

RE-WRITING AND RE-BELIEVING OUR HISTORIES: QUEEN ELIZABETH I IN ELLA HICKSON'S *SWIVE* [*ELIZABETH*]

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Ella Hickson's *Swive* [*Elizabeth*] premiered at Shakespeare's Globe, London in December 2019 as part of a winter season that focused on themes of gender, sexuality, and power in plays by Shakespeare and his contemporaries, and in modern drama. Reviving the image of the last Tudor monarch, the production referenced both the revered space of the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse and the history of England's Virgin Queen. For the last four hundred years, many works of fiction have adapted the figure of Elizabeth I and thereby created an elaborate and constantly broadening web of cultural symbols surrounding Queen Elizabeth. Hickson's interpretation renders a post-feminist image of the Queen dominated by the feeling of insecurity and instability rhyming with the experience of the #MeToo generation. The play challenges the audience's expectations by systematically deconstructing the sense of history and questioning the possibility of any authentic retelling of the past.

The decision of Michelle Terry, the artistic director of the Globe, to choose Ella Hickson to write a play about Elizabeth I fitted the concept of the 2019/20 Winter Season that set out to engage with feminine experiences of history and heritage. Hickson's former work (*Eight, Oil, Anna, Writer*) addressed female concerns strongly rooted in historical consciousness, which sought "to dramatize psychologically and affectively complex situations with an emphasis on the liminal, visceral, [and] experiential."¹ *Swive* explores these themes within the context of the religious, social, and political upheavals of the sixteenth century, and depicts the struggles of an adolescent Elizabeth Tudor to survive in a hostile, masculine-dominated world. Furthermore, Hickson's former plays displayed an awareness of the interaction of text, theatrical space, and audience, which suited well the staging possibilities at the Wanamaker Playhouse.

Hickson saw the topic of Queen Elizabeth as a new artistic start, an occasion to look "at the world through other people's eyes" instead of writing only about her own experience.² She regarded history as "a journey of understanding [...] an opportunity to emo-

¹ Alireza Fakhrkonandeh, "Crossing the Mirror into Maternal Waters: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Becoming-other in Ella Hickson's *The Writer* (2018)," *English Studies* (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1080/0013838X.2022.2047336>.

² Quoted in Christina Care, "How a Director and Writer Collaborate in Theatre: Interview with Ella Hickson and Natalie Abrahams," *The Spotlight Podcast* (November 2019), <https://www.spotlight.com/news-and-advice/director-and-playwright-collaboration-in-theatre-podcast>.

tionally experience life through somebody that is different to you", which she claimed to be "part of the philosophical pursuit of theatre."³ *Swive* combines historicity and contemporary thought, especially with its terse dialogues and repetitive phrases, yet Hickson encourages future directors to regard the work as a new rather than as a history play.⁴ Also, Hickson opted to maximize the use of "original practices" within the Jacobean indoor replica theatre, yet strongly distanced the action from the surface decoration of the space, the outward "look" that is also problematized in the framework of the feminine experience.

The paper will address the issue of how the play, as staged at Shakespeare's Globe, reimagined Queen Elizabeth for an early twenty-first-century audience, and how the interaction of Hickson's text and its staging commented and contributed to the re-telling of the story of the Virgin Queen.

A SENSE OF HISTORY

The Sam Wanamaker Playhouse was opened in 2014 to offer indoor performances during the winter seasons at Shakespeare's Globe. Being in close proximity to the replica Globe Theatre, the venue partakes in its reputation of being an "authentic" space for Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. However, the playhouse is not an actual replica of any pre-existing structure, but rather an archetype of an indoor theatre, one that would be recognized as such by Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

While indoor spaces were widely used in the late sixteenth century for private performances – for instance at various royal palaces, at the Inns of Court, or in country houses – a purpose built indoor public theatre did not exist until 1596 when James Burbage decided to convert a hall of the old Blackfriars monastery into a playhouse for his company.⁵ Although Burbage spent 600 pounds and fitted out a theatre for an audience of about 500–1000, the theatre was not allowed to be opened due to petitions to the Privy Council from neighbours.⁶ It was not until 1609 that public indoor performances were regularly offered to the London public. Unfortunately, very little is known about this interior space, and there is also barely any information about the other early seventeenth century indoor

³ Ibid. See also: "I'm bored of my own experience [...] I feel less inclined to just bare my soul," Quoted in Joe Townend, "Was Elizabeth I Insecure?" *Shakespeare's Globe*, 27 November, 2019, <https://www.shakespearesglobe.com/discover/blogs-and-features/2019/11/27/was-elizabeth-i-insecure/#0>.

⁴ Ella Hickson, *Swive [Elizabeth]* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2019), 6, author's note.

⁵ Blackfriars was used for theatrical performances already in the 1580s both by the Children of the Chapel Royal and the Boys of St. Paul's, yet it was never opened up for the public as Burbage intended.

⁶ For information about the public indoor Elizabethan and Jacobean theatres and the building of the Sam Wanamaker Theatre see Will Tosh, *Playing Indoors: Staging Early Modern Drama in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

public theatres, such as the Cockpit (1617–) or Salisbury Court (1629–).⁷ Thus for the construction of the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse drawings of later theatres had to be used, and an imaginary date of 1616 was chosen to serve as a stylistic orientation for details of the architectural design.

Swive [*Elizabeth*] was specifically written for the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse by Ella Hickson, and the theatre space is just as vital for the play as its text. “The space is magic. It’s got a kind of cosiness to it, which I find quite provocative”, admits Hickson.⁸ The atmosphere of the Jacobean theatre overwhelms the production, and Hickson enhances the potential of its early modern stage.

One aspect of the space that Hickson and director Natalie Abrahams explored was the use of shared light. Early modern theatre studies often emphasize that in the public theatres the sunlight equalized the focus on actor and spectator. However, there has been much less work done on how the candlelight within indoor spaces affects the production. Hickson’s *Swive* maximizes the possibilities inherent in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, which is illuminated by 100 beeswax candles, and where the smell of the candlewax creates an aura and sense of history which is almost tangible. As opposed to open air replica stages (such as the London Globe), the quality and quantity of the light can be altered, and the striking effect of a pitch dark auditorium can be achieved.

For the production of *Swive* a special candle consultant was employed, who exploited the symbolic connotations of this lighting system. As the candles were snuffed out, the pattern of the smoke became a telling comment on the events, for instance hinting at the death of characters. As the light got dimmer within the performance, the sounds got more prominent: whispers became harsher, words more distinct and marked. The high point of the play was the pitch dark scene featuring the Tower of London where the sound of the desperate prayer murmured by Princess Elizabeth monopolized the attention and sensory perception of the audience. The technique was further enhanced by the voice suddenly switching over into a scream that produced an aural effect well above the real volume of the sound. From this point onwards the fortune of Princess Elizabeth started a steady ascent paralleled in the gradual lighting up of the space. From the sharp and threatening shadows of one single candle to the final brilliance of the full light of the chandeliers, the shared light of the theatre space acted as a signifier of the emotional and social standing of Elizabeth.

⁷ A reconstruction of Blackfriars was attempted at Staunton, Virginia in 2001. A replica indoor space of the 1633 version of the Cockpit-at-Court by Inigo Jones opens in 2022 – named Shakespeare North Playhouse – at Knowsley, Prescot just outside Manchester, near the site where the Stanley family had an indoor theatre built for the public ca. 1599.

⁸ Townend, “Was Elizabeth I Insecure?”

Another aspect of the space that was utilized was the cosy scale of the interior. While the rebuilt Globe has been criticized for miscalculating the size of the wooden structure which resulted in the galleries being out of reach for the actors, the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse is praised for its exquisite intimacy.⁹ The actors are physically so close to the spectators of the pit that they could actually touch them, and the surrounding vertical galleries are so closely embracing the stage that the softest sound can be heard even by those standing in the gods. This intimacy does not only establish an emotional tie between actors and spectators, but occasionally is used by Hickson to enhance the drama with the intimidating proximity of the stage action. With the actors and audience sharing the same light this feature of the space was used also for assigning the roles of the members of the Privy Council (Scene 8), or the crowd (Scene 17) to the spectators.

Yet beyond these immaterial aspects, when it comes to the architectural details of the recreated theatre, the play treats the embellishments in a sceptical manner. The prologue of the play starts with Elizabeth Q[ueen] tearing down the old façade and lampooning its pretensions: “The sense of history in this theatre, the cosy, candle-y Elizabethan feeling, is bullshit. The space is no more than five years old. What it creates, is a false sense of security.”¹⁰ Instead of a carved and gilded interior, a chipboard background serves as the backdrop to the stage action. From the very first moment the notion of history versus fiction becomes a source of tension. As the atmosphere of the replica theatre overwhelms the production, the play attempts to discard the belief in an objective retelling of events and in the security of knowledge or possession of one’s past. Thus *Swive* uses the replica space to underline the fictitious nature of history, as a subjective reimagining of the past, or – on a more cynical note – the manipulation of the interpretation of bygone times.

The play is historically sound, with very little reshuffling of chronology, and verbatim quotations of historical documents underpinning the plot, such as John Knox’s pamphlet of 1558 attacking female rule, Princess Elizabeth’s preface to her translation of John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* of 1545, and her first public speech as Queen of 1559. But the play’s “authenticity” is questioned in several scenes. As Elizabeth Q ascends the throne, her first instruction to her principle secretary, Cecil is to rewrite history, obliterate the memory of humiliating details of her life, and establish her own preferred interpretation of events: “My sister – Mary [...] She will be known for cruelty.”¹¹ While the audience knows that changing facts cannot be done easily – which is also

⁹ Tim Fitzpatrick, “Reconstructing Shakespeare’s Second Globe using ‘Computer Aided Design’ (CAD) tools,” *Early Modern Literary Studies* 13, no. 4 (2004): 1–35.

¹⁰ Hickson, *Swive*, 9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 36, scene 10.

articulated by Cecil's protestation "you cannot just rewrite history" – their attention is drawn to the realisation that history is ultimately a social construct, a product of cultural memory which depends on the assertiveness of the voice interpreting the past: Elizabeth Q: "Yes, I can. [...] we'll just repeat it, frequently."¹²

The play also explores the nature of history by repeating phrases and sentences. These verbal echoes prompt the questions: Is history progress or repetition, and can the newer be better than the old? The words of Princess Elizabeth written at the age of twelve are quoted which emphasize the linear vision of history as evolution:

Since the creation of the world we see just as the days and months increase and multiply, so similarly, little by little, by succession of time the mind of man is more ingenious and inventive, more adorned and polished, than it formerly was.¹³

The accompanying dialogue between Elizabeth P[rincess] and Thomas Seymour argues for getting smarter as one gets older, and that newer is better. However, the reappearance of the same quotation with the same dialogue a couple of scenes later amid very different circumstances by different characters – Elizabeth Q and Robert Dudley – highlights just the opposite, that history repeats itself. The "succession" of time – a pun on the fraught power politics of the Tudors – is anything but "adorned and polished" within the play. Elizabeth Q's succession to the throne would ultimately make nothing better: manipulation, surveillance, and pressure to control the female body will continue. The blind panic of Elizabeth P will only mature into the desperate defiance of Elizabeth Q in her late twenties.

The production underlined the same idea when – reviving early modern production practices – it required actors to perform more than one character. The four actors of the cast embody types that re-emerged with the passing of time: Nina Cassells played the roles of young powerless women (Elizabeth P, Katherine Grey, and the simple Washer-woman), Abigail Cruttenden represented women who were in position of power but were denied real access to it (Queen Elizabeth, Catherine Parr, and Mary Tudor), Colin Tierney donned the role of the seducer (as Thomas Seymour and John Dudley), while Michael Gould was the powerful male manipulator (William Cecil). Thus Hickson emphasized continuity and repetition that invited the audience to rethink and reinvent the figure of Elizabeth Tudor as a type for a modern woman.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ "Princess Elizabeth to Queen Katherine, Prefacing Her English Translation of Chapter 1 of John Calvin's *Institution de la Religion Chrestienne* (Geneva, 1541), December 30, 1545," in Elizabeth I., *Collected Works*, eds. Leah S. Marcus, Janel Mueller, and Mary Beth Rose (Chicago / London: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 11.

THE VIRGIN QUEEN AS A CULTURAL SYMBOL

Queen Elizabeth in British cultural memory was often shown in powerful male roles that reflected a masculine view of success: she was depicted as a military leader on the field of Tilbury, the founder of colonies, or the ambitious builder of an empire.¹⁴ As opposed to this, in *Swive* she stands for femininity and insecurity, her figure is shown as deprived of power, whose sole purpose is to survive vicissitudes. *Swive*'s Elizabeth Tudor is represented in two characters: as Elizabeth P, the young girl whose life is threatened by political power struggles; and as Elizabeth Q, the Queen of England whose sovereignty is compromised by the machinations of her councillors. Her only means to control her fate and safeguard her position is to assume maximum command of her female body: to resist getting married and having children. It is only through her independence that she can be secure.

The references to historical events serve to prove her choice right. The play enumerates the hazards of having a child or not having the right kind of child (Anne Boleyn's execution after failing to deliver a male heir, Katherine Parr's death in childbirth, Mary Tudor's humiliation after her false pregnancies, and Katherine Grey's imprisonment for having an illegitimate baby), and the risks of getting married or not marrying the right man (Anne Boleyn, Mary Tudor, Katherine Grey). As Elizabeth ascends the throne she faces the prejudice of men against female power which is summed up by quoting John Knox's misogynist words about the monstrosity of women ruling men, and about its "subversion of good order, equity and justice."¹⁵ She battles to get the title of Head of Church instead of Governor, and fails; she strives to get informed about matters and make decisions – for instance about the execution of Mary Queen of Scots – and fails. Her only strength seems to be her power to resist making a decision about the "succession."

Swive both addresses and subverts Queen Elizabeth's long standing cult image which the audience brings to the performance as their historical capital.¹⁶ Elizabeth's public representation rested on her own self-fashioning that appear in her speeches and justified her rule with four principles: her godliness and providential election, her exceptional education, her reciprocal love-relationship with her subjects, and the authority of her

¹⁴ For the cultural significance of Queen Elizabeth's myth see Michael Dobson and Nicola J. Watson, *England's Elizabeth: An Afterlife in Fame and Fantasy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1–31.

¹⁵ Hickson, *Swive*, 52, scene 15.

¹⁶ Pierre Sorlin defines the historical capital of the audience as a "cultural heritage" that "includes dates, events and characters known to all members of that community" which enables every member of the community to perceive a plotline as an adaptation of a past event in history. Pierre Sorlin, "The Film in History," in Marnie Hughes-Warrington, ed., *The History on Film Reader* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 15–6.

male body politic as opposed to her weak female body as represented in her famous words at Tilbury: "I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king and of a king of England too."¹⁷ However, Hickson set out to defy all these traditional understandings of the Queen. Elizabeth's religiosity is degraded to Elizabeth P's suppositious repetition of prayers that sound much more as incited charms than conviction in God's redemption. Her education is mocked by reference to her drawing male limbs on her Greek papers. Both Elizabeth P and Q openly acknowledge that nobody loves her, and enough evidence from her lonely childhood and adolescence is given to prove her point. Her love of others is also questioned by the Washerwoman's account of her coronation: "She was waving. Sort of at everyone – sort of at no one."¹⁸ But the most attention is given to her authority as Queen, which is not divided – as in Tudor political writing – into a male body politic and a female body natural, but which is integral to and dependent on one aspect: her femininity.

The major metaphor of her female body is the recurring theme of discussing looks. It seems an axiom within the play that she receives respect in proportion to its ability to impress with her costume and jewels. The contempt for Elizabeth P is expressed by reference to her dress ("The maid said my mother was a goggle-eyed whore and that's why she won't repair my dress with holes in it."¹⁹), in the Tower Elizabeth P asks for a new dress in order to convince her jailors of her innocence, and Elizabeth Q's status as sovereign is confirmed by her attire. After assuming power, Elizabeth Q is dressed in a costume displaying the 1588 Armada portrait, a painting that depicts her at the height of her political power which is symbolized by an imperial crown, her hand on the American continent, and the defeated Spanish fleet. The words of the play, however, reinforce uncertainty again, and argue against Elizabeth Q's power:

Dudley: "You're the Queen"

Elizabeth Q: "Do you think I look like one?"

Dudley: "Have you seen what you're wearing?"²⁰

Instead of being robed in the costume and jewels of the famous painting, Elizabeth wears the portrait as a pattern on her dress showing her power to be just an illusion.

¹⁷ The version of the Queen's Speech at Tilbury in 1588 as printed in 1654. *Cabala, Mysteries of State, in Letters of the Great Ministers of K. James and K. Charles* (London: Printed for Bedell and Collins, 1654), 260.

¹⁸ Hickson, *Swive*, 38, scene 10.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 16, scene 4.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, scene 11.

CONCLUSION

Ella Hickson's representation of Elizabeth Tudor is a provocative interpretation of history for contemporary society which is emphasized by the treatment of the replica space of the Sam Wanamaker Theatre and the epilogue's claim of "Together – we get to remake things. Re-believe. Our histories."²¹ The play also foregrounds memory as the basic means to construct the past: "Every child in England has remembered her, for centuries."²² Yet instead of Queen Elizabeth's achievements of establishing a Protestant England, defying the power of Catholic Europe, or patronizing naval exploration, there are only two memorable features mentioned: her childlessness and unmarried state.

As opposed to Shekhar Kapur's film adaptation *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (2007) which ends with a self-assured Elizabeth holding a baby in her hand as the symbol of her role of a caring mother to her nation, Hickson finishes her play on a bitter note of loneliness and sacrifice. The disrobed Queen Elizabeth characters – all in black – pour wine on the stage and act out the ritual sacrifice of their female body as a reinterpretation and travesty of the Christian rite of the Eucharist:

Elizabeth P:	Take this – all of you – and eat it. For this is my body which will be given up for you. [...] Take this all of you and drink from it.
Elizabeth Q:	For this is the chalice of my blood. ²³

Queen Elizabeth inhabits a world where young women are not allowed to make decisions, where their desires are humiliated ("Encouraging lust in man is an aggression"),²⁴ and where losing their heads is a real possibility unless they use their minds. The last sentence of the play "She was her own safety" echoes a modern belief in self-reliance, but to survive as a woman Elizabeth needs to sacrifice her feminine instinct of love and motherhood.

²¹ Ibid., 71, epilogue.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 24, scene 7.