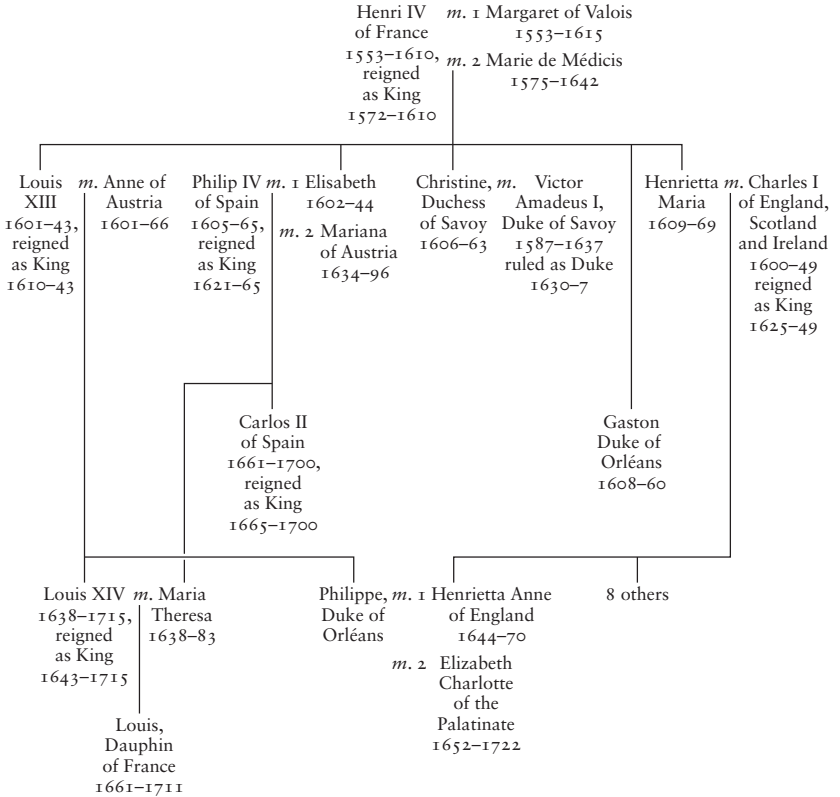


The Stuarts





The House of Bourbon



Author's Note

Dates in the text appear in 'Old Style' as per the Julian calendar that was observed in the British Isles until 1752 and, until 1700, was ten days behind the Gregorian calendar that had been adopted in the majority of Continental European countries after its introduction by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582. Dates in the endnotes remain as they appeared in the original sources. For convenience, each new year is taken to begin on 1 January, although, in England until 1752, and in Scotland until 1600, it was usual to deem each new year as starting on 25 March at the Feast of the Annunciation.

The spelling and punctuation of quotations and publication titles have mostly been modernized and the names of monarchs Anglicized, except for Henri III and Henri IV of France and Carlos II of Spain in order to differentiate them from their English Tudor namesakes and Charles II. All translations from French, Latin or Spanish texts are my own, unless indicated otherwise in the endnotes. During the seventeenth century, the official name of the Dutch Republic was the United Provinces of the Netherlands.

Introducing Devil-Land

In 1652, an anonymous Dutch pamphleteer advised that England should no longer be known as ‘Angel-land’, but instead be rechristened ‘Devil-land’.¹ Reversing familiar Latin puns whereby the ‘*Anglorum*’ (English) could be cherished as cherubic ‘*angelorum*’ (angels), Dutch denigration of ‘devil-land’ drew on xenophobic suspicions, dating back to medieval times, that Englishmen had tails. Diabolic and dreadful, the English were fallen angels: rebellious king-killers who had murdered their monarch, Charles I, three years earlier, and whose republican leaders, most prominently Oliver Cromwell, had declared war against their Dutch commercial rivals. A Dutch print, also published in 1652 and entitled *The Horrible Tail-Man*, depicted Cromwell sporting a strong, scaly tail that was made of gold coins and proved resistant to blows inflicted by his English Royalist, Scottish and Dutch enemies (Plate 16). Nor were denunciations of *duyvel-landt*, or devil-land, confined to foreign critics. A former chaplain to Charles I, Peter Heylyn, repeated a familiar seventeenth-century adage that, while the Spanish monarch was popularly known as ‘*Rex Humanum*, the king of men’, comfortably reliant on his subjects’ loyalty, and his French counterpart commonly termed ‘*Rex Asinorum*, the king of asses’ for levying exorbitant taxes on his suffering subjects, the English monarch’s relationship to his people was that of ‘*Rex Diablorum*, the king of devils, by reason of their many rebellions’. Twenty years earlier, an Essex apothecary, Dr Conyers, had been imprisoned for publicly claiming that, since the Holy Roman Emperor was styled ‘king of kings’, and his Spanish and French counterparts kings of men and asses, ‘so the king of England is king of devils’.²

To contemporaries and foreigners alike, seventeenth-century England was a failed state: a discomfiting byword for seditious rebellion,

religious extremism and regime change. Revisiting English history's most turbulent and radical era, *Devil-Land* re-explores Stuart England's dynastic politics and diplomatic dealings, the leitmotifs of which were instability, mistrust and contingency. In the mid-1670s, the experienced diplomat Sir William Temple declined Charles II's offer of promotion to a Secretaryship of State, admitting to his father that he remained sceptically mindful of the disdain, expressed by the recently assassinated Grand Pensionary of Holland, John de Witt, for the 'fluctuation perpetuelle dans la conduite d'Angleterre' – the unending flux of English affairs – 'which, of all things in the world, I am not made for . . . wrenching myself continually with sudden turns'.³ In the 1830s, the Whig historian and essayist Lord Macaulay denounced Temple's 'extreme dread of all responsibility' and his readiness 'rather to leave his country in a scrape than to run any chance of being in a scrape himself'. While England 'resounded with tumult' and 'the din of civil wars', Temple 'amused himself by writing memoirs and tying up apricots' in his orchard.⁴ But Macaulay's Victorian verdict was delivered secure in the knowledge of a 'Glorious' Revolution that would take place in 1689 and eighteenth-century Britain's emergence as a Great Power. Before 1689, de Witt's disparaging denigration was all too accurate. Seventeenth-century England remained Europe's adventure playground: a troubled nation, by turns too endemically unstable to influence with confidence, but simultaneously tempting as a pawn to be strategically ventured on the chessboard of Continental diplomacy.

Four centuries ago, Edmund Garrard predicted that readers of his *Country Gentleman Moderator* (1624) could plausibly complain 'that in my discourse I have been squint-eyed, as not looking or bending my course any ways direct'; *Devil-Land*'s readers might feel similarly.⁵ Like turning a jumper inside out to reveal the untidy seams, tied-off threads and disordered fabric of Stuart rule, this account emphasizes confusion, distrust and trepidation, rather than confidence, buoyancy and assurance. Acknowledging the inevitably selective content of all books, the Elizabethan playwright John Lyly penned a dedication to female readers of his two-part prose romance *Euphues and His England* (1580), pointing out that viewers only ever saw a single side of two-dimensional paintings or arras-hangings. By the same logic, Lyly explained that, if *Euphues*'s readers felt 'some sleights are wanting, I must say they are noted on the backside of the book'.⁶ In the prologue to his tragicomedy *Midas* (1592), Lyly

developed his textile metaphor by maintaining that, in England, ‘traffic and travel hath woven the nature of all nations into ours, and made this land like Arras, full of device, which was broad-cloth, full of workmanship’. Global commerce and overseas travel had prompted the demise of dense, durable and plain English broadcloth, as fashion now favoured intricate foreign tapestries with figurative designs, named after the northern French town of Arras. Detecting similar trends in literary form, Lyly warned that vogueish hybridity was replacing traditional pastoral, comedy and tragedy: what had previously appeared as ‘several dishes for a feast, is now minced in a charger for a gallimaufrey’. If play-goers found distasteful the resulting ‘mingle-mangle, our fault is to be excused, because the whole world is become a hodge-podge’.⁷ Less like a thickly woven plush arras-hanging, *Devil-Land*’s metaphorical texture more closely echoes the deliberate ‘openwork’ of a seventeenth-century doily, designed precisely to expose Stuart England’s unstable fissures and vulnerable fragilities.

I

The ‘hodge-podge’ of external perspective is central to *Devil-Land*’s emphasis on the remarkable degree to which seventeenth-century English history was determined, in Alexander Pope’s phrase, ‘by foreign hands’, who saw recurrent and irresistible opportunities for interference, involvement and even invasion.⁸ At the outset of our story, England’s narrow escape from the Spanish Armada in 1588 may have prompted hysterical gratitude for the nation’s ‘miraculous’ deliverance, but the biological bankruptcy of its Tudor monarchs led to a foreign dynasty – the Scottish Stuarts – acceding to the English and Irish thrones in 1603. While James VI & I articulated ambitious plans to create a new unitary kingdom of ‘Great Britain’, his son Charles I relied on foreign policy advisers who were characterized by one critic as variously ‘Hispanolished, Frenchified, Romanised or Neutralised’.⁹ As bitter internecine divisions spawned civil wars throughout England, Scotland and Ireland during the 1640s, foreign intervention was alternately sought and feared by Royalist and Parliamentary contingents alike. In 1645, for instance, an Italian archbishop, Giovanni Battista Rinuccini, arrived as a papal nuncio in County Kerry with plentiful finances and arms, seeking to spearhead the creation of an independent, Catholic-controlled Ireland.

Following the English Parliament's trial and execution of Charles I in 1649, the new republic's leaders trod dangerously when trying to evangelize overseas. In early 1651, Philip IV of Spain's ministers were understandably incensed by reports that the Commonwealth's General-at-Sea, Admiral Robert Blake, had arrived in the Andalusian port of Cadiz and brazenly announced 'in the public square there, that, with the example afforded by London, all kingdoms will annihilate tyranny and become republics'. With England's regime change completed, and France convulsed by internal rebellions, Blake recognized that 'the natural gravity of Spaniards rendered them somewhat slower in their operations', but he nevertheless 'gave them ten years for the revolution in this country'.¹⁰ But a decade later, it was Charles I's heir who, after a prolonged and peripatetic exile in a succession of foreign Continental courts, was invited to return to England as King Charles II by the same army that had engineered his father's removal. Over the next quarter of a century, fears that England risked being overrun by an aggressive neighbouring Catholic superpower persisted as traditional Hispanophobia transmuted into frenzied Francophobia, culminating in James VII & II's dramatic attempts to re-Catholicize the British Isles in the late 1680s. Foreign conquest then became a reality when, rather than Spanish or French forces, it was James's Dutch son-in-law and nephew, William of Orange, who spearheaded a successful seaborne invasion that landed at Torbay in Devon in November 1688 and rendered England, as one pamphleteer put it, 'a blank apt to receive any kind of impression'.¹¹

England's chaotic predicament was not unique. Amid a 'global crisis', the mid-seventeenth century witnessed the collapse of political authority and the outbreak of popular rebellion engulf not only Continental Europe, but also Ming China, Japan and the Mughal Empire. Shortly before Charles I's execution, the Welsh Royalist James Howell marvelled that so many 'monstrous things' had occurred, 'it seems the whole world is off the hinges'.¹² In 1655, the French ambassador to London, Antoine de Bordeaux-Neufville, doubted the likelihood of his imminent recall, admitting to a colleague that 'one must still apprehend some revolution in a country more subject to change and alteration, than any other in the world that is known'.¹³ Eight months later, Bordeaux's long-serving Spanish counterpart in London, Alonso de Cárdenas, warned a newly arrived Venetian envoy, Giovanni Sagredo, that 'I had come to a sea in which a knowledge of the compass and experience of

navigation were insufficient for avoiding the rocks'.¹⁴ As an alternative to discredited royal and parliamentary precedents, the republican theorist James Harrington imagined a utopia which he dedicated to England's Lord Protector, Oliver Cromwell, in *The Commonwealth of Oceana* (1656). As Harrington rhetorically wondered,

What is become of the princes . . . in Germany? Blown up. Where are the estates, or the power of the people, in France? Blown up. Where is that of the people in Aragon, and the rest of the Spanish kingdoms? Blown up. On the other side, where is the king of Spain's power in Holland? Blown up. Where is that of the Austrian princes in Switz? Blown up.¹⁵

Despite the Stuart monarchy's peaceful restoration in 1660, renewed revolt and rebellion could not be discounted. In 1673, one of Charles II's chaplains, the French-born Huguenot Pierre Du Moulin, acclaimed recent history as 'an age of wonders', and suggested that readers divert their attention from Continental Europe and look 'towards this island' to 'find that this little British world is a small enchiridion or epitome of all the stupendous events that ever happened in the great one'.¹⁶ While Du Moulin feared that Restoration England risked becoming a satellite state of Louis XIV's France, to foreign eyes more generally England's Stuart kings – and their Danish, French, Portuguese and Italian queen consorts – ruled an anxious, fractious and erratic people with a volatile constitutional history and complex confessional politics.

II

Devil-Land places the succession of Stuart rulers centre-stage to illustrate how a nation's insecurities and apprehensions were refracted through their monarchs' diplomatic agendas, different personalities and political associates. To many of their English subjects, the Stuarts were regarded as an alien, imported dynasty that could not be securely relied upon to promote the national interest. Indeed, *Devil-Land* opens with the spectacle of a state execution, as Elizabeth I signed the death warrant of her cousin Mary, Queen of Scots, who was not even one of her subjects, but a former queen consort of France and deposed queen regnant of Scotland, with a strong hereditary claim to the English throne and a track record of

fomenting Catholic conspiracies to undermine the Elizabethan regime. Mary Stuart's demise left the vexed question of Elizabeth's eventual succession unresolved and banned from public discussion. But for audiences attending the first performances of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* around 1600, the anxious fears of a royal court, anticipating imminent regime change and fearing military aggression from foreign enemies hoping to exploit dynastic weakness, were only too resonant.

Although James VI of Scotland's peaceful accession as James I in 1603 averted fears of a bloody war of succession, he had only been on the English throne for fifteen months when MPs in the House of Commons presented a draft *Form of Apology and Satisfaction* disabusing their new king of any 'misinformations' he might have received and firmly denying that 'kings of England have any absolute power in themselves' regarding religious or civil legislation.¹⁷ In the public arena, English MPs, lawyers and polemicists decisively rejected James's unionist vision of 'Great Britain' on the grounds that 'England' would thereby be eradicated as a separate and ancient constitutional entity. On the international front, it was as brother-in-law to Christian IV of Denmark that James successfully acted as mediator – in a role unthinkable for Elizabeth I – to broker the Treaty of Knäred that ended the Kalmar War between Denmark-Norway and Sweden in 1613. That same year, the marriage of James's daughter Elizabeth to the Protestant Palatine Elector Frederick V rendered inevitable England's eventual entanglement in the Thirty Years War which broke out in 1618, following Frederick's misjudged decision to accept the Bohemian crown. A self-styled '*rex pacificus*', James's reluctance to enter the Continent-wide conflict on his daughter's behalf, while simultaneously seeking a Catholic bride for her brother, Prince Charles, was criticized both as a father's dereliction of dynastic duty and for undermining England's international responsibilities to promote Protestant interests.

Although popular rejoicing greeted the failure of Prince Charles's projected 'Spanish Match' in 1623, he went on to marry the French Catholic Princess Henrietta Maria the following year. Residual suspicions that Charles I was 'popishly inclined' gained credence through artistic installations that included the splendidly baroque ceiling of the Banqueting House in Whitehall, painted by the Flemish artist Peter Paul Rubens, who secured the commission while acting as an envoy of Philip IV of Spain during a nine-month diplomatic mission to London in 1629.¹⁸

As civil wars engulfed England, Scotland and Ireland during the 1640s, the poet John Milton rued that Stuart foreign policy had left England 'naked of our firmest, and most faithful neighbours abroad, by disparaging and alienating from us all Protestant princes and commonwealths' and 'preferring the Spaniard, our deadly enemy, before them'.¹⁹ Resenting continued interference and serial invasions by Scottish Presbyterians and Irish Catholics, the civil wars stimulated a rhetoric of English exceptionalism, championed by 'God's own Englishman', Oliver Cromwell, who denounced Charles I's alliance with Scottish 'Engagers' in 1648 as an attempt 'to vassalise us to a foreign nation'.²⁰

Dividing the Stuart dynasty as it divided families across England, the civil wars pitted Charles's Palatine nephews, Prince Rupert and his younger brother Prince Maurice, who served as Royalist commanders, against the siblings' eldest brother Charles Louis, who in 1644 accepted the English Parliament's invitation to travel to London, where he resided in the king's former residence at Whitehall until shortly after his uncle's execution in 1649. Thereafter, the English monarchy was officially abolished as an institution, prompting one propagandist to point out that 'forty years were the English under the government of two Scottish kings', which was 'just as many years as the children of Israel did wander in the wilderness before they came unto rest'.²¹ Although the English had successfully thrown off their alien subjugators, the Scots' determination to re-export Charles II as England's rightful king soon posed a new security threat.

After the Stuart monarchy's restoration in 1660, fears that England's national interests risked liquidation only intensified during the second half of the seventeenth century when Charles II relied on secret French subsidies to avoid negotiating with a truculent English Parliament. When renewed conflict broke out between England and the Dutch Republic, a string of English naval defeats culminated in one of the most daring exploits in naval history: the Dutch raid on the River Medway in June 1667 and the humiliating capture of the Royal Navy's flagship, the *Royal Charles*, the carved stern piece of which remains on prominent display in Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum (Plate 25). In Whitehall, Charles insisted to Louis XIV's envoy, Henri de Massue, marquis of Ruigny, that he was 'standing up for France's interests against his entire kingdom' in 1674. Five years later, he confirmed to Ruigny's successor, Paul Barillon d'Amoncourt, marquis of Branges, that he would prefer to rely on financial subsidies from the French king than accede to demands from

opposition Whig MPs to exclude his Catholic brother, James, duke of York, from the royal line of succession. Hence it was up to Louis to decide ‘whether he wanted a republic or a monarchy in England’.²²

During the short reign of James VII & II – himself a veteran of Louis’s French army – the fortunes of Continental Catholicism and Stuart kingship became more inextricably linked than ever. Determined to reverse James’s pro-Catholicizing agenda, a group of seven prominent English nobles invited the king’s Dutch son-in-law and nephew, William of Orange, to intervene in domestic politics. After William successfully landed a massive invasion fleet at Torbay, Dutch, Danish and Hessian troops occupied London during Christmas in 1688, with all English regiments barred from approaching within twenty miles of the city for over a year thereafter.²³

In 1687, a Scots Presbyterian exile in the Netherlands, Patrick Hume, Lord Polwarth, had warned William to court English opinion carefully and beware his Stuart credentials, admitting that ‘the far greater part, even of those who like monarchy, of that nation carry to this hour a dislike of the race and branches of the Scots family, and if they could fix elsewhere, would certainly reject it’.²⁴ As Polwarth predicted, even this form of Protestant deliverance posed new risks to the national interest as William thereafter voraciously drained England’s resources for Dutch ends to prosecute a Continental war against Louis XIV on an unprecedented scale. Accusing a resuscitated ‘William the Conqueror’ of having illegally seized the English crown, in 1692 a French polemicist, Eustache Le Noble, compared William of Orange to ‘a guilty second Cromwell, under whose power . . . enslaved Albion is moaning’.²⁵

By the time of George I’s accession two decades later, England’s domestic security remained on a knife-edge. Defensive about its legitimacy, the new Hanoverian dynasty feared constant challenge from determined supporters of the exiled James VII & II, known as Jacobites, and found itself obliged to maintain an unpopular standing army at a time of ostensible peace. Once again, England’s national priorities were in the grip of a foreign – German – dynasty, but this time permanently.

III

If the Stuarts were regarded as alien foreigners by their own, more critical, English subjects, one priority of this book is to reveal how they

were perceived by foreign observers, especially by the large cast of overseas ambassadors and envoys dispatched to seventeenth-century England. Having ruled Scotland as an adult king for almost two decades before succeeding Elizabeth I as English monarch, James VI had already developed extensive diplomatic relations with states including France, Spain, the United Provinces, the Spanish Netherlands, Denmark-Norway and the papacy. His accession to the English throne attracted a visibly enlarged resident diplomatic community in London. Between 1603 and 1625, James received more than 250 diplomatic delegations from over thirty different states while the number of English ambassadorial missions dispatched abroad also increased significantly.²⁶

It was, moreover, through foreign eyes that incisive critiques of Stuart rule emerged, since it was precisely those characteristics most distrusted by domestic critics – such as insisting on the absolute power of divinely ordained monarchy and concealing the secret arts of successful statecraft, known as the *arcana imperii* – that were instinctively appreciated by foreign envoys trained in dissimulation and deception. Personifying their own rulers' dignity and authority, seventeenth-century ambassadors continually calibrated the standing of their own country vis-à-vis that of other states through interactions at court, official royal audiences, intelligence-gathering and unofficial patronage. At the same time, ambassadors' assessments were inescapably subjective and distorted, since diplomats deployed a double vision, observing events in their host country in terms of their domestic impact, but primarily as the basis for reports to be returned to their own country. But as Louis XIV reminded his newly dispatched representative to London, Gaston Jean-Baptiste, count of Cominges, in 1663, 'there is nothing in the whole world that does not come under the cognisance and fall within the sphere of an ambassador'.²⁷

Although no seventeenth-century government had its own professional consular service, diplomatic ceremonial, codes, techniques and practice were becoming more formalized. Promoted as England's first Historiographer Royal under Charles II, James Howell published a treatise on ambassadorial practice in 1664 which confirmed 'the absolute and indispensable necessity of ambassadors'. Insisting that 'mankind cannot subsist without them', Howell explained that 'if it were not for ambassadors, wars would be endless and enmities everlasting'. Although commenting on royal policy was 'a ticklish and tremendous task' – akin

to a man 'walking upon the ridge of a high house, or dancing upon a rope . . . in danger to break his neck' – Howell criticized Charles II's father for notoriously disregarding diplomatic protocol by travelling to the Spanish court incognito when Prince of Wales in 1623. Well-intentioned, but naïve, the prince's presence in Madrid had only 'distracted and retarded' objectives that Howell claimed would, if negotiated by ambassadors, have 'been brought to perfection'.²⁸

If sometimes seeming hyperbolic, the intense jealousies attaching to matters of diplomatic ceremonial – such as the hierarchy of seating arrangements at royal events or the perceived quality of royal coaches placed at the disposal of different retinues – reflected the proxy roles that ambassadors performed for their rulers and states. The long-standing rivalry between the ambassadors of France and Spain even bloodied London's streets in 1661 as struggles for precedence in a public procession to welcome a new Swedish delegation resulted in gunfire, French fatalities and threats of renewed Franco-Spanish warfare. Three years later, Secretary of State Henry Bennet (later earl of Arlington) reminded Charles II's representative in Madrid, Sir Richard Fanshawe, of new protocols designed to avoid such clashes; most monarchs preferred 'to have their business done by their ambassadors, than punctilios disputed' ensuring that, only when diplomacy had been exhausted, was it 'fit they rather fight them out with their armies than their ambassadors'.²⁹ In an era when sovereigns more often ventured overseas at the head of invading armies than enjoyed ceremonial state visits, ambassadors provided peacetime proxies for face-to-face summits. Leading an English delegation resident at Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich's court in Moscow in 1663, Charles Howard, earl of Carlisle, had tried to circumvent obstructive Russian courtiers and gain a personal audience with the Tsar. Only then, as Carlisle had explained to Aleksei, would he be able to represent Charles II's 'words upon this occasion, as if he and you could meet together' and perceive, through 'that glass of friendship, the most clear eyes of one another'.³⁰

Early modern diplomacy's inherently theatrical character provided the Stuarts with regular opportunities to magnify their majesty for domestic and foreign audiences. Yet early modern diplomacy also depended as much on artifice and disguise as decorum. Serving as James VI & I's ambassador to Venice for three terms between 1604 and 1623, Sir Henry Wotton first came to the king's attention when he arrived at

James's court in Edinburgh in 1601, posing as a Florentine envoy named 'Octavio Baldi', ostensibly sent to warn James of an imminent plot to poison him and prevent his accession to the English throne, with Baldi also helpfully bringing the requisite Italian antidote. Having successfully maintained the fiction for three months in Edinburgh, Wotton's reward was prolonged diplomatic service for James. Royal patience was tested, however, when Wotton's witty inscription in a friend's commonplace book – that an ambassador was an 'honest man sent to lie abroad for the good of his country' – backfired when the English pun (whereby 'to lie' could also denote 'to reside') failed to translate into Latin and the epigram was cited in print by a Catholic controversialist as evidence that the English king routinely posted mendacious representatives to lie on his behalf overseas.³¹ At the same time, James's pacifist preference for dispatching envoys to negotiate, rather than armed battalions to fight, incurred mocking censure from Continental critics. Visiting the Low Countries to research materials involved in glass-making in the early 1620s, Howell reported news of a satirical play staged by Jesuits in Antwerp in which reports were received of the imminent arrival of extensive supplies for the defeated Protestant Elector Palatine from Christian IV of Denmark, 'the Hollanders' and James. Further enquiries revealed, however, that the Danes were actually intending to 'send 100,000 red herrings', while the Dutch authorities would provide '100,000 cheeses' and the English king would dispatch '100,000 ambassadors'.³²

Amid growing recognition that a diplomat's official duties might risk compromising an individual's private integrity, the Dutch-born envoy Abraham de Wicquefort produced a popular manual of diplomatic practice, first published in French in 1681 and translated into English as *The Ambassador and His Functions* (1716). To define an ambassador's role, Wicquefort cited instructions given to Francis Walsingham before a delegation to France in 1570. While the ostensible purpose of Walsingham's mission had been to seek a formal Anglo-French alliance, Elizabeth I had further tasked him with observing 'all the actions of the king, and the queen regent, as well private as public' that 'might be prejudicial to us and to our state'. 'These few lines' wherein Elizabeth succinctly confirmed 'the two first functions of an ambassador . . . as a messenger of peace on one side and as an honourable spy on the other' were singled out for admiration by Wicquefort – who was himself later

convicted of selling state secrets.³³ Although often deployed ironically, Wicquefort's characterization of the 'honourable spy' captured the shadowy boundaries between an ambassador's duty to gather intelligence and the potential for illicit espionage.

During the 1660s, Charles II's special ambassador in The Hague, Sir William Temple, confessed to enjoying his role as a 'moderate intelligencer' while his counterpart in Paris, Ralph Montagu, frankly admitted to Arlington that since 'the part of an ambassador is to be a spy and a tell-tale', he would 'tell you all I hear and learn in this country'.³⁴ Twice sent to England to represent Carlos II of Spain's interests in 1674 and 1680, Don Pedro Ronquillo acknowledged that his ambassadorial role amounted to 'an honourable mode of deception', according to a manual of diplomatic procedure penned by a member of Ronquillo's entourage. While Ronquillo knew that 'flattery is the magnet which everywhere attracts goodwill', all foreign embassies were haunted by 'certain busy-bodies' that acted as 'conduits and gutter-spouts of political gossip' and were denounced by the Spanish commentator as 'moths and woodlice of the state'.³⁵

Inherent within any diplomat's role was also the risk of going native. Having served as Florentine ambassador to Ferdinand V of Aragon's court in the 1510s, Francesco Guicciardini observed that 'ambassadors often take the side of the prince at whose court they are'. Expected blandishments would include valuable gifts and flattering compliments, but Guicciardini also warned about the possibility of a distorted perspective. Since envoys were naturally preoccupied with the politics of a foreign court, 'the ambassador has the affairs of that prince constantly before his eyes', often meaning that 'they assume greater importance than they really have'.³⁶ In London, James VI & I had only been on the English throne for nine months when reports circulated that he had already spent over £25,000 on gifts to foreign ambassadors, contemporaries particularly distrusting his companionable sharing of bibliophile, oenophile and hunting interests with Philip III's representative, Diego Sarmiento de Acuña, count of Gondomar.³⁷

By the same token, however, ministers naturally welcomed evidence that domestic events were being reported abroad to English advantage. In 1679, Charles II's Secretary of State, Sir Henry Coventry, apologized to the Irish Lord Deputy, James Butler, duke of Ormond, for forwarding a letter intercepted in the Dutch Republic which observed, in passing,

that Ormond's son, Thomas, earl of Ossory, 'has not much brains'. Coventry was, however, more interested in the anonymous correspondent's claim that members of the Dutch States-General were alarmed that their ambassador in London, Conrad van Beuningen, 'gives more credit to the king and his directions, than he does to them'. As the writer acknowledged, if Van Beuningen could be persuaded to 'write with a little more guard it would do well, for we live in an age that even blockheads can see day at the least crevice'.³⁸

IV

If its English subjects regarded its Stuart court as suspiciously foreign, they were justified in doing so, not least since successive queens consort at Whitehall each brought different networks of political patronage, confessional complexities and foreign entanglements. James VI & I's consort Anna, for example, could write fluently in Danish, German, Latin, French, Scots, English and Italian. Often overlooked, too, are the cosmopolitan dimensions to the Stuart dynasty's extended family and consorts whose numerous tentacles yielded extensive foreign contact and influence. While the English court had not known a functioning royal family for over half a century at the time of Elizabeth I's death, James's credentials to succeed his English cousin had been strengthened by both his Protestant faith, as well as future heirs in his children, Henry, Elizabeth and Charles. Progeny not only assured posterity, but also diplomatic potential. As James's ambassador in Madrid, Sir Charles Cornwallis, observed in 1608, contemporary political wisdom admired 'princes with large posterity' for 'as many children as any king has, so many more baits they have' to tempt prospective partners in an international marriage market.³⁹ Acclaiming the Stuart-Bourbon alliance achieved by the marriage of James's son Charles and Princess Henrietta Maria in 1624, one French commentator marvelled that 'two of the most mighty and potent kingdoms of Christendom should be united together, by the most glorious marriage that ever was seen in the world'.⁴⁰ But just as the French Valois and Bourbon dynasties faced regular threats from semi-sovereign 'foreign princes' – or *princes étrangers* – notably from the House of Guise, in an English context members of the Palatine branch of the Stuart dynasty provided a

parallel destabilizing influence on domestic affairs as a result of the marriage of Charles I's sister Elizabeth to Elector Frederick V in 1613. Several of Charles's overseas ambassadors became confidants and frequent correspondents of Elizabeth, supplying critical commentaries of Caroline foreign policy. From the diplomat Sir Thomas Roe, for instance, Elizabeth received numerous letters, variously sent from Moghul India, Constantinople, Poland, Denmark, Vienna and England. While Elizabeth often started her letters to Roe with the salutation 'honest, fat Tom', she teasingly addressed another ambassador, John Hay, earl of Carlisle, as 'ugly, filthy camel's face'.⁴¹

Although the marriages of both Charles and Henrietta Maria, and Elizabeth and Frederick, proved remarkably fecund, the Stuarts were not a family renowned for dynastic reliability. Between 1603 and 1700, over twenty-five of their legitimate offspring died before the age of twenty-one including, notably, Charles I's popular older brother, Prince Henry, for whom James had written a manual of kingship, *Basilikon Doron* (1599), but who died at the age of eighteen in 1612. After chronic dynastic insecurity had ended the Tudor royal line, James VI & I became the only one of thirteen English monarchs between Henry VII and George I who lived to see a grandchild born.⁴² With the post-Reformation English crown also came Supreme Governorship of the established church, but following the covert conversion to Catholicism of James's Danish wife, Anna, both James's son, Charles I, and grandsons Charles II and James VII & II, all took Catholic consorts in the forms, respectively, of Queens Henrietta Maria, Catherine of Braganza and Mary of Modena, and each queen maintained separate Catholic religious establishments at court. Following the Williamite Revolution in 1688, the English political establishment's startling decision to elevate Protestant confessional conformity over actual patrilineal descent ensured that, by the Act of Settlement in 1701, succession to the English crown was diverted from James VII & II's Catholic descendants to James VI & I's Protestant grandchild through the Palatine branch, Electress Sophia of Hanover, who then died in June 1714. On Queen Anne's death the following August, the era of Stuart rule ended when Sophia's son and heir, Georg Ludwig, became King George I and the first Hanoverian monarch to rule over a united Great Britain and Ireland.

To some extent, the Stuart court's confessional complexities reflected the heterogeneity of religious belief throughout its territories. Although a

Protestant, Episcopalian church was established in all three kingdoms of England, Scotland and Ireland, the majority population in Ireland remained Roman Catholic, while opposition to the Church of England's ecclesiastical hierarchy of archbishops and bishops by a significant proportion of Scots prompted the eventual re-establishment of Presbyterianism in 1690, whereby the Church of Scotland was governed by representative assemblies of church elders. During the mid-century civil wars, the collapse of state-controlled religious conformity had unleashed an explosion of new and radical religious sects, including Quakers, Baptists, Fifth Monarchists and Ranters, while Oliver Cromwell's Protectorate reversed the thirteenth-century expulsion of Jews from England and oversaw their readmittance in 1656. Responsibility for England's growing religious sectarianism was inevitably attributed to foreign influence. The former Thames boatman and Royalist water-poet John Taylor bewailed the extent to which 'religion is made a hotch-potch and, as it were, tossed in a blanket, and too many places of England, Amsterdamnified by several opinions'.⁴³ As Dutch practices of religious toleration threatened to gain ground, the title-page of Taylor's *Religion's Enemies* (1641) bore a woodcut illustration of an Anabaptist, Brownist, Familist and Papist, each holding a corner of a blanket, bearing a large Bible.

Concerns about English Protestantism's capacity to accommodate myriad doctrinal differences compounded anxieties regarding long-standing fears of domestic rebellion or foreign intervention undertaken to promote Catholic interests. Between 1590 and 1690, Counter-Reformation military victories and missionaries reduced the geographical extent of Protestantism from one-half to one-fifth of Continental Europe's land area.⁴⁴ To foreign envoys in London representing Catholic states, Stuart England was now one of a reduced handful of countries inhabited by obstinate heretics. Nonetheless, the Venetian Resident, Francesco Giavarina, was alarmed by the Cromwellian Protectorate's deployment of troops in Flanders in 1658, objecting that 'this mad dog nation, which professes such false and wicked doctrines, keeps gaining a firmer footing in the Catholic states'.⁴⁵ While Giavarina's fears proved alarmist, ambassadors representing Catholic states were regularly disconcerted by the variety of worship encountered in England. In 1663, Louis XIV's ambassador, Cominges, winced to see 'this nation, so deeply gnawed and ruined by false religions that nothing short of a miracle will be wanted to save it'.⁴⁶

For their part, English administrations distrusted the influence exerted by Catholic chapels attached to foreign embassies that recruited English-speaking priests and attracted congregations of English recusants who were protected, on extra-territorial grounds, while worshipping inside the embassy's walls, but whose immunity evaporated once they returned to London's streets. At the royal court, the sung Masses held in Catherine of Braganza's chapel drew regular attendance by the diarist Samuel Pepys, who in 1667 was given a private tour of the lodgings for the queen's Franciscan friars by her Grand Almoner and later cardinal, Philip Howard. As well as viewing 'a crucifix given by a pope to Mary, Queen of Scots', Pepys so admired the friars' comfortable living quarters that he 'wished myself one of the Capuchins (a Franciscan order)', while Howard referred 'in mirth' to Pope Alexander VII as 'the Antichrist' and ended the visit by sharing a coach with Pepys, 'talking merrily about the difference in our religions'.⁴⁷ But when James VII & II's queen, Mary of Modena, bore a son in June 1688, the 'differences' were no longer those of musical taste or jovial banter. Protestant propagandists, alarmed by the sudden prospect of a perennial Catholic dynasty on the English throne, tried to deny the new Prince of Wales's legitimacy, claiming that he had been surreptitiously smuggled into the royal apartments in a warming-pan, before the king summoned over forty prominent witnesses to Whitehall in October to provide sworn depositions to dispel such rumours. While James worried about reports that his Dutch nephew and son-in-law, William of Orange, 'with the first eastwardly wind, will invade this kingdom', the Lord Chancellor, George, Baron Jeffreys, was among those who formally testified to having attended the queen's delivery where he had observed the baby prince 'black and reeking, so that it plainly seemed to this deponent to have been newly come from the womb'.⁴⁸

Living in constant terror of an international popish plot, whether through dynastic coup, political assassination, foreign invasion or domestic subversion, Protestant polemicists preached a need for constant vigilance. Although medieval fears of physical demons had receded, the godly remained vulnerable to more insidious forms of spiritual corruption. With pernicious priests 'demonised as diabolic servants in Christian camouflage', Protestants feared that susceptible souls might yet be seduced by Catholicism's claims to theological certainty or tempted by the alluring ceremonial, images and incense of its false worship.⁴⁹ In

1588, James VI of Scotland published *A Fruitful Meditation* on verses in the biblical Book of Revelation that identified the imminent descent of the Antichrist in the Spanish galleons currently ‘prepared and come forward against this isle’.⁵⁰ Four years later, the Elizabethan satirist John Nashe likewise invoked the precarity of the ‘Narrow Seas’ that separated England from its Continental neighbours as a means of imagining the propinquity of Hell. As Nashe suggested, just ‘as a man standing upon Calais sands may see men walking on Dover cliffs, so easily may you discern Heaven from the farthest point of Hell’.⁵¹ While James VI’s *Fruitful Meditation* was translated into French, Dutch and Latin and published in Amsterdam, La Rochelle, Basle, Halle and Jena during the 1590s, the Scottish king also provided articulations of the theoretical basis and practical workings of divinely ordained monarchical power in *The True Lawe of Free Monarchies* (1598) and *Basilikon Doron*.

Fundamental to James’s supernatural conception of the divine right of kings was a parallel appreciation of the concomitant dangers posed by satanic forces and his printed dialogue entitled *Daemonologie* (1597) was the only work by an early modern monarch on the demonic presence in politics and society. Deploying an oppositional rhetoric of contrarities, the character ‘Epistemon’ ventriloquized James’s warning that he ‘who denies the power of the Devil, would likewise deny the power of God’ and insisted that, ‘since the Devil is the very contrary opposite to God, there can be no better way to know God, than by the contrary’.⁵² Two years after James’s accession as English king, discovery of the Catholic Gunpowder Plot in 1605 supplied terrifyingly tangible proof of how demonic potential might be activated to wreak destruction.

Yet although providential deliverance preserved both the royal court and Westminster Parliament from Catholic plotters, Devil-land’s constitutional practices remained disorderly. After more than a decade of disillusionment, James candidly vented his frustration to Philip III of Spain’s ambassador, Gondomar, describing the English House of Commons in 1614 as a rambunctious and unmanageable body, whose meetings comprised only ‘cries, shouts and confusion’. Surprised ‘that my ancestors should ever have permitted such an institution to come into existence’, James admitted, ‘I am a stranger, and found it here when I arrived, so that I am obliged to put up with what I cannot get rid of’.⁵³ Towards the end of James’s reign in 1624, the Venetian ambassador Alvise Valaresso wearily reported that, in London, ‘matters are in a state

of fluctuation, not to say decadence; every day brings its novelty, and the novelties are all but detestable. Nothing is more stable than instability.' Three months later, following the impeachment and conviction of the Lord High Treasurer Lionel Cranfield, earl of Middlesex, Valaresso reported that Middlesex's imprisonment had only lasted a few days, despairingly observing that 'this is the way in England: hardly has the ink dried of a sentence fulminated by parliament than the king annuls it . . . yet it all happens without exciting disgust'.⁵⁴

Even when the Stuarts set Parliament aside in favour of 'personal rule', perceptions of a pervasive arrogance, combined with fatal indecisiveness, exacerbated foreigners' frustrations. In 1637, another Venetian envoy, Anzolo Correr, visited the sickbed of his Spanish counterpart, Íñigo Vélez de Guevara, count of Oñate, who railed 'in a very contemptuous manner about this court', insisting 'there was no school in the world where one could learn how to negotiate with the English' and denying that he was 'capable of understanding their humours'.⁵⁵ To some minds, endemic instability was the natural result of Britain's off-shore insular geography. In his first-century BC *Eclogues*, the Roman poet Virgil had described Britain as *penitus toto divisos orbe* – 'that land completely separated from the world' – while the Jacobean poet Anthony Nixon referred to 'this sea-walled isle' in 1613.⁵⁶ Dispatched to London to congratulate James on his accession as king in 1603, the Protestant Huguenot Maximilien de Béthune, marquis of Rosny, insisted that 'no nation in Europe is more haughty and disdainful, nor more conceited in an opinion of its superior excellence'. Inclined 'to adore all their own opinions, and despise those of every other nation', the English, he speculated, had 'contracted all the instability of the element by which they are surrounded', namely water. For this reason, Rosny insisted that any future French ambassador must be someone 'of understanding and authority, who may compel them to hear him, and force them to be reasonable'.⁵⁷

Prolonged mid-century civil wars and successive republican regimes only perpetuated diplomatic vexations. Resident in London in 1646, the French ambassador, Pomponne de Bellièvre, objected to Louis XIV's Secretary of State, Henri-Auguste de Loménie, count of Brienne, that 'affairs here change so fast that one no longer reckons time by months and weeks, but by hours and even by minutes'.⁵⁸ In a tract entitled *A German Diet* (1653), James Howell gave voice to a vitriolic German

noble who likewise observed of Britain that ‘as the sea tumbles perpetually about the country, so their brains do fluctuate in their noddles [heads], which makes them so variable and unsteady’.⁵⁹ Christer Bonde, serving as Sweden’s representative in London two years later, complained to Charles X that ‘I go round in circles with these irresolute people: sometimes I blaze away at them, at others I take them to my bosom’, adding that ‘they cannot produce a single argument which I cannot show to be palpably erroneous’. Unlike many of his diplomatic colleagues, Bonde spoke fluent English which he acknowledged ‘comes in extremely handy’, narrating a conversation with the Lord Protector in which Cromwell had confessed ‘that it was a matter of grief to him that he had been so ill-educated that he scarcely ventured to speak any other language than English’.⁶⁰

Cromwell’s monolingualism served him poorly given that, as the London-based language teacher, translator and sometime spy John Florio had observed in 1578, English was ‘a language that will do you good in England, but past Dover, it is worth nothing’.⁶¹ Just over a century later, a Spanish commentary on diplomatic etiquette recommended that ambassadors learn the vernacular language of their host country ‘or at least the language most in use there, as is French in London’.⁶² As Louis XIV’s ambassador, Gaston Jean-Baptiste, count of Cominges, confirmed to a colleague in Paris, he refused to ‘nettle myself by listening to English and I will never learn it’. As Cominges insisted, ‘it can only be spoken after long practice in the habit which the English have of flapping their lips, but neither pronouncing nor articulating effectively’.⁶³

Not that maintaining Francophone communications muted the diplomatic chorus of confusion and crossness. As Cominges admitted to Louis XIV in 1663, ‘it seems to me, every moment, I have been transferred to the antipodes’. Baffled by English politics, the French envoy ventured that, even were Aristotle – famed for his precise and detailed constitutional analyses – ‘to come again to this world, he could not find words to explain the manner of this government’. For Cominges, England’s government ‘has a monarchical appearance, as there is a king, but at bottom it is very far from being a monarchy’, prefiguring the famous description of eighteenth-century Britain as ‘a nation where the republic hides under the form of a monarchy’ by the Enlightenment *philosophe* Charles-Louis de Secondat, baron de Montesquieu, in his *Spirit of the Laws* (1748).⁶⁴

England’s unpredictable climate only compounded Gallic gloom.

Whereas Rosny had identified strength of character as the essential attribute for future French envoys, when the plague afflicted London in 1665, Honoré Courtin advised Louis XIV 'to cast his eyes on some broad-shouldered person' and prioritize physical robustness when appointing ambassadors to England. While Courtin hoped 'not to die in London', he warned one of Louis's ministers in Paris that, concerning his fellow envoy Henri de Bourbon, duc de Verneuil, unless a speedy replacement was dispatched, 'French travellers will be one day shown the tomb of Monsieur de Verneuil in Westminster Abbey', while their colleague, Cominges, also suffered 'a chronic rheum which will follow him to his grave'. Having been afflicted by scurvy the previous year, Cominges plaintively feared that 'I shall go home without one single tooth left', after London doctors had dismissively offered 'a pretty piece of consolation' when predicting that the ambassador would 'only lose five or six' teeth with each outbreak.⁶⁵

Visiting Charles II's court from his native Florence in the late 1660s, Lorenzo Magalotti likewise found Restoration England to be a 'per-turbed and disorderly machine'. Denying that his bewilderment derived from being a foreigner, Magalotti instead blamed 'the perpetual change-ableness with which everything is directed and governed'. He objected that even if 'one tries hard to understand the necessary rules, they change before one can finish getting them into one's head', and equated his experiences to reading a particular time on a clockface, only to find that such a time had already passed.⁶⁶

V

Dominating Devil-land was London, which had around 200,000 inhabitants in 1600, but by 1700 had rapidly expanded to become Europe's largest city, with a population of around 575,000, eclipsing Paris and Naples. Accommodating over 10 per cent of the country's inhabitants by the start of the eighteenth century, London was also around twenty times larger than any other sizeable English city, such as Bristol, Exeter, Norwich or York. The Stuart royal court was not, however, located in the ancient City of London, following Henry VIII's decision to relocate his principal royal residences from the Tower of London and Bridewell Palace west towards Whitehall and St James's Palace in Westminster,

close to the Houses of Parliament, the courts of justice and Westminster Abbey. Unlike the French Bourbons, Spanish Habsburgs or Danish Oldenburg dynasties, the Stuarts owned no property in the heart of their capital city, which limited the potential for royal majesty to be showcased through extensive and elegant civic improvement. By contrast, the spectacularly wealthy City of London retained its own jurisdiction and municipal structures, including a Court of Common Council, which was the largest representative body in England after the House of Commons. Moreover, whereas the walled City of London was easily secured with defensible gates and England's premier fortress, the Tower of London, the royal court at Westminster lay dangerously unprotected from the west.

Throughout the seventeenth century, royal policy tried unsuccessfully to deter further development in London to curb the capital's inflated rents and prices and protect against threats alliteratively cited in a Star Chamber prosecution in 1606: 'death, dearth, depopulation, disorder'.⁶⁷ A decade later, James VI & I justified legislation that restricted new buildings to existing foundations, arguing that, otherwise, 'with time, England will only be London, and the whole country be left waste'. Monstrously over-sized, England's capital was, in its king's eyes, 'a general nuisance to the whole kingdom . . . like the spleen' which inflated in proportion as the rest of an invalid's body wasted away.⁶⁸ Yet recurrent outbreaks of bubonic plague could quickly render London's prosperity precarious: one epidemic that broke out shortly after Charles I's accession in 1625 claimed the lives of over 26,000 Londoners, or a fifth of the city's population. Appealing to the rich seeking rural sanctuary 'in your orchards and pleasant gardens', the dramatist Thomas Dekker described a 'desolate and forsaken city' where 'if one shop be open, sixteen in a row stand shut up together, and those that are open, were as good to be shut; for they take no money'. While a scene of 3,000 armed troops prepared for combat would be viewed with approbation, Dekker wondered what reactions might be provoked 'if we should behold 3,000 coffins piled (in heaps) one upon another, or 3,000 corpses in winding-sheets, laid in some open place, one on the top of each other'?⁶⁹

Although plague mortality failed to derail the capital's long-term demographic expansion, images of armed troops became common during the mid-century civil wars, when the City's resources proved decisive in facilitating Parliamentary victories and London's rebellious credentials

were confirmed. Charles I's disastrous decision to flee from the capital in January 1642 saw the monarch excluded from London until he returned, seven years later, for his trial and execution. As one Royalist pamphleteer warned in 1643, when posterity wondered who had 'pulled the crown from the king's head, taken the government off its hinges, dissolved monarchy, enslaved the laws and ruined their country', the answer would be 'the proud, unthankful, schismatical, rebellious, bloody city of London'.⁷⁰ That same year, Howell concurred in attributing chief blame for the civil wars to the City of London, objecting that the swollen metropolis 'bears no proportion with the size of this island'. Exchanging James's splenetic metaphor for an anserine alternative, Howell likened London 'to the liver of a crammed Italian goose, whose fattening emaciates the rest of the whole body, and makes it grow lean and languish'.⁷¹

Following the Great Fire that ravaged the city in 1666, London's rebuilt streets accommodated growing numbers of coffee-houses whose clientele was dangerously well informed and keenly interested in state affairs. The year before the Fire, the delegation of three French envoys attending Charles II's court had objected to Louis XIV's secretary for foreign affairs that, in England, 'everybody thinks it his right to speak of the affairs of state, and the very boatmen want the milords to talk to them about such topics while they row them to Parliament'.⁷² In a world of garrulous Thames boatmen, coffee-house debate, town-criers, local scribes and politicized Sunday pulpits, the political punditry of England's citizens did not depend on formal capacities to read and write.⁷³ Named after French *courants*, serial 'corantos' and regular newsletters were themselves foreign imports that dated from the *Mercurius Gallo-belgicus*'s publication in Cologne in 1594, before other titles had appeared in cities including Amsterdam, Antwerp, Paris, Venice and Vienna. In the late-Elizabethan era, pamphlets bearing titles such as *News from Spain and Holland, containing an information of English Affairs in Spain* (1593) avoided offering overt polemic but were, rather, framed as fortuitous opportunities for English readers to eavesdrop on overseas debates about their own country. Despite a well-established market in manuscript newsletters, the printed reporting of domestic news remained forbidden in England while attempts to ban the import of foreign newsletters were largely unsuccessful. In 1622, the prolific letter-writer John Chamberlain objected to the English ambassador in

The Hague, Sir Dudley Carleton, that in London ‘we know not what to believe of that [which] is done here under our nose, and what is given out today for certain is tomorrow contradicted’. Chamberlain lamented that, in the ‘two years that the forge or mint was set up at Amsterdam, we have never left off coining, so apish are we in imitation of what is worst’.⁷⁴ Once licences to publish foreign news were granted, English readers could follow Continental events closely. In 1632, Charles I’s Master of the Revels, Sir Henry Herbert, apologized to his Herefordshire-based friend, John, Viscount Scudamore, for failing to keep him fully updated with the latest news, but complained that ‘the corantos of this time are like the Thames at a full water, or a spring tide rather, with this difference, that the one monthly, the other weekly, overflows’.⁷⁵

For Stuart administrations, the popular addiction to news was a destabilizing threat that encouraged subjects to interest themselves in matters of state and tended to prize novelty over attestation. During the mid-century civil wars, the collapse of pre-publication censorship provoked an explosion of print. For whereas a yearly average of 624 titles had been published in Britain during the 1630s, with additional English volumes printed overseas, when armed hostilities broke out between crown and Parliament, that figure rocketed to 4,038 items printed in 1642 alone.⁷⁶ Moreover, all information – whether audaciously printed or whispered rumour – could be denounced as erroneous, misleading and damaging. Royal courtiers and foreign ambassadors alike detected an unwelcome rise in ‘false news’, fearing that London’s Royal Exchange could rival the Rialto in Venice, or the Piazza Navona in Rome, as a notorious site for rumour-mongering. Advising his counterparts in London from the Dutch embassy in Paris, the envoy Willem Boreel recalled in 1653 how, ‘when we were last in England, we could hardly trust . . . our own eyes and ears, so much were all things then disfigured unto us, through the conduct of the parliament; so much daubing and colouring over’. The Commonwealth regime had inserted so many ‘spies among our domestics, and false informers’, that the Dutch delegation had needed to recruit ‘secret and confiding correspondents on the other side’ to understand ‘affairs in their true colours’.⁷⁷

After Charles II’s restoration, the Licensing Act (1662) made press censorship a matter of statutory authority rather than royal prerogative, and the king’s Licenser of the Press, Roger L’Estrange, made clear his opposition to greater press freedom. In the government-backed

Intelligencer's first issue, L'Estrange warned that undue coverage of domestic politics made 'the multitude too familiar with the actions and counsels of their superiors . . . and gives them not only an itch, but a kind of colourable right and licence to be meddling with the government'.⁷⁸ Visiting England three years later, the French physician Samuel de Sorbière doubted the scope of English independence of mind, but recognized that freedom of expression was a cherished shibboleth. As Sorbière ventured, 'the English may be easily brought to anything, provided you fill their bellies, let them have freedom of speech, and do not bear too hard upon their lazy temper'.⁷⁹ Habituated to turbulent constitutional change, the English had indeed become incurable coffee-house commentators. Several years earlier, an exhausted Venetian Resident, Francesco Giavarina, had refused to be drawn into political speculation, given that England's 'variations and instability have continued without interruption for so many years'. To foreign observers, Giavarina admitted that 'such constant motion must appear incredible and excite laughter at such a long comedy which must infallibly be turned, one day, into a tragedy'.⁸⁰ It is time to visit Devil-land for ourselves.

I

So Strange a Precedent, 1587

In her end is the beginning of our story. Mary, Queen of Scots's execution at Fotheringhay Castle in Northamptonshire on 8 February 1587 was sanctioned by a death warrant bearing Elizabeth I's signature and followed Mary's conviction for plotting harm to the English queen. Embroidered into the canopied cloth of state under which she had sat during various forms of house arrest in different English strongholds for nearly two decades, Mary's motto, *en ma fin gît mon commencement* – 'in my end is my beginning' – had once offered hope that, after her forced deposition as queen of Scotland in 1567, Mary might, one day, regain her Scottish throne and she and her heirs might also realize their hereditary claim to the English crown. But, once Elizabeth decided to put her fellow queen and close relative to death, Mary's motto became a martyr's text.

In Catholic eyes, Mary Stuart should have reigned as rightful queen of England since 1558. Refusing to recognize the dissolution of Henry VIII's marriage to Catherine of Aragon, Catholics regarded Elizabeth's birth in 1533 to Henry's second wife, Anne Boleyn, as illegitimate. Following Boleyn's execution in 1536, and the annulment of Boleyn's marriage to Henry, Elizabeth was also formally declared a bastard by her own father in the Succession Act passed that year. Another Succession Act (1543) then restored Elizabeth to the English royal line – after her Protestant younger brother, Edward, and Catholic older sister, Mary – but legally she remained a bastard when she succeeded her sister, Mary Tudor, as queen of England in 1558. Thereafter, Elizabeth's long reign as England's 'Virgin Queen' was endured by Catholics as the illegitimate tyranny of a Protestant heretic bastard that simultaneously deprived Henry VIII's legitimate great-niece, Mary Stuart, of her rightful English crown.

Nine years younger than Elizabeth, Mary Stuart had acceded to the Scottish throne at only six days old after the death of her father, James V, in December 1542. Although once identified as a potential bride for Elizabeth's half-brother, Edward VI, Mary had instead married the French dauphin and briefly became queen consort of France between 1559 and 1560, before the death of her husband, Francis II, prompted her return to Scotland as the Catholic sovereign of a country undergoing a radical Protestant Reformation. After a second marriage to Henry Stuart, Lord Darnley – a distant cousin who, like Mary, also had hereditary claims to both the English and Scottish thrones – Mary was forcibly removed as queen of Scotland in July 1567 and succeeded by her infant son, James VI, who was thereafter raised as a Protestant.

The following year, Mary escaped from her detention in the island fortress of Lochleven Castle and sought refuge in England where she was initially detained at Tutbury Castle in Staffordshire. In February 1569, Mary was visited at Tutbury by an Irish lawyer, Nicholas White, who noticed the motto '*en ma fin gît mon commencement*' embroidered on the queen's canopied cloth of state, but admitted to Elizabeth's chief minister, Sir William Cecil, that it was 'a riddle he understands not'. White further warned Cecil that 'very few should have access to, or conference with, this lady', given his own susceptibilities to what he described as 'a goodly personage' with 'an alluring grace, a pretty Scottish speech, and a searching wit, clouded with mildness'.¹

Over the next two decades, Mary's prolonged presence on English soil magnetically attracted serial Catholic conspiracies, which claimed greater legitimacy after Pope Pius V's excommunication of Elizabeth in 1570. But Mary's eventual execution created a dangerous English precedent for Stuart regicide that sent shock waves across Catholic Europe and reverberated for decades thereafter. The international significance of Mary's death was confirmed by the insistence of both the Elizabethan regime and Mary's supporters that her execution must be explained, justified and described 'to the world'. At the same time, both Mary and Elizabeth had been equally as keen to proclaim consistently – if wholly disingenuously – their innocence: in Mary's case, her innocence of the charge that she had ever intended harm against the English queen and, in Elizabeth's, that she was innocent of sanctioning the execution itself.

I

The trial of Mary, Queen of Scots took place over two days in October 1586 and investigated her alleged complicity in the 'Babington Plot': a conspiracy that had envisaged a potential Spanish invasion of England, together with Elizabeth's assassination and Mary's installation as queen. The previous month, the plot's convicted ringleader, a young Catholic named Anthony Babington, and thirteen associates had been executed in London, where the Elizabethan chronicler, Raphael Holinshed, described how, through dismembering, disembowelling and decapitation, 'these venomous vipers' were 'hewn in pieces, their tigers' hearts burned in the fire' and their heads and quartered corpses 'fixed upon poles and set over the gates of London, that all the world might behold the just reward of traitors'.² At the same time, Cecil (now Lord Burghley) demanded that parliamentary sanction be attached to official investigations into Mary's complicity 'to make the burden better borne and the world abroad better satisfied'.³

Having deemed the Tower of London too risky a venue to try such a prominent suspect, Elizabeth's ministers ordered that Mary be moved from Chartley Hall in Staffordshire, where she had been held since the previous December, to Fotheringhay Castle in Northamptonshire to be tried under legislation passed in 1584 that had rendered involvement in any plot to harm, shorten or threaten Elizabeth's life a capital offence. But Mary denied the right of any English tribunal to try her on the grounds that she was 'an absolute prince and not within the compass of your laws', being solely accountable to God and 'equal to any prince of Europe'. Despite being 'ignorant of the laws and statutes' of England, 'destitute of counsel' and fearful that 'nobody dares or will speak' on her behalf, Mary protested that she was 'innocent and had not procured or encouraged any hurt against' Elizabeth. She further warned the commission of thirty-six Privy Councillors, nobles and judges appointed to question her to consider their actions 'in regard of the world; for England is not all the world'.⁴ Mary's claims regarding immunity from prosecution were endorsed by her erstwhile brother-in-law, Henri III of France, who confirmed to his ambassador in London, Guillaume de l'Aubespine, baron of Châteauneuf, that, even were Mary to be tried and

convicted of a capital crime, her status as ‘a born sovereign princess’ would ensure that she remained ‘exempt from human jurisdiction and subject only to the judgement of God’. In practical terms, Elizabeth could not proceed in a prosecution ‘without offending all the kings and sovereign princes of Christendom’.⁵

Undeterred, the commissioners persevered, alleging that Mary had supplied tacit approval of the plot in an encrypted letter that she had dictated to Babington in July 1586 from Chartley Hall. Cited as the prosecution’s main evidence, Mary’s letter had been intercepted and decoded by Elizabeth’s spymaster, Thomas Phelippes, who had forged a damning postscript to the queen’s letter. Making a separate copy for Elizabeth’s principal secretary, Sir Francis Walsingham, Phelippes had also drawn a gallows cartoon on the envelope, indicating the likely destination of its royal sender. This was not the first time that the queen’s opponents had resorted to forgery, for shortly after her deposition in 1569 a cache of Mary’s sonnets and papers – the notorious ‘Casket Letters’ – was tampered with, if not fabricated entirely, in an attempt to implicate the queen in adulterous complicity in Darnley’s murder. While Mary objected that resorting to forms of invisible ink for communication was ‘very hazardous and vulgar’, in 1584 she had recommended the use of alum (hydrated potassium aluminium sulphate) in covert correspondence with the French ambassador to Elizabeth’s court, Michel de Castenau. As Mary had advised, when engaging in ‘secret writing’, the alum needed to be ‘soaked in a little clear water twenty-four hours before one wishes to write’ and, to read messages penned in alum, ‘it is only necessary to damp the paper in some basin of clear water’, while the ‘secret writing’ would disappear when the paper dried again.⁶

Following the hearings at Fotheringhay, the commissioners adjourned to London where review of the evidence generated a unanimous guilty verdict. A new English parliament met at the end of October 1586 and, equally unanimously, endorsed a motion petitioning Elizabeth to pass a sentence of execution on the Scottish queen. Maintaining that her very existence posed a threat to the English commonwealth, the radical Puritan MP for Warwick, Job Throckmorton, denounced Mary as ‘the daughter of sedition, the mother of rebellion, the nurse of impiety, the handmaid of iniquity’ and ‘the sister of unshamefastness’. She was, moreover, a loathsome foreigner: ‘Scottish of nation, French of education, papist of profession, a Guisian of blood, a Spaniard in practice’

and ‘a libertine in life’.⁷ As MPs knew, the Babington Plot was only the latest in a succession of foiled Catholic conspiracies that had sought to eject Elizabeth in favour of Mary, including the ‘Ridolfi Plot’ of 1571 (spearheaded by a Florentine banker, Roberto Ridolfi) and the ‘Throckmorton Plot’ of 1583 (revealed by an English Catholic, Francis Throckmorton, and prompting expulsion of Spain’s ambassador in London, Bernadino de Mendoza, for his alleged involvement).

Given that Mary was, as indicated, also widely suspected of involvement in the murder of her second husband, Darnley, MPs reasoned that so long as the Scottish queen lived Protestant lives were endangered. Within a single state it was simply untenable, invoking an image later used in Shakespeare’s play *Richard II* (1597) to deny ‘the fear that is conceived of two suns in one firmament, and of the one rising and the other setting’. The House of Commons Speaker, Thomas Puckering, insisted that Elizabeth must confirm the capital penalty attaching to Mary’s conviction, warning that ‘to spare her, is to spill us’. Since thousands of ordinary subjects, and even Mary herself, had sworn a Bond of Association in 1585, pledging themselves to defend the English queen’s life and to revenge anyone who threatened her, Elizabeth risked divine wrath if justice was not done. Mercy should not be extended to ‘this enemy of our felicity’ that sought ‘to undermine the religion’ and ‘to supplant us and plant strangers in the place’, while lying ‘in continual wait to take your life’.⁸ In a play written in the late 1590s and initially entitled *L’Écossaise, ou le Désastre* (1601) – ‘The Scotswoman, or the Disaster’ – the French playwright Antoine de Montchrestien, imagined a ‘Counsellor’ (presumably Burghley) warning that, for England’s Catholic neighbours, Elizabeth’s assassination at popish hands would be ‘the wish of kings fulfilled, the end of our faith, and the death of our laws’. By contrast, securing Mary’s removal would extinguish ‘the barbarous plots of those proud, swarthy Spaniards’ and would ‘bring security to us, injury to Scotland, and terror to France’.⁹

Confirming the death sentence on Mary nevertheless entailed executing another royal woman who, like Elizabeth herself, was a granddaughter of Henry VII and also an anointed queen and former queen consort. In mid-November 1586, Elizabeth was confronted at Richmond Palace by a joint delegation from the Houses of Commons and Lords, bearing a parliamentary petition demanding the death sentence, and she warned them that ‘princes, you know, stand upon stages’ with their actions

scrutinized. Since her 'doings will come to the scanning of many fine wits, not only within the realm, but in foreign countries', they should 'look to persons as well abroad as at home'. Confessing a wish that tensions between Mary and herself might have remained private, Elizabeth offered to 'become a blab' (gossip) and claimed to have written directly to Mary before the trial, offering to protect her in return for a confession and supply of detailed intelligence. As Elizabeth daintily – if implausibly – ventured, had it 'pleased God to have us both milkmaids with pails on our arms', she would have accepted Mary's determination to 'seek my destruction still, yet could I not consent to her death'.¹⁰ Faced by a second visitation twelve days later, Elizabeth remained anxious as to how her actions would be 'sifted and finely scanned by good fellows abroad' only too willing 'to publish pamphlets, libels and books against me, with detestation of me and my government'. Yet she refused to be rushed, or to let parliamentary pressure dictate royal (in)action, and beseeched her Privy Councillors, rather, to 'take in good part my answer answerless'.¹¹

On the same day that Elizabeth sought to justify procrastination to baleful MPs, Mary wrote from Fotheringhay to her cousin and leader of the Catholic League in France, Henri of Lorraine, duke of Guise, protesting horrified disbelief that her conviction might result in death and her fate being entrusted to the hands of a common executioner: 'such a death as no-one of our race, thank God, has ever received, still less one of my quality'. Yet if such a hideous eventuality were to result, Mary also recognized the potential potency of what would be acclaimed throughout Continental Europe as an honourable Catholic martyrdom, acknowledging to Guise that 'we, both men and women, may be ready to shed our blood to maintain the fight of the faith'.¹² The previous day, Mary had confided to the Spanish diplomat Mendoza her suspicion that building works in her apartments at Fotheringhay were 'for the purpose of erecting a scaffold on which I am to perform the last act of the tragedy'.¹³

On 4 December, Elizabeth issued a royal proclamation confirming the sentence of death against Mary, explaining that royal consent had been given only after visitations from MPs and peers who had been obliged to fall 'upon their knees, pray, beseech, and with many reasons of great force and importance, move and press us' to pursue this course of action.¹⁴ Two weeks later, the condemned queen wrote her last letter to Elizabeth, requesting that, should she be executed, her body might

thereafter be buried in France to lie alongside relatives, particularly her mother, Mary of Guise, who lay in the Convent of Saint-Pierre-les-Dames in Reims. Unwilling to lie in heretic soil, Mary Stuart reminded Elizabeth that, in 'our religion, we set great store by being interred in holy ground'.¹⁵

As news of the death sentence quickly spread to Continental Europe, Dutch, German and Latin translations of Elizabeth's proclamation were published in Cologne, Middelburg and Leiden, and in the Bavarian city of Ingolstadt.¹⁶ From Frankfurt, the English envoy Sir Horatio Palavicino advised Elizabeth's secretary Sir Francis Walsingham 'to make clear to the world the business of the Queen of Scots' to ensure that 'it may in all times hereafter be by all most fully justified'.¹⁷ Elizabeth's dilemma was outlined in a pamphlet entitled *The Copy of a Letter to the Earl of Leicester* (1586), which was translated into Latin, French, Dutch and German editions that also reproduced the parliamentary petitions demanding Mary's execution as well as Elizabeth's replies in a way that presented the English queen as facing political pressure to confirm the death sentence while being consumed by personal anguish. Yet Elizabeth's signature under the Great Seal was still required before any execution could take place. In Madrid, the Venetian ambassador, Hieronimo Lippomano, took little notice of Elizabeth's rumoured determination to remove Mary, insisting that 'there is no reason in the world why England should commit an act which would rouse all Christendom in wrath against her'.¹⁸

Setting the whole of Christendom to one side, Elizabeth was also mindful of the likely reaction of Mary's relatives sitting on the thrones of England's neighbours, Scotland and France. In Scotland, Mary's twenty-year-old son, James VI, had recently concluded a league of amity with England via the Treaty of Berwick, which, in July 1586, had guaranteed Scottish neutrality should England be invaded by a foreign power, in return for James's receipt of an English annuity of £4,000 sterling – albeit one that was paid irregularly – and a commitment from Elizabeth that she would take no action to obstruct James's hereditary claim to the English throne on her death.

When first informed of Mary's alleged involvement in the Babington Plot in October 1586, James – who had been an infant when he had last seen his mother – opined, in a conversation reported to Henri III's ambassador to Scotland, Monsieur de Courcelles, that Mary 'might well

drink the ale and beer which herself had brewed'. Having sworn the Bond of Association to preserve Elizabeth's life, 'she ought to have kept her promise'. But as a formal trial appeared more likely, Courcelles warned that many of the Scots nobility opposed James's diplomatic rapprochement with England and were ready 'to declare open war against' Elizabeth if she proceeded against Mary. Discussing his mother's case with Courcelles in November, James described it as 'the strangest that ever was heard of, the like not to be found in any story of the world' and asked the Frenchman if 'he had ever read of a sovereign prince that had been detained prisoner so long time without cause, by king or prince her neighbour', that 'in the end would put her to death'?¹⁹ Writing to a Scots agent in London, William Keith, James admitted that 'whole Scotland [was] incensed with this matter'. In a spiteful swipe at Elizabeth's parentage, James suggested that, even if Henry VIII had become infamous for 'beheading of his bedfellow', he still reckoned 'that tragedy was far inferior to this'. Directing Keith to ensure that Elizabeth saw his letter, he nevertheless ventured that, if the English queen could 'see the inward parts of my heart', she would find 'a great jewel of honesty toward her locked up in a coffer of perplexity' to which her future actions would hold the key.²⁰

Two months later, Elizabeth replied directly to James, asking him to 'transfigure yourself into my state, and suppose what you ought to do': given the evidence adduced against his mother, should she 'keep the serpent that poisons me'?²¹ Yet James still accounted the execution of one divinely ordained and anointed monarch – as well as a woman and blood relative – by another of equal status as unthinkable. Writing to Elizabeth in January 1587, he described the very prospect as a 'monstrous thing' and refused to credit that 'my nearest neighbour, being in straightest friendship with me, shall rigorously put to death a free sovereign prince and my natural mother, alike in estate and sex to her . . . and touching her nearly in proximity of blood'. He reminded Elizabeth that monarchs remained solely accountable to God, and beseeched a change of mind that would render him and 'all other princes in Europe eternally beholden unto you'.²²

Elizabeth deployed the same tactic of inviting Mary's former brother-in-law, Henri III of France, to imagine himself in her position when considering the Scottish queen's fate. Before Mary's trial, Elizabeth had instructed her envoy to Paris, Edward Wotton, to explain to the French

king that, since the Scottish queen's 'long continued malice' daily put Elizabeth's life 'into continual peril', her English subjects were impelled 'importunately to require that some course should be taken' to ensure their sovereign's safety.²³ After the hearings at Fotheringhay, the Venetian ambassador in Madrid, Lippomano, reported that Elizabeth had also offered to send Henri 'the minutes of the trial' to show, bitterly, 'how she had been recompensed for sparing the queen's life before, owing to a dislike of shedding royal blood'. Acclaiming Henri as 'a judge in this case', Elizabeth was convinced that, when the French king had 'examined the crimes' serially committed by Mary, 'he, himself, would pass upon her the sentence which he now, in his want of information, begged her to quash'.²⁴

But instead, Henri dispatched to London his most experienced diplomat, Pomponne de Bellièvre, who, in a series of audiences with Elizabeth, unsuccessfully offered a monetary ransom for Mary's life, along with pledges as to her future good conduct, in the hope that the capital sentence might be commuted. In early December, Bellièvre reported that Elizabeth had confessed to him 'that nothing had ever touched her heart so keenly as this last accident' and that she had shed 'more sighs and tears' for Mary than for 'the loss of all her kinsfolk' – in an allusion to the deaths of her father Henry VIII, mother Anne Boleyn, half-sister Mary and half-brother Edward.²⁵

II

In the event, false rumours of both an imminent Spanish invasion and Mary's escape from Fotheringhay prompted a panicked response. Although Elizabeth later protested that the document had not been intended for imminent use, she put her signature to Mary's death warrant on 1 February 1587, in the presence of her secretary Sir William Davison. She also instructed Davison to inform his senior colleague, Walsingham, who was ill at the time, quipping in ironic jest that 'the grief thereof would go near . . . to kill him outright'.²⁶ In turn, Walsingham confirmed to the English ambassador in Paris, Sir Edward Stafford, that the warrant for Mary's death had been signed and sealed. As Walsingham explained, the decision had been taken amid widespread unrest, as 'bruits were spread abroad' that 'the Queen of Scots was broken out of prison, that the City of London was fired, that many thousand Spaniards

were landed in Wales' and that prominent English nobles had mysteriously left the capital. Indeed, the general 'stir and confusion' seemed more threatening than at any point in the last hundred years – i.e. since the Battle of Bosworth Field and the start of Tudor rule.²⁷

Terrified by the prospect of sanctioning what would widely be seen as sacrilegious regicide, Elizabeth had evidently already requested that Walsingham and Davison write to Mary's keeper, the Puritan diplomat Sir Amias Paulet, requesting the quiet dispatch of the former queen as a pragmatic means of achieving her permanent removal without incurring royal responsibility. But an appalled Paulet had responded by refusing to commit murder and objecting that 'God forbid that I should make so foul a shipwreck of my conscience, or leave so great a blot to my poor posterity, to shed blood without law or warrant'.²⁸ Unable to secure Mary's demise on the quiet, Elizabeth's only option remained the death warrant. Having surrendered control of events after entrusting the signed document to Davison's custody, the queen did not know that the earls of Shrewsbury and Kent, the Privy Council's Clerk, Sir Robert Beale, and a sheriff, Thomas Andrews, had already set off for Fotheringhay, on the 'apt and colourable pretext' of investigating local disturbances, accompanied by a public executioner who was disguised as their servant.²⁹

In the early hours of 8 February – 'this morning of my death' – Mary wrote to Henri III and drew up a final will.³⁰ Later that morning, her execution took place, attended by around 300 observers, comprising state officials, local gentry and a handful of Mary's personal servants, in a scene of pathos that was constantly replayed in contemporaries' imaginations and provided creative inspiration to later generations of composers, dramatists and writers including Robert Burns, Gaetano Donizetti, Alexandre Dumas, Friedrich Schiller, Richard Wagner and Stefan Zweig. In a contemporaneous account submitted to Burghley, Sir Robert Wingfield of Upton reported that Mary had refused to listen to admonitions delivered by the Protestant Dean of Peterborough Cathedral, Richard Fletcher, and had stated to those attending that she was 'cousin to your queen, and descended from the blood of Henry VII, a married queen of France, and the anointed queen of Scotland'. To her personal servants, Mary had emphasized her unjust betrayal at the hands of foreign persecutors as she continued to protest her innocence, while enjoining them to 'tell my friends, that I die a true woman to my religion, and like a true Scottish woman, and a true French woman'.

After her death, Mary's ladies-in-waiting were denied access to the queen's clothing to minimize any potential martyrological capital, since Elizabeth's ministers were familiar with the searches for relics that customarily attended public executions of Catholic priests. As Wingfield observed, the queen's small lap-dog had, however, refused to 'depart from the dead corpse, but came and laid between her head and shoulders'; having becoming 'imbrued with her blood', the dog was thereafter 'carried away and washed', while the queen's other effects were 'either burned or clean washed'.³¹ Mary's embalmed body then remained at Fotheringhay for nearly six months before its interment – contrary to her wishes – in the local Protestant cathedral at Peterborough in the early hours of 1 August, or Lammass Day: a day customarily reserved for settling accounts. Mary's former confidant, Mendoza, denounced the outrageous burial arrangements to the Spanish king while observing that buried alongside Mary in Peterborough was Henry VIII's first wife, Catherine of Aragon, 'who was no less a martyr in her life than the queen of Scotland in her death'.³² The affront to Philip II – as the most powerful monarch in sixteenth-century Europe – was both confessional and personal; in addition to being a member of Catherine of Aragon's family, he was also the widower of Elizabeth's half-sister and predecessor as queen, Mary Tudor.

Once the execution of Mary Stuart had taken place, Elizabeth protested her innocence in its realization. Enraged, the English queen refused to see close advisers and dispatched Davison to the Tower of London, since he had been the official entrusted with the death warrant's safekeeping. Designated the regime's sacrificial scapegoat, Davison was charged before the Star Chamber with misprision (deliberately concealing a treasonable act) and contempt, for having allowed the warrant to leave his possession. Although acquitted of 'evil intention', Davison was fined heavily, sentenced to indefinite imprisonment and never again served Elizabeth in person. On 11 February, the queen delivered a raging rebuke to her Privy Councillors, prompting Burghley to draft an entreaty to Elizabeth on the Councillors' behalf, which seemed to suggest that the English queen had suffered some form of breakdown. Burghley confirmed, 'with sobbing hearts, our desire to have your grief of mind to cease and to give yourself to your natural food and sleep to maintain your health without which we have no comfort to live or breathe'. Whether or not Burghley actually sent this draft is unknown.

Its emotive appeal was accompanied by justification of Mary's execution on the grounds that 'there was never any worldly act that could bring more surety to your own life, more strength to all your good subjects at home, and your friends abroad'. Meanwhile, Elizabeth's enemies had also been permanently discouraged, 'seeing the anchor of their hold lost, and the foundation of all their intended machinations dissolved'.³³ Defending the English queen's agitated response, the poet George Puttenham admitted that Elizabeth nevertheless remained incredulous 'to think that she, of all Christian princes, should be made the first author of so strange a precedent in justice'.³⁴ In the version of events presented to the outside world, Mary's execution was an unfortunate 'accident' for which Elizabeth was not directly responsible.

When news of Mary's execution reached London, the bells of City churches were rung and bonfires blazed: such civic festivities were usually ordered to mark royal births rather than a death. Finding himself coerced into supplying firewood for a celebratory bonfire outside his official residence, Henri III's ambassador, Châteauneuf, was disgusted. In Paris, the Spanish ambassador Mendoza denounced this unprecedented 'piece of insolent intolerance' to Philip II, regarding it as insensitive to expect a French dignitary to share in any English triumph, but entirely unacceptable 'to force him to rejoice over the death of a queen of France'.³⁵ Only days after the execution, Elizabeth also faced implicit censure for shamefully trying to shift responsibility for Mary's death to her advisers in a sermon preached in her presence at Greenwich Palace by Dean Fletcher, who had officiated at Fotheringhay. Taking as his text Matthew 2:19–20, which described the aftermath of King Herod's death, Fletcher allegorically urged Elizabeth to desist from indulging in unjustified mourning and making unworthy claims of innocence. Instead, the queen was advised to focus on the 'land of Israel' and direct her energies to further Protestant evangelism, especially in Ireland and the 'cold parts' of northern England, where her subjects remained 'frozen in their dregs' of popery.³⁶ On 23 February the Puritan MP Throckmorton, echoing sectarian interpretations of Mary's removal, renewed his warnings in the House of Commons about England's encirclement by Catholic states, denouncing the repugnant 'litter' produced by Mary's mother-in-law Catherine de Médicis and attacking Philip II's territorial ambitions – even belittling Mary's son James as 'the young imp of

Scotland'. As Throckmorton advised, England needed to strengthen its diplomatic and military support for the Protestant Dutch, there being 'no hope of Spain, no trust in France, cold comfort in Scotland'.³⁷

III

Not even cold comfort awaited the English delegation sent to inform James of his mother's death. In late December 1586, Courcelles had reported mounting pressure on the Scottish king by nobles who opposed his apparent appeasement of Elizabeth's murderous intentions. 'In choler', James had responded by denying culpability for his mother's fate: were she to die unnaturally, 'her blood should be upon them [the English], and not upon him'.³⁸ The following month James had written to Elizabeth, acknowledging that his mother's judicial execution could 'peril my reputation among my subjects'.³⁹ The English queen's disregard of his entreaties to spare Mary's life obliged James to tread a difficult tightrope between acknowledging incensed calls for vengeance in order to satisfy the honour of both the Stuart dynasty and Scotland's independent sovereignty, while also trying to preserve the recent achievement of Anglo-Scottish amity and his own claim to the English throne on Elizabeth's death.

When news of Mary's demise reached Edinburgh, crowds reacted angrily to the English execution of a Scottish Stuart, albeit one whose queenship they had forcibly overthrown twenty years earlier. The courtier Robert Carey, dispatched by Elizabeth to inform James in person, was denied entry at the Scottish border, aware that if he 'had gone in', he would 'have been murdered'.⁴⁰ On 14 February, Elizabeth wrote directly to James, wishing he could know 'the extreme dolour that overwhelms my mind, for that miserable accident, which far contrary to my meaning' had befallen his mother, beseeching him to acknowledge 'how innocent I am in this case'.⁴¹ Several weeks later, Walsingham was informed by an Edinburgh correspondent, Robert Carvell, that James continued to refuse audience to English envoys, being as yet unclear 'that the queen is as sorry for his mother's death as he was informed she was'.⁴² Circulating anti-English verses reflected popular anger and Carvell enclosed a halter of hemp that had accompanied a libel addressed

To Jezebel, that English whore
 Receive this Scottish chain
 As presages of her great malheur
 For murdering our queen.⁴³

According to the Scots lawyer David Moysie, several Scots Privy Councillors were eventually sent to meet Elizabeth's envoy in mid-March, when Carey confirmed that, since 'the queen was very sorry for taking Queen Mary's life', if James were to indicate an appropriate form of satisfaction, 'it should be granted'. Disconcertingly for Carey, he was nevertheless informed that, by 'the custom of Scotland', it was not for James to make such a suggestion; rather, the party responsible for a murder should make a compensation offer to be considered by the victim's family and friends. Given Mary's eminent lineage, the councillors added that any offer from Elizabeth would not only need to be reviewed by James, but also by the Scottish nobility and Parliament, as well as by James's relatives in foreign royal houses who were 'as well interested as he'.⁴⁴

Depictions of Elizabeth as Jezebel – the wicked female ruler incarnate – also circulated in Paris, where one poet objected that 'from the cradle, there has not been a day' that Elizabeth had not 'vomited some outrage'. In this instance, she had proceeded 'against all law, made a prisoner and killed' a queen who 'excelled your own lineage'.⁴⁵ Despite mounting a propaganda campaign to publicize the reasons for passing sentence on Mary throughout Europe, the Elizabethan regime was equally determined to suppress accounts of the execution itself. In mid-January, all English ports had been closed to forestall communications with the Continent and Mary's servants were detained at Fotheringhay for six months. Accordingly, as the Gallicized Scot Adam Blackwood later acknowledged, 'not knowing what had happened', verse-writers, hagiographers and artists 'could only publish what they conjectured and imagined' had occurred at Fotheringhay.⁴⁶ Blackwood himself composed at least one of fifty or more short verses, collectively termed the 'De Jezabelis', poems that reviled Elizabeth as an immoral, heretic bastard, responsible for Mary's death.

In Paris, the English ambassador, Stafford, reported that 'truly, I find all men here in a fury', with ubiquitous predictions of 'some great harm' likely to redound on Elizabeth. A month later, Stafford confirmed to Burghley that he had never known an event more detested by 'little,

great, old, young and of all religions, than the Queen of Scots's death, and especially the manner of it'. Weeks later, Stafford restated to Walsingham his alarm, as those of 'what religion, state, passion, affection or age soever' continued to debate the execution 'in public or in private, speaking against it and in hard terms, especially against the manner of it'. But the ambassador's litanies drew only rebuke from Walsingham who demanded that Stafford stop supplying Elizabeth with pretexts to become 'so much the more exasperated' with her councillors. Rather, Walsingham directed Stafford to find evidence to support rumours in Paris regarding James VI's likely absolution of Elizabeth from blame, since that type of report 'did wonderfully content her Majesty, who desires nothing more than to have it generally conceived that she had least part in the action'.⁴⁷ Stafford's hysterical reports of French outrage may also have been deliberately exaggerated to deflect attention from Spanish antipathy towards England, since, by March 1587, Stafford had become a double agent, receiving, via Mendoza, at least one substantial payment of 2,000 crowns for the first of serial supplies of English intelligence to Madrid.⁴⁸

Convincing Continental Europe of Elizabeth's personal innocence was challenging. In Madrid, Philip II acknowledged to Mendoza that he had been 'deeply hurt' by news of Mary's death and judged it 'very fine' for Elizabeth 'now to want to give out that it was done without her wish, the contrary being so clearly the case'.⁴⁹ In the Spanish Netherlands, a member of Philip's Council of State, Charles, count of Aremburg, informed Henry Stanley, fourth earl of Derby, that it would have 'been better done to have poisoned' Mary 'or to have choked her with a pillow, but not to have put her to so open a death'.⁵⁰ From Ostend, Walsingham received reports that English and Scottish soldiers, currently assisting the Dutch in their struggle to secure independence against Spain, had been outraged at news of Mary's death, making 'lewd speeches' and claiming 'that they desired to serve against the English as well as against the Spaniards to revenge their queen'.⁵¹ In Rome, the Venetian envoy, Giovanni Gritti, confirmed that Pope Sixtus V 'shows great grief' at news of Mary's death, but was consoled by the expectation that Henri III would 'desire to avenge this deep injury' on his former sister-in-law's behalf or, at the very least, would not impede other powers intent on attacking England.⁵² In Paris, Mendoza confirmed the indignation expressed by Henri's normally placid and restrained councillor

Bellièvre that Elizabeth seemingly believed ‘that monarchs’ heads were laced on, to have done such a knavish thing as to dare to lay hands on the queen of Scotland’.⁵³ In his *Historia de lo Sucedido en Escocia e Inglaterra en cuarenta años que vivió María Estuardo* (1589) (‘History of Events in Scotland and England during the forty-four years Mary Stuart lived’), the Spanish chronicler Antonio de Herrera y Tordesillas predicted that ‘the day of punishment will come for this monster Elizabeth, who has not only turned Great Britain upside down, but also by extending her diabolic fury beyond its borders, has unsettled her neighbours’. Invoking classical mythology to find comparable instances of royal wickedness, Herrera compared Elizabeth to the Egyptian king Busiris, who welcomed strangers to his home ‘only to murder them afterwards’.⁵⁴

While Mary’s body remained unburied in England, Henri organized a memorial service at the French court, within a month of the queen’s execution, to which all foreign ambassadors were invited and instructed to appear in mourning dress. With foreign envoys also invited to special vespers and a morning Mass, ‘the ceremony was truly regal’ in the view of Venice’s representative, Giovanni Dolfin.⁵⁵ In another memorial Mass held at Nôtre-Dame Cathedral in Reims, Archbishop Renaud de Beaune of Bourges delivered an emotional eulogy, later published, that acclaimed Mary’s links to the Guise dynasty and exhorted the congregation to interpret her death as a martyrdom. In Normandy, Mary’s confidante and former Catholic Bishop of Ross, John Leslie, preached a funeral oration in Scots – later published in French translation – that emphasized Mary’s martyred commitment to Catholicism and her innocence of involvement in any conspiracies. As the Parisian diarist Pierre de L’Étoile observed, by preachers across the city, Mary was ‘canonized daily in their sermons’, with sympathizers ‘loudly’ insisting that she had been executed solely on account of her Catholicism.⁵⁶

Graphic visual reconstructions of Mary’s last moments – as she placed her head before the executioner – were also soon circulating in the *Theatre of the Cruelties of the Heretics of our Time* (1587), produced in Antwerp by the Anglo-Dutch Catholic publisher, Richard Verstegan, with captions acclaiming Mary as ‘the most serene queen of Scotland’ and ‘the legitimate heir to the English throne’, before putting ‘into the hands of Christian princes’ the duty to seek revenge against the ‘barbarian tyrant’ responsible for the queen’s death.⁵⁷ In scenes of mounting

grisliness, Verstegan's illustrations depicted the many arrests, interrogations, imprisonments, condemnations and executions of Catholics in England, of whom Mary was now the most distinguished victim. From Paris, Stafford complained to Walsingham in June that pictures of the gruesome manner in which the English executed 'traitors, Jesuits and priests, which they call Catholics and martyrs' were prominently displayed in the cloister of Saint-Séverin church in Paris. According to Stafford, around 'five thousand people a day come to see' the images, to which exiled English recusants 'point with a rod and show everything; affirm it to be true and aggravate it'. Six months later, Walsingham received similar reports from an English agent in Venice, Stephen Powle, who had seen 'sundry pictures of the Scottish Queen to be sold' in the city, together with verses – apparently by a Scottish Jesuit, William Crichton – extolling Mary's virtues with 'an exhortation to all princes of the earth to endeavour a revenge against her royal person and estate'.⁵⁸

IV

Rather than permanently eliminating a problematic rival queen, Mary's execution left unfinished business. In the long term, Elizabeth's reluctance to invoke parliamentary authority to proceed against Mary, and her attempts to disregard the statutory penalties attaching to the queen's conviction, inevitably diluted the prerogatives of clemency and mercy traditionally claimed by divinely ordained monarchs. A dangerous precedent had been created that would be dramatically extended, over six decades later, when Mary's grandson, Charles I, was placed on trial by that same English Parliament and sentenced to death by a warrant signed by fifty-nine commissioners, later denounced as regicides. In the short term, the emotive resonances unleashed by Mary's execution inspired English writers such as Henry Constable who – despite serving as 'a courtier maintaining a solid Protestant façade', commissioned to rebut Counter-Reformation polemic – penned manuscript 'spiritual sonnets' shortly after the execution, acclaiming Mary as a 'blessed martyr' who 'as a queen became a sacrifice / Like to a lamb unto a scaffold led'.⁵⁹ In a poem entitled 'Decease, Release', the English Jesuit Robert Southwell imagined Mary as an anonymous narrator called 'N.', insisting that

Alive a Queen, now dead I am a Saint,
 Once 'N.' called, my name now Martyr is,
 From earthly reign debarred by restraint,
 In lieu whereof I reign in heavenly bliss.

...

By death from prisoner to a prince enhanced,
 From Cross to Crown, from thrall to throne again.
 My ruth, my right, my trap, my stile advanced,
 From woe to weal, from Hell to Heavenly reign.⁶⁰

Overseas, the teenage Maffeo Barberini, who would become Pope Urban VIII in 1623, penned a Latin funeral elegy for Mary which expressed confidence that, although 'the axe strikes you undeservingly' and appropriate funeral rites had been disregarded, 'don't let Scotland cry in sorrow', heavenly reward would follow.⁶¹ Around the same time, an elaborate and colourful funerary monument was erected in Sint-Andrieskerk (St Andrew's Church) in Antwerp, then part of the Spanish Netherlands, carved from black marble and alabaster and sumptuously gilded. The monument marked the final resting-places of 'two noble British matrons' who had been erstwhile members of the queen's entourage before 'flying from their homeland to the protection' of the Spanish king, but also included a detailed portrait of Mary, painted on copper. The accompanying inscription confirmed that the queen's 'martyrdom' arose as a result of 'the perfidy of her kinswoman Queen Elizabeth, reigning there, and through the hatred of an heretical parliament'.⁶²

But in 1587, others demanded more immediate justice. In France, members of the Catholic League, led by Mary's Guise cousins, insisted that her execution made plain the urgent need to end Henri III's toleration of Protestant Huguenots. The brutal images of Protestant persecutors presented in Verstegan's *Theatre of the Cruelties* were taken to prefigure the horrors likely to be unleashed on Catholics should the childless Henri III be succeeded by the Protestant Henri of Navarre. As the number of polemical Catholic tracts printed in France increased fourfold between 1586 and 1589, around a quarter focused on accounts of Mary's execution and the persecution suffered by English Catholics.⁶³ Moreover, when Mary's personal servants were released from arrest and arrived in France during the autumn of 1587, further personal testimonies of her final days and details of the posthumous

autopsy performed on her body were incorporated into Blackwood's *Martyrdom of the Scottish Queen* (1587) and *The Death of the Scottish Queen and Dowager Queen of France* (1588), which went through at least twelve editions by 1589.

In Edinburgh, when the Scottish Parliament convened in July 1587, Henri III's ambassador, Courcelles, reported that all the assembled commissioners had knelt down before James 'and prayed him to revenge the injury which he had received, with them, by the murder of the late queen his mother' and 'promised him, with one voice, to employ their lives and goods' to this end.⁶⁴ The following January, one of Mary's attendants, Jane Kennedy, who had witnessed the execution, met James in Edinburgh. From Berwick-upon-Tweed, the town's English governor, Henry Carey, Baron Hunsdon, reported that Kennedy was declaring 'openly how the queen was martyred and mangled by the executioner' and did so 'with such speeches and gestures as moved everybody to mislike greatly' what they were hearing. Dismissing the Scottish king's reassurances of restraint as 'plain dissembling', Hunsdon warned Elizabeth that, since James intended 'to revenge the death of his mother if ever he be able', urgent military reinforcements should be sent to 'make her borders presently strong'.⁶⁵

The most immediate likelihood of imminent revenge emanated, however, from Spain, where Philip II now seemed the most likely Catholic claimant to succeed Elizabeth on the English throne. In August 1587, the Venetian envoy in London, Lippomano, relayed reports that Philip had requested documents from the royal archives in Simancas in order to review his dynastic right to the English throne amid speculation 'that his claims are extremely well founded'.⁶⁶ Writing to Mendoza in May 1586, Mary had indicated her intention – if her son James remained a Protestant – to 'cede and grant by will my right to the succession of this crown' to Spain, if Philip undertook to advance Catholic interests in England.⁶⁷ Although Mary's claim later fuelled fruitless searches for the queen's 'phantom will' confirming these arrangements, Philip was, in any event, already incensed by the English on account of their support for the rebellious Dutch against Spain, as well as the activities of notorious English corsairs, such as Sir Francis Drake, who harried Spanish ships and coastal ports.

Ten days after news of Mary's execution reached Madrid, longstanding plans for an attack on England were resuscitated and orders were

sent to naval officers throughout Spain's Iberian and Mediterranean territories, demanding that resources be directed towards marshalling a sizeable fleet. As Philip's secretary Don Juan d'Idáquez observed to the future commander of the Armada that sailed in 1588, Alonso Pérez de Guzmán, duke of Medina Sidonia, Philip now judged the English threat to be such that 'defensive measures cannot deal with everything. Rather, it obliges us to put their house to the torch.'⁶⁸

Auspicious conditions were confirmed by a newsletter from England, received by Philip's court in November 1587, claiming that 'the people have never been so alarmed before, nor so little prepared to defend themselves as they are now'. Further intelligence indicated that Elizabeth was now convinced that 'the Pope and the kings of Spain and France were in league to ruin her' and confessional warfare was unavoidable. Although Elizabeth regarded James VI as 'neither fish nor flesh himself' when it came to siding unilaterally with Protestant or Catholic powers, among her advisers 'it is said secretly that if the Spanish Armada comes, he will welcome it'. Put simply, one execution necessitated another. The unnatural death of Mary, Queen of Scots could now legitimate the delayed realization of Pope Pius V's sentence of execution issued against Elizabeth. Among Medina Sidonia's papers was a document intended to inspire confidence among those involved in the Armada's preparations. Accompanying in spirit all those setting sail for English shores would be 'the blessed and innocent, Mary, Queen of Scotland, who, still fresh from her sacrifice, bears copious and abounding witnesses to the cruelty and impiety of this Elizabeth, and directs her shafts against her'.⁶⁹

The Enterprise of England, 1588

Non Sufficit Orbis – ‘the world is not enough’ – read the ominous legend on a triumphant Spanish medal struck in 1583 to celebrate the global extent of Philip II’s dominions. After the death of Sebastian I of Portugal in 1578, Philip had annexed the Portuguese imperial territories to create a vast Catholic empire that included the renamed, now eponymous Philippine Islands, and extended ‘from Madrid through Mexico, Manila, Macau and Malacca to India, Mozambique and Angola, and so back to Madrid’.¹ But following Francis Drake’s remarkable circumnavigation of the globe between 1577 and 1580, Philip II needed a defensive strategy to protect his possessions from incursion. The Spanish no longer had the world to themselves. After suppressing residual resistance to Spanish rule on the Azorean island of Terceira in 1583, Álvaro de Bazán, marquis of Santa Cruz, had advised Philip to ‘follow up this victory by making arrangements for the invasion of England next year’.²

To the English, the threat of Spanish conquest was not new. Nor was Philip an unknown quantity, having been granted the title ‘King of England’ by Parliament during his marriage to Mary Tudor between 1554 and 1558. Indeed, Philip’s own Lancastrian lineage had been publicly acclaimed when the newlyweds had witnessed a London pageant in 1554 that depicted the couple’s shared genealogical descent from Edward III.³ During his first year in England, Philip had not only survived a major Protestant rebellion and an assassination attempt, but had also started to acquire a library of works describing seaborne invasions that had threatened successive English administrations since the time of William I’s successful conquest in 1066. After Mary Tudor’s death in 1558 and with the accession of her Protestant half-sister, Elizabeth I, Philip maintained a keen interest in English affairs. When Pope

Pius V excommunicated Elizabeth in 1570, and issued the papal bull *Regnans in Excelsis*, releasing all subjects from allegiance to the queen's orders, mandates and laws, Philip protested that Pius should have consulted him first, knowing 'I could give him better information and advice on that kingdom, and on its affairs and people, than anyone else'.⁴ As Philip's anti-English animus grew, serial conspiracies aimed at removing Elizabeth and installing a Catholic replacement often involved some form of Spanish-sponsored invasion, which became known in Madrid as *la empresa de Inglaterra*: 'the Enterprise of England'.

I

The execution of Mary, Queen of Scots on Elizabeth I's order provoked a Continental chorus of calls for the execution of Pius's papal bull. In 1588, the Spanish Jesuit Pedro de Ribadeneyra insisted that Mary's recent execution supplied 'so heinous and so extreme an exemplar of cruelty as was never yet seen of or heard among barbarians, infidels or madmen'. Ribadeneyra's *Historia Eclesiástica del Cisma del Reino de Inglaterra* (1588) ('Ecclesiastical History of the Schism of the Kingdom of England') was published simultaneously in six Habsburg-ruled cities – Madrid, Valencia, Zaragoza, Barcelona, Antwerp and Lisbon – and warned readers that there could be 'no security or foundation in crowns, sceptres or territories' if an anointed queen of Scotland and France could be put to death 'at the hands of the executioner of London'. In a private letter intended as an exhortation to Spanish soldiers taking part in a future Armada, Ribadeneyra deemed it no less urgent for Spain to prioritize 'casting the Devil out of England than in having cast him out of the Indies'. Incensed by the heretical and sacrilegious dimensions of Mary's execution, he urged Spanish forces to mete out due punishment and 'behead a woman' (Elizabeth) who had 'ordered the beheading of a queen of France and Scotland for being a Catholic, her own niece and successor, who entered her realm under her devilish word'. Under Elizabeth, England was 'a nest of vipers, a den of thieves, [and] a ditch and cesspit of poisons and noxious vapours'.⁵

Outside Spain, however, Philip needed to convince foreign powers, including a sceptical papacy, that his 'enterprise of England' was not simply yet another expansionist bid to swell Spain's territories or to

promote his own hereditary claim to succeed the childless Elizabeth. It was, rather, a pious crusade to eradicate Protestant heresy and avenge Mary Stuart's death: his infantry units known as *tercios* would land on English shores as Catholic liberators, not Spanish conquerors. Accepting this rationale, in 1587 Pope Sixtus V offered Philip's ambassador in Rome, Enrique de Guzmán, count of Olivares, a papal subsidy of 1 million escudos, one half of which would be paid when Spanish troops landed on English, Scottish or Irish soil, with the remainder to be paid by instalment. The following June, Elizabeth's administration were alerted to reports that 12,000 copies of a broadsheet repeating the *Declaration of the Sentence and Deposition of Elizabeth, the Usurper and Pretended Queen of England* (1588) had been printed in Antwerp, renewing the papal sentence of excommunication.⁶

A rhetoric of confessional crusade notwithstanding, Spanish aggression was also fuelled by damage sustained to Philip's reputation by the recurrent activities of English privateers. The apparent ease with which Sir Francis Drake had attacked Spanish possessions in Galicia, the Canary and Cape Verde islands, present-day Colombia and Spanish Florida in 1585 had only been compounded by Drake's recent attack on the Andalusian harbour of Cadiz in April 1587, resulting in the destruction of twenty-four Spanish ships, intended as part of a future Armada against England. As the Venetian ambassador in Madrid, Hieronimo Lippomano, observed the following month, Drake's depredations would 'raise many considerations in the minds of other princes' regarding the vulnerability of Philip's possessions, and could also foment rebellious thoughts among Spaniards themselves. As Lippomano reported, it was generally remarked that 'this woman has shown the world how they can strike at the Spaniard in Flanders, in the Indies and in his own house'.⁷

In northern Europe, Elizabeth had directly undermined Spanish sovereignty in the Low Countries by supplying financial, military and political support to Protestant Dutch rebels seeking to overthrow Spanish Habsburg rule. Through a series of agreements known as the Treaty of Nonsuch in 1585, the queen's ministers had supplied 4,000 soldiers, 400 horse and an annual subsidy of 600,000 florins, together with an English Governor in the form of Robert Dudley, earl of Leicester. By way of security, the Dutch had ceded English control over the Zeeland fortress of Rammekens, two 'Cautionary Towns', Briel and Vlissingen, and agreed to lend twenty ships if England was attacked by Habsburg forces.

To hostile Spanish minds, exterminating Elizabeth was essential to preserve their country's potent reputation. Invoking Aesopian imagery, Ribadeneyra insisted that since 'the entire world fears our power and hates our greatness', defeating 'this mad and perverse boldness' would ensure that other enemies would 'make no move, nor will the beetles seek to do battle with the eagles, nor the rats with the elephants'. By contrast, 'so long as this wicked spider lives in England, weaving her plots and spinning webs of treason and chaos in Flanders' and elsewhere, perceptions of Philip's puissance were damagingly compromised.⁸

Bellicose warmongering between England and Spain was nevertheless accompanied by serial attempts at diplomatic resolution with at least five separate peace negotiations started between 1585 and 1588. Elizabeth also sustained alliances with neighbouring powers, Henri III of France and James VI of Scotland, finding a common cause in resisting Spanish expansionism. Writing to Walsingham in early 1588, the English Lord High Admiral, Charles Howard, Baron Effingham, wearily concluded that he had 'made of the French King, the Scottish King, and the King of Spain, a Trinity that I mean never to trust to be saved by'. Howard distrusted Habsburg diplomatic initiatives, doubting that 'there was never, since England was England, such a stratagem and mask made to deceive England withal as this is of the treaty of peace'.⁹ The previous month, Walsingham had been warned by an English agent sent to Venice, Stephen Powle, that 'a Spanish peace is more dangerous than manifest hatred', suspecting that Philip was 'following that devilish advice of Machiavelli, to join the lion and fox in one body, in making show of peace and carrying secretly in heart, war'.¹⁰ In late 1586, Lippomano had opined from Madrid that, despite Philip's well-known desire to menace Elizabeth, 'two considerations of great weight present themselves: the questions of how and when'. In Lippomano's view, 'the French, from thinking too little, often fail', while 'the Spanish, from thinking too much, often miss their opportunity'.¹¹ Over a year later, the Holy Roman Emperor's ambassador in Madrid, Hans Khevenhüller, admitted to Emperor Rudolf II that, whereas in 1587 he had been 'right when I predicted the Armada would not leave that year, now in 1588, I do not trust myself to make a prediction'. Unable to fathom Spanish intentions towards England, Khevenhüller sensed that 'all these preparations are more to facilitate and preserve a good peace than for any other reason'.¹²

Unfortunately for the English, while the English embassy in Paris was

Elizabeth's only permanent diplomatic presence in Catholic Europe, the English ambassador, Sir Edward Stafford, had, by early 1587, started selling intelligence to Spain as a means of tackling mounting personal debts. In April, Stafford warned Philip's representative in Paris, Bernardino de Mendoza, that it had been 'suggested to Drake that Cadiz was a suitable port' to attack since 'anyone who arrived in force might burn any ships that were there'. Stafford's accurate alert was hurriedly passed on to Madrid, and reached Philip's court only the day after Drake's raid on Cadiz, suggesting that – had Drake been delayed by adverse weather – his attack might have been forestalled. As well as sharing state secrets, Stafford collaborated with Mendoza to spread false information, informing Elizabeth's ministers in January 1588 that Philip's Armada had been disbanded, although this claim was distrusted by Lord High Admiral Howard (who happened to be Stafford's brother-in-law), suspecting a deliberate 'device, knowing that a little thing makes us too careless'.¹³

The following April, Stafford reported apparent scepticism in Paris that Philip would launch his Armada, citing rumours that 'their great elephant will bring forth but a mouse'. According to Stafford, it was rumoured that the Spanish king 'in his sleeve laughs at the Pope, that he can make such a fool of him', organizing processions and promising papal jubilees for an enterprise 'which he durst never think of in deed, but in show, to feed the world'.¹⁴ As speculation regarding the Armada's intended destination shifted from north Africa to the Indies, obtaining reliable information became even more difficult following the 'Day of the Barricades' in May 1588, when Philip's ally, Henri of Lorraine, duke of Guise, seized political control in Paris, prompting Henri III's panicked flight from the city. With effective power wielded by the Catholic League and Guise – cousin to the executed Mary, Queen of Scots – Philip hoped that, rather than France remaining neutral during any Anglo-Spanish hostilities, strategically important Channel ports might now be controlled by pro-Spanish interests.

II

Information, misinformation and disinformation combined to create pervasive uncertainty regarding the likely scale and direction of any Spanish attack on England. In April 1586, an English agent at the Grand