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License to Kill: Assassination and the Politics of Murder in Elizabethan and Early Stuart England

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Abstract: If we understand “assassinations” to be the targeted killing of public figures by people who believe themselves to be acting in the public interest, then the history of modern assassination begins in late sixteenth-century Europe. Prompted by the observation that the word itself was new to the late sixteenth-century English, this article examines the altered scope and significance of political killings in post-Reformation England. Individuals from a broad range of backgrounds came to think themselves authorized to shape their polity by killing their leaders. Their efforts, along with authorities’ responses to and representations of such plots, speak to an increasingly participatory political culture. Murder had long been a political tool; but as politics changed, this article argues, so too did the nature and meanings of political killings.

In his remarkably ambivalent dissection of the morality of “attempts on the lives of great personages,” early Stuart scholar Richard James observed that “in story, such actions are hateful under the name of assassination.”¹ James drew most of his material from classical sources, but may also have had more recent killings in mind. The late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries saw a spate of deadly attacks on political leaders. Prince William of Orange had survived one near-fatal shooting before succumbing to another in 1584. The French witnessed an abundance of political killings, including the slaying of Francis, Duke of Guise in 1563 by a Huguenot, the Guise-backed slaughter of Admiral Coligny in 1572, the fatal stabbing of King Henri III by a Dominican friar in 1589, and the killing of Henri IV in 1610, after several earlier attempts on his life. In Scotland, Lord Darnley and Regent Moray had died at others’ hands. In England, such attempts had been many, but unless James was writing after the killing of the Duke of Buckingham in 1628, none had

¹ Alexander Grosart (ed.), *The Poems, etc., of Richard James, B.D., 1592-1638*, (London, 1880), p. 281; discussed in Alastair Bellany, “‘The Brightnes of the Noble Leutenants Action’: An Intellectual Ponders Buckingham’s Assassination,” *English Historical Review* 118 (2003), pp. 1242-62.

thus far succeeded.² Yet, while James was right to suggest that labelling the killing of political leaders as “assassinations” made them particularly opprobrious, he erred in suggesting that this had long been the case. Moreover, while he could contextualize recent slayings and attempted slayings of political leaders with reference to the ancient past, this essay suggests that there was something distinctive about the assassinations of his era that warrants attention. The word itself was new; so, too, were some aspects of the deed it described and the place such “attempts on the lives of great personages” assumed in early modern political culture.

Asking whether assassination was, in any meaningful sense, new to late sixteenth and early seventeenth-century England might simply seem perverse. “No” is the obvious answer; indeed, most every writer on the subject assumes or asserts that the practice is “as old as time.”³ What prompts the query, though, is the novelty of the word itself to the Elizabethan years. In long use in Italian, “assassinat(e)” and its cognates appeared in French in the mid-1500s and then in English some decades later.⁴ The *Oxford English Dictionary* dates “assassin” and “assassinate” to 1600 and 1602, respectively. It attributes the first use of “assassination” to William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, which was probably composed some time between 1603 and 1607.⁵ Somewhat earlier examples do exist; the first reference I have found appears in a letter sent by Sir Thomas Smith from France in 1572, in which he referred to “treason, conspiracy, insurrection, assassination, empoisonment” and other such “false measures” intended for the “utter destruction of the

² Stephen Alford, *The Watchers: A Secret History of the Reign of Elizabeth I* (New York, 2012) provides the best recent survey of the many plots, both real and contrived, of the Elizabethan years.

³ See, for example, Lindsay Porter, *Assassination: A History of Political Murder* (New York, 2010), p. 7, and Franklin L. Ford, *Political Murder: From Tyrannicide to Terrorism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985).

⁴ Martin Wiggins, *Journeymen in Murder: The Assassin in English Renaissance Drama* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 11, 13.

⁵ A.R. Braunmuller (ed.), *Macbeth* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 5-15.

state.”⁶ To be sure, one should not too quickly see too much significance in the appearance of a new word, at this time especially: in the years from c. 1570-1630 the English coined or borrowed more additions to their vocabulary than ever before or since.⁷ In this case, however, I want to suggest that the adoption of “assassination” and its cognates should alert us to changes in the nature and significance of political killings in an increasingly participatory political culture. The focus here is not primarily on the word itself, but what it points to. In the wake of the Reformation, individuals from a broad range of social backgrounds came to believe themselves licensed to kill in the interests of the public good. Their efforts, however few, fed authorities’ fear-mongering, with plots constructed or crafted for the public in ways that make it difficult to distinguish fact from fiction in individual instances, but that themselves suggest a broadening of the political nation.

Dynastic rivals and embittered noblemen in the past had certainly sought power or revenge by killing their kings and other dignitaries. “Compassing or imagining” the king’s death had been defined as treason since 1352, and the link between king-killing

⁶ The National Archives (hereafter TNA), SP 70/146, f. 66. For an early use in Scotland, see the “Declaratioun anent the tumult and uproar rased within the burgh of Edinburgh,” issued by the Scots parliament in 1596 to denounce “ane swa haynous assassinatt”: *Records of the Parliaments of Scotland to 1707* (rps.ac.uk), A1596/12/21/4. (My thanks to Dr. Cynthia Neville for pointing me to this passage.)

⁷ Manfred Görlach, *Introduction to Early Modern English* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 136; David Graddol, *English: History, Diversity and Change* (London, 1996), p. 142. Yet, as Keith Wrightson and others have demonstrated, being attentive to the emergence and evolution of new words can help us understand something of shifts in the “more basic reality” those words reflect and constitute. The phrase, and the approach, originates in Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London, 1983, revised edn). For Quentin Skinner’s classic response, see “Language and Political Change,” in Terence Ball, James Farr and Russell Hanson (eds.), *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change* (Cambridge, 1989). Alongside works of political theory that seek to unlock grand conceptual fields through attentiveness to keywords, more socially inclined historians have shown the utility of charting changes in vocabulary. For an introduction to the former, see Mark Knights, “Towards a Social and Cultural History of Keywords and Concepts by the Early Modern Research Group,” *History of Political Thought* 31.2 (2010), pp. 427-48; for examples of the latter, see Keith Wrightson, “‘Sorts of People’ in Tudor and Stuart England,” in *The Middling Sort of People*, (ed.) Jonathan Barry and Christopher Brooks (New York, 1994), pp. 28-51; Craig Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation* (Basingstoke, 1998); Phil Withington, *Society in Early Modern England: The Vernacular Origins of Some Powerful Ideas* (Cambridge, 2010); and Peter Marshall, “The Naming of Protestant England,” *Past and Present* 214 (2012), pp. 87-128.

and treason remained explicit thereafter. If we include young Edward V, the English had seen four kings dethroned and despatched in suspicious circumstances between 1327 and 1483. By the second half of the sixteenth century, however, new motives, new actors, and new fears entered the fray. The various political killings and conspiracies of the era have all been well studied individually, but taken together, new elements appeared that have not yet been noted. As politics changed, so too did the nature of political killings. Recent scholarly work has delineated the broadening participatory base of early modern governance and an emerging “public sphere” of political communication, both infusing the “monarchical republicanism(s)” of subject-citizens who demonstrated remarkable capacities for self-governing while acting in pursuit of what they perceived to be the common good.⁸ Harkening to this context, the argument here is that assassination—both the word and the deed—become a tool of the new politics and a newly feared aspect of the early modern political culture that was born in the wake of religious division.

If we are to argue that assassinations themselves were in any sense new to late sixteenth-century England, we need to be careful of our own use of the word. If we use “assassination” simply to denote any killing of a powerful person, then this was indeed “as old as time.” Manuel Eisner has recently tallied European regicides from 600-1800 and found that perhaps as many as 15 per cent of all monarchs were murdered, making kingship amongst the most deadly of occupations.⁹ Much depends, of course, on

⁸ See, for example, Michael Braddick, *State Formation in Early Modern England, c. 1550-1700* (Cambridge, 2000); Steve Hindle, *The State and Social Change in Early Modern England* (Basingstoke, 2002); Peter Lake and Steven Pincus (eds.), *The Politics of the Public Sphere in Early Modern England* (Manchester, 2012); Patrick Collinson, “The Monarchical Republic of Queen Elizabeth I,” *Elizabethan Essays* (London, 1994); John McDiarmid (ed.), *The Monarchical Republic of Early Modern England* (Aldershot, 2007); and works cited below in n. 59.

⁹ Manuel Eisner, “Killing Kings: Patterns of Regicide in Europe, AD 600-1800,” *British Journal of Criminology* 51 (2011), pp. 556-77. Of the 1513 monarchs in his dataset, he had 159 as certainly murdered and another 60 as possibly murdered. He categorized these violent deaths as succession by murder, war by

definitions. If we use assassination in a narrower sense, to denote killings with a political purpose, then the meaning of the adjective “political” matters, too. In his survey of political murder throughout the ages, historian Franklin Ford treats assassination as a species of the broader genus and defines it as “the intentional killing of a specified victim or group of victims, perpetrated for reasons related to his (her, their) public prominence and undertaken with a political purpose in view.” Ford implicitly adopts an expansive view of the “political,” however, in selecting examples for inclusion in his text. When discussing the early medieval slayings of “barbarian chieftains” in drunken fights and family squabbles, he briefly raises but quickly dismisses a possible objection: “In the absence of a governmental structure worthy of the name, can there be *political* assassination at all, as generally understood, or only private murder writ large?”¹⁰

Most any murder might be considered political, if “politics” is used in its broadest sense, as struggles for power. For present purposes, though, we might best adopt the traditional Aristotelian notion of “the political” as those things dealing with public life, or the *res publica*. As such, the definition Alan Marshall uses in his study of late Stuart espionage and intrigue is apt: “Assassination can be defined as the sudden and treacherous killing of a public figure who has, or did have, responsibilities in public life, by someone who kills in the belief that he is acting *in the public interest*.”¹¹ Understood in this way, not all killings of powerful people constitute assassinations, only those done by individuals who believe themselves—no matter how misguidedly—to be serving a

murder, private grievances and revenge, and murder by outsiders, and found that the vast majority were “succession by murder.” He identified only two as “murders by politically radicalized outsiders,” those of Henri III and Henri IV of France.

¹⁰ Ford, *Political Murder*, pp. 2, 94.

¹¹ Alan Marshall, *Intelligence and Espionage in the Reign of Charles II, 1660-1685* (Cambridge, 1994), p. 280. Emphasis added.

public good. This perception of a public interest sets some of the attempts upon the lives of powerful people from the late sixteenth century forward apart from those seen over the past several centuries.

The key public interest being contended for was the religious, which can be seen, in part, in the ways the early modern English came to use the new word. Then, as now, the words “assassinate” and “assassination” had a variety of inflections, but they were used most frequently to discuss the acts of king-killers motivated by faith. In English-language publications, the word “assassin” first appeared as a proper noun that referred to the legendary band of Muslim killers of the era of the Crusades.¹² Clement Edmondes’ *Observations upon the Five First Books of Caesars Commentaries*, published in 1600, offers one of the earliest printed uses of a variant of the word to denote an act. There it referred without detail to “murders and assassinats” in general.¹³ It appeared again in Thomas Fitzherbert’s 1602 *Defence of the Catholyke Cause*—a work to which we will return—where it designates a particularly heinous crime tied to treason.¹⁴ Thereafter, the word appears to have been used a bit more frequently. Disregarding its use for the Muslim band of killers, it appeared in at least fifteen different publications from 1606 to 1610. In one of these, Henri Estienne’s *A World of Wonders*, translated from the French in 1607, “assassin” describes hired killers, or those murderers who “butcher men for a set

¹² Frère Hayon, *Here begynneth a lytell cronycle* (London, 1520); Celio Augustino Curione, *A Notable Historie of the Saracens* (London 1575); Ralph Carr, *The Mahumetane or Turkish historie* (London, 1600).

¹³ Clement Edmondes, *Observations upon the five first books of Caesar’s Commentaries* (London, 1600), p.198. An important caveat: Edmondes’ work is the earliest to use the word in this way that appears in a text search of books digitized on *Early English Books Online* [EEBO]. EEBO does not yet allow a systematic, full-text keyword search, however. Many of its books as yet have no transcribed, searchable text; the searchable text of others is not always wholly accurate; and, of course, lost works do not appear in the database. As the point here is simply to identify the range of meanings the word had in its early appearances, though, such a search presumably provides a reasonably representative sample. On using EEBO to chart word usage, see Withington, *Society in Early Modern England* and Marshall, “Naming,” pp. 90-1.

¹⁴ Thomas Fitzherbert, *A Defence of the Catholyke Cause* (Antwerp, 1602), p. 14.

price, a thing (doubtless) more to be lamented in Italy than in any other country.”¹⁵ In all the other works, “assassination” and its cognates refer to political murder, to the killing of public figures. It appears alongside references to treason and rebellion, and to Catholics.¹⁶ Debates over the oath of allegiance, and then the death of Henri IV, prompted its repeated use to condemn the Romanists, who reputedly enjoyed “sacraments for assassinated, masses for massacres.”¹⁷

Words followed from actions, which in turn had a pre-history in discussions of regicide and tyrannicide. Scholars of political theory have given due attention to learned debates on the acceptability of king killing, showing that those few authors who allowed it some legitimacy almost always restricted it to the elite, be they noblemen or magistrates.¹⁸ In 1415, the Council of Constance condemned as heresy the notion that a vassal or subject might kill a tyrant, after John the Fearless, Duke of Burgundy, had ordered the killing of his cousin and rival, the mad king’s brother Louis, Duke of Orleans. The killing had been of a traditional sort, done to advance Burgundy’s position, but John Parvus had mounted a scandalously novel defence of the duke which held that anyone

¹⁵ Henri Estienne, *A World of Wonders* (London, 1607), pp. 141, 140.

¹⁶ See: Matthew Sutcliffe, *The Subversion of Robert Parsons* (London, 1606); Robert Parsons, *A Treatise Tending to Mitigation towards Catholike Subiectes* (Saint-Omer, 1607); Barnabe Barnes, *The Diuils Charter* (London, 1607); Anon., *George Blackwell...his answeres upon sundry his examinations* (London, 1607); John King, *A Sermon Preached at White-Hall the 5. day of November* (London, 1608); Anon., *A large examination taken at Lambeth...of M.G. Blakwell* (London, 1609); William Barlow, *An Answer to a Catholike English-man* (London, 1609); Pierre Coton, *The Hellish and Horrible Councell Practised and Used by the Jesuites (in their private consultations) when they would have a man to murder a king* (London, 1610); Samuel Daniel, *The Ciuile Wars betweene the howses of Lancaster and Yorke* (London, 1609); John Donne, *Pseudo-Martyr* (London, 1610); Thomas Owen, *A Letter of a Catholike Man* (London, 1610); George Marcelline, *The Triumphs of King James the first* (London, 1610); and Thomas Pelletier, *A Lamentable Discourse upon the Paricide and bloody assasination committed on the person of Henry the fourth* (London, 1610). It appears in at least a further 17 works from 1611-15, 12 from 1616-20, and 22 from 1621-25. A similar preponderance of references to Catholic traitors applies in these later works.

¹⁷ King, *Sermon at White-Hall*, p. 18.

¹⁸ See, for example, Roland Mousnier (trans. Joan Spencer), *The Assassination of Henry IV: The Tyrannicide Problem and the Consolidation of the French Absolute Monarchy in the Early Seventeenth Century* (London, 1973) and essays in Robert von Friedeburg (ed.), *Murder and Monarchy: Regicide in European History, 1300-1800* (Basingstoke, 2004).

might lawfully kill a tyrant without need for the sanction of higher powers.¹⁹ In his early sixteenth-century guide to political history and practice, Machiavelli acknowledged that a decision to kill the Prince might in theory be “made by any man, of whatever sort, small or great, noble or ignoble, familiar or not familiar with the Prince,” but he cited only one example of a “poor and abject Spaniard” who tried to kill his king. He focused instead on the likelier danger of conspiracies, and history showed that “all conspiracies have been made by men of standing or else by men in immediate attendance on a prince, for other people...who are not in touch with a prince are devoid alike of any hope and of any opportunity of carrying out a conspiracy successfully.”²⁰ As the sixteenth century progressed, however, small but dangerous and growing numbers of subjects came to believe themselves able and justified in trying to kill “great personages,” including their sovereigns. And in this, whether they needed it or not, they had some help from their superiors.

Any attempt to identify a transitional date for the modern practice of assassination is bound to founder. In England, one might point to the contests for supremacy in the 1530s in establishing the necessary conditions, or to the writings of the Marian Protestant exiles in setting out justifications for such actions. The Bible they produced contained not just the usual stories of Judith, Ehud, and other Old Testament assassins, but also marginalia suggesting that while those who killed in private causes sinned, those who killed in a public cause did not.²¹ We might well begin in 1573, when Peter Burchett, a

¹⁹ Mousnier, *Assassination of Henry IV*, pp. 83-5.

²⁰ Machiavelli (ed. Bernard Crick) *The Discourses* (London, 2003), Book Three, ‘On Conspiracies’, pp. 401-2. First published in 1531.

²¹ Geneva Bible, 1 Kings 21:15, 2 Kings 9:33, 1 Samuel 26:9; 2 Chronicles 15:16, discussed in Patrick Collinson, “Monarchical Republic,” p. 45. On the broader context of Protestant resistance theory, see, for example, Quentin Skinner, “The Origins of the Calvinist Theory of Revolution,” in B.C. Malament (ed.), *After the Reformation* (Manchester, 1980), pp. 309-30; Gerald Bowler, “‘An Axe or an Act’: The

student of the Middle Temple of a puritan bent, persuaded himself that the Gospel allowed the killing of any who hindered its truth. He sought to kill not the queen, but her favourite and privy councillor Sir Christopher Hatton, whom he believed to be a particularly strong obstacle to the Gospel. In the event, he mistook his man and stabbed the navigator and slave trader Sir John Hawkins instead. After his arrest, he remained resolute, insisting that had he succeeded, the “act had been lawful by God’s law if not by man’s law, and I would not have repented me of the same deed.”²²

Pope Pius V’s excommunication of Queen Elizabeth in 1570 might also be a strong contender for marking a transition point. Although it did not authorize her death, but only her deposition, it soon came to be taken as doing the former at least implicitly. As early as 1571, Dr. John Story was accused of having planned to kill the queen in the belief that her excommunication made the killing lawful.²³ By 1580, upon queries from English exiles about plans to kill Elizabeth, Cardinal Gallio reported on behalf of Pope Gregory XIII that “there is no doubt that whosoever sends her out of the world with the pious intention of doing God service not only does not sin but gains merit, especially having regard to the sentence pronounced against her by Pius V of holy memory.”²⁴

Presumably without the benefit of such direct assurances, Catholic John Somerville set

Parliament of 1572 and Resistance Theory in Early Elizabethan England,” *Canadian Journal of History* 19 (1984), pp. 349-59; and Dan Danner, “Christopher Goodman and the English Protestant Tradition of Civil Disobedience,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 8 (1977), pp. 60-73.

²² British Library (hereafter BL), Lansdowne 17, no. 88. Burchett’s crime so outraged the queen that privy councillors had some difficulty convincing her that they had to proceed against Burchett by common law rather than summary execution: BL, Lansdowne 17, nos. 17, 24 and 88.

²³ Ronald Pollitt, “The Abduction of Doctor John Story and the Evolution of Elizabethan Intelligence Operations,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 14 (1983), pp. 131-56.

²⁴ Arnold Oskar Meyer, *England and the Catholic Church under Queen Elizabeth* (London, 1916), pp. 271, 491. For the broader context and range of responses, see also Peter Holmes, *Resistance and Compromise: The Political Thought of the Elizabethan Catholics* (Cambridge, 1982) and work by Michael Questier, including “Elizabeth and the Catholics,” in Ethan Shagan (ed.), *Catholics and the ‘Protestant Nation’* (Manchester, 2005), pp. 69-94 and “Catholic Loyalty in Early Stuart England,” *English Historical Review* 123 (2008), pp. 1132-65.

out from Warwickshire for London three years later with barely concealed intent to shoot the queen. He professed himself ready to “die for the commonwealth,” but was apprehended after assaulting some Protestants along the way.²⁵ More such attempts followed in the years to come.

On the continent, in the meantime, events unfolded that might better mark a transition point. In 1580, King Philip II issued a proclamation against the “rebel” Prince William of Orange, then leading the forces of anti-Spanish and anti-Catholic resistance in the Netherlands. After listing William’s crimes and noting the oaths of fidelity he had violated, the proclamation described him as “the public plague of Christendom” and declared him a traitor, perpetually and forever proscribed. It went on to demand his killing in the public interest, an act to be rewarded with money and preferment. Exemplifying the ambiguities of assassination, and influencing English reactions, it is worth quoting at length:

And to the end, indeed, that this matter may be the more effectually and readily performed, and so by that means our said people the sooner delivered, from this tyranny and oppression, we willing to reward virtue and to punish vice, do promise in the word of a king and as the minister of God, that if there be any found, either among our own subjects, or amongst strangers, so noble of courage and desirous of our service, and the public good, that knoweth any means how to execute our said Decree, and to set us and himself free from the aforesaid plague, delivering him unto us quick or dead, or at the least taking his life from him, we

²⁵ Quote at TNA, SP 12/163, f. 137; see also SP 12/158, ff. 57, 65, 67; KB 8/45. The Throckmorton plot followed in the next year. While it is sometimes referred to as an assassination plot, it focused on rebellion and invasion and on deposing Elizabeth in favour of Queen Mary of Scotland; no particular attention seems to have been paid to securing Elizabeth’s death. See, for example, *A Discoverie of the treasons practised and attempted against the Queenes Majestie and the realme*, by Francis Throckemorton (London, 1584).

will cause to be given and provided, for him and his heirs...the sum of 25 thousand crowns of gold.²⁶

Hope of financial reward may have lain behind the first serious attempt upon William that followed this proclamation, but the second and successful attempt, that of Balthasar Gérard in 1584, seems more clearly to have emerged from principle and a desire to do good.²⁷ Welcomed into the prince's presence under the guise of a Protestant spying on the Spanish, Gérard had no difficulty in delivering the fatal gun shot. If one accepted that Prince William was indeed a rebel, his killing in this manner would not shock; if one accepted him as a legitimate leader, as did the English, this was an outrageous and terrifying act of murder. Done in stealth by means against which defence was difficult, by a man of no particular note, and justified by reference to the public good, William's death became the archetype of the new style of political killing, soon to merit the label of assassination.

Lisa Jardine treats William's death as a turning point after which "no head of state would ever feel safe again." She does so not because of the nature of the killer or his motive, however, but because of the relatively new technology used by the assassin: the wheel-lock pistol, an easily concealed gun that could be prepared ahead of time and used with one hand.²⁸ The handgun also allowed a killer to act at somewhat more distance than did some other weapons, aggravating fears that others besides a king's familiars might be able to despatch him. Early modern governments issued new laws and edicts against guns

²⁶ Lisa Jardine, *The Awful End of Prince William the Silent: The First Assassination of a Head of State with a Handgun* (London, 2005), includes the full document, pp. 139-43, quotation at 142. It can also be found appended to William's *Defence*, published first in French but then in "all other languages," appearing in English in 1581: *The apologie or defence of the most noble Prince William...against the proclamation and edict, published by the King of Spaine* (Delft, 1581), sigs. P3r-R2v.

²⁷ Jardine, *Awful End*, pp. 51, 54-60, 68-70.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

partly in response to this fear.²⁹ But as Henri III and Henri IV would later find, knives retained a deadly effectiveness. Would-be assassins turned to other traditional means, too. Certainly, authorities showed ever greater concern about the age-old techniques of the poisoner, witch, and sorcerer.

Poison had long been suspected in the sudden deaths of powerful persons thought to have died at rivals' hands and remained an object of fear as the politics of murder broadened in scope. It seemed an especially insidious means of attack, difficult to defend against and difficult to detect. In stipulating an especially terrifying form of execution—death by boiling—for those who used poison to kill, an Act of 1531 had observed that “no person can live in surety out of danger of death...if practice thereof should not be eschewed.”³⁰ While this particular punishment did not long last, the fear of poisoning did. The difficulty in identifying deaths by poison as acts of murder made the tool especially terrifying, and the accusation easy. The sudden and suspiciously convenient deaths of a number of notable figures in Elizabethan and early Stuart England prompted claims of poisoning.³¹ That they occasionally proved true—most notoriously, in the murder of Sir Thomas Overbury in 1613—lent support even to the wilder claims.³² The French held an autopsy to dispel rumours that Charles IX had died of poison in 1574, a practice later adopted in England as similar tales attended the deaths of Henry, Prince of

²⁹ For English measures, see for example P.L. Hughes and J.F. Larkin (eds.), *Tudor Royal Proclamations* (New Haven, 1964-9), II, pp. 116, 442-5, III, pp. 141-2.

³⁰ 22 Henry VIII c. 9. For the context of the Act's enactment, see K.J. Kesselring, “A Draft of the 1531 ‘Acte for Poysoning’,” *English Historical Review* 116 (2001), pp. 894-99 and William Stacy, “Richard Roose and the Use of Parliamentary Attainder in the Reign of Henry VIII,” *Historical Journal* 29 (1986), pp. 1-15.

³¹ For one such case, and evidence that such claims of dark deeds remain tantalizing into the present, see Leo Daugherty, *The Assassination of Shakespeare's Patron: Investigating the Death of the Fifth Earl of Derby* (Amherst, New York, 2011).

³² Alastair Bellany, *The Politics of Court Scandal in Early Modern England: News Culture and the Overbury Affair, 1603-1666* (Cambridge, 2002).

Wales and King James himself.³³ Such accounts typically focused on intimates and motives of the most traditional sort, but came to cover concerns that disaffected outsiders might use such means to effect their own ends. In 1598, for example, Edward Squire suffered a traitor's death after supposedly trying to kill both Elizabeth and the Earl of Essex on behalf of the Catholic cause, the first by coating the pommel of her saddle with poison and the second by dousing the earl's chair with the same ineffective potion.³⁴

Magical components were often included or suspected in conspiracies against Elizabeth.³⁵ In a 1561 plot to depose her in favour of Mary Queen of Scots, the conspirators drew encouragement from prophecies, and proceeded only after one John Prestall had invoked spirits to learn when Elizabeth would die.³⁶ As Norman Jones has shown, the discovery of this plot alarmed the authorities sufficiently to prompt the passage of statutes against conjuration and false prophecies in 1563.³⁷ In this plot, as in so many earlier ones, conspirators may have sought only to "foretell" rather than actively to cause the death of the monarch, but Prestall seems soon to have involved himself in more actively interventionist use of magical means. In the aftermath of the Northern

³³ David Harley, "Political Post-mortems and Morbid Anatomy in Seventeenth-Century England," *Social History of Medicine* 7.1 (1994), pp. 7-10, 15. For the long life and effects of rumours that the Duke of Buckingham, and even Prince Charles, had been involved in James's death, see Thomas Cogswell, "The Return of the 'Deade Alive': The Earl of Bristol and Dr Eglisam in the Parliament of 1626 and in Caroline Political Culture," *English Historical Review* 128 (2013), pp. 535-70. For Charles IX, see Jacqueline Vons and Pauline Saint-Martin, *Certitudes et incertitudes autour de la mort de Charles IX. Enquête sur l'autopsie d'un roi*. Etude inedite, publiée en ligne sur Cour de France.fr le 2 janvier 2009 (<http://cour-de-france.fr/article699.html>).

³⁴ For the official side of the story, see Francis Bacon (attr.), *A Letter written out of England to an English gentleman remaining at Padua, containing a true report of a strange conspiracie contrived between Edward Squire...and Richard Walpole* (London, 1598). For a response, see Martin Aray, *The Discoverie and Confutation of a Tragical Fiction deuysed and played by Edward Squyer...the meaning and moralization thereof was to make odious the Iesuits, and by them all Catholiques* (Antwerp, 1599).

³⁵ For the use of magic and prophecy in protest, see K.J. Kesselring, "Deference and Dissent in Tudor England: Reflections on Sixteenth-Century Protest," *History Compass* 3 (2005), pp. 1-16.

³⁶ *Calendar of Patent Rolls, Elizabeth*, vol. 4, nos. 455 and 457. On Prestall, see Glynn Parry, *John Dee: Arch-Conjuror* (New Haven, 2013), pp. 48, 78-9, 82-4, 92.

³⁷ Norman L. Jones, "Defining Superstitions: Treasonous Catholics and the Act against Witchcraft, 1563," in Charles Carleton et al (eds.), *State, Sovereigns, and Society in Early Modern England* (Stroud, 1998), pp. 187-203.

Rebellion of 1569, he consorted with the English rebels first in Scotland and then on the continent. Prestall may have become a double agent since being detained after the 1561 plot, but an anonymous pamphlet writer maintained that Prestall had joined himself with the exiles and “attempted sundry treasons against her Majesty,” perhaps related to his boast that he “had an art to poison any body a far off, being not present with them, and that none could do it but he.”³⁸ At about this time, Dr. John Story also reportedly consulted with Prestall, “a man most addicted to magical illusions, against his prince’s life.”³⁹ The privy council investigated a number of suspected plots involving sorcery, all of which suggested the difficulties of protecting the queen against even base-born or distant foes. In 1571, for example, they sought information about “a book painted wherein the queen’s majesty’s image is with an arrow in the mouth.”⁴⁰ Early in 1579, they ordered special interrogation of witches at Windsor thought to have killed several people using waxen images, to see if they had any knowledge relevant to a recently discovered “practise of that device very likely intended to the destruction of her Majesty’s person.”⁴¹ As Alexandra Walsham has detailed, evidence of image magic against the queen’s life heightened concerns about William “Frantick” Hacket, the puritan plotter and pseudo-messiah executed for treason in 1591.⁴² English authorities continued to watch for such attempts after the accession of King James, who famously had already fended off the magical forces of the North Berwick witches and their

³⁸ Anon., *A Copie of a Letter...concerning Dr Story* (London, 1571), sig. C2r. See Ronald Pollitt’s suggestion that Prestall was involved in the plot to kidnap Dr. Story and return him to England for execution: Pollitt, “Story,” p. 142.

³⁹ William Camden, *Annals, or, the Historie of the Most Renowned and Victorious Elizabeth* (London, 1635), p. 147.

⁴⁰ *Acts of the Privy Council*, VIII, p. 31.

⁴¹ *Acts of the Privy Council*, XI, p. 22.

⁴² Alexandra Walsham, “Frantick Hacket”: Prophecy, Sorcery, Insanity, and the Elizabethan Puritan Movement,” *Historical Journal* 41.1 (1998), pp. 27-66.

confederates in 1590; he had personally interrogated Agnes Sampson for her part in the plot to poison, shipwreck, or otherwise hurt him with waxen images.⁴³

Such magical attempts to do away with God's-anointed already had a long history. Elizabeth turned for advice about such plots to John Dee, who had himself been detained in 1555 on suspicion of having "endeavoured by enchantments to destroy Queen Mary" on behalf of Elizabeth's servants and supporters.⁴⁴ In 1538, Mabel Brigge reportedly held a magical fast to procure the death of King Henry VIII.⁴⁵ In an infamous case, Eleanor, Duchess of Gloucester was charged with treasonable necromancy in 1441, although she may only have tried to predict rather than cause the king's death.⁴⁶ In 1325, in the midst of baronial revolt against King Edward II and his favourite, a group of Coventry worthies reportedly hired a local necromancer to kill the king with the use of sympathetic magic by sticking pins into waxen figures.⁴⁷ Even as political killings acquired new dimensions in the late sixteenth century and as would-be killers adopted more modern or tangible means, magical elements continued to be expected. Jean Jauregay, who shot but failed to kill William of Orange in 1582, reportedly had not just Catholic tokens on his person but also dried toads and other such charms. Although François Ravaillac, the killer of King Henri IV, stoutly denied the charge, reports claimed that he had about him various "characters and instruments of sorcery, including a heart

⁴³ Lawrence Normand and Gareth Roberts, *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland* (Exeter, 2000), pp. 85, 95-9.

⁴⁴ Nicholas H. Clulee, *John Dee's Natural Philosophy* (London, 1988), pp. 33-4, 189; Parry, *John Dee*, pp. 31-7.

⁴⁵ TNA, SP 1/130, ff. 24-31v, discussed in Ethan Shagan, "Rumours and Popular Politics in the Reign of Henry VIII," in Tim Harris (ed.), *The Politics of the Excluded, c. 1500-1850* (Basingstoke, 2001), p. 42.

⁴⁶ G. L. Harriss, "Eleanor, duchess of Gloucester (c.1400-1452)," H.C.G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (eds.), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: OUP, 2004); online ed., ed. Lawrence Goldman, January 2008.

⁴⁷ Montague Summers, *The Geography of Witchcraft* (Evanston, 1958), pp. 82-5.

pierced in three places.”⁴⁸ As Jardine speculates, such accusations may have been intended to discredit a killer who claimed worthy intent,⁴⁹ but they also speak to a continued and indeed growing fear that death might come from a distance, and at anyone’s hands.

Even as the means adopted by would-be assassins blended old and new into a more potent mix, the assassins themselves came from a wider range of backgrounds than had generally been the case before. Disgruntled noblemen continued to be a threat, as now were their more conscience-stricken kin, but increasingly, too, were gentlemen, lawyers, doctors, and even members of the lower ranks of society. Balthasar Gérard and François Ravailac came from respectable but not especially notable families; Gérard studied law and Ravailac worked as a school teacher. In England, one plotter reportedly held back as he waited to secure better clothing that would allow him to fit in at court.⁵⁰ William Camden described “Frantick” Hacket as a man of vulgar, mean background who taught that “it was lawful for a true Christian, though a country peasant, to inform kings how to sway the sceptre and to depose the queen herself”; he noted that Patrick Cullen, purportedly another would-be killer of the queen, was an Irish fencing master; he depicted Edward Squire, accused of trying to poison Elizabeth, as “one of the ordinary sort of men, who having been first a pettifogging clerk, afterwards an under servant in the queen’s stable, and [then] a soldier in Drake’s last voyage.”⁵¹ References to the low status of supposed assassins may have represented attempts to discredit and demean, but need not be discounted. King-killing was no longer a pursuit of the aristocracy alone.

⁴⁸ Mousnier, *Assassination of Henry IV*, p. 28.

⁴⁹ Jardine, *Awful End*, pp. 67-8.

⁵⁰ T.B. Howell (ed.), *A Complete Collection of State Trials* (London, 1816-), I, col. 1131.

⁵¹ Camden, *Annals*, pp. 400, 431, 498.

Certainly, men of meagre means had killed powerful personages before, but typically as hired hands of other persons of privilege. Now, more often, they acted on their own initiative, and even if for reward, only after being convinced of the rectitude of their actions. They maintained that defence of public interests, known through the will of God, licensed them to kill. Balthasar Gérard, Jacques Clément, and François Ravailac—the killers of William of Orange, Henri III, and Henri IV respectively—all insisted that they acted for the public good or at the command of God. At least some observers accepted such claims. An unnamed friar showed an English guest the picture he kept of Gérard's killing of William of Orange, reportedly saying that "in such manner and sort" someone would soon step forward to kill Elizabeth, "for the common wealth of all Christendom." With such an act "then all Christendom would be in peace and quietness."⁵² According to the evidence presented at the trials of those involved in Anthony Babington's plot to despatch Queen Elizabeth, Thomas Salisbury refused to participate in the assassination though he offered his services to free Mary Queen of Scots; Chidiok Titchburne and Charles Tilney initially scrupled at killing but came to believe it lawful after some persuasion; the others seemed quite ready to accept such a deed as a just and meritorious act.⁵³ John Savage reportedly became sufficiently convinced that it was not just lawful but "meritorious to take away the lives of princes excommunicate" that he "willingly and gladly vowed" to kill the queen, "contented to do anything for his country's good."⁵⁴ Relying on statements reported by spies or extracted from confessions sometimes secured through torture should give one pause, for a variety

⁵² TNA, SP 12/173, f. 181, discussed in Alford, *Watchers*, p. 135.

⁵³ Howell, *State Trials*, I, cols. 1127-41.

⁵⁴ Howell, *State Trials*, I, col. 1130.

of reasons, but the ubiquity of words like “good” and “lawful” in such accounts is itself telling.

Dr. William Parry’s case would seem a perfect distillation of the new elements of political murder. A Welsh doctor of law, son of a royal guardsman, and an impecunious debtor, Parry travelled abroad where he became reconciled to the Catholic church and fell in with English Catholic refugees and exiles. According to his subsequent confession, he began plotting the queen’s death even before the slaying of William of Orange. In Paris, Catholic Thomas Morgan expressed his hope that Parry might do “some service for God and His Church.” Parry swore his willingness to kill “the greatest subject in England” (probably meaning the earl of Leicester), but Morgan had a higher objective in mind: the queen. Parry replied that “it were soon done, if it might be lawfully done.” One priest consulted on the matter denounced such a killing as “utterly unlawful,” however. Open, armed rebellion and deposition of an excommunicated queen was one thing, the priest felt, but murder entirely another. Parry held back until he could obtain better assurances. He returned to England, determined not to kill the queen “if by any device, persuasion or policy she might be wrought to deal more graciously with the Catholics.” He also retained some hope that parliament might be brought to amend its harsh course against his co-religionists. He obtained an audience with the queen, revealing much of the plotting to date, in hopes that he might yet persuade her to relieve “the afflicted Catholics.” Meanwhile, he found in the writings of William Allen “warrant to a prepared mind” and received sufficient assurance from Cardinal Gallio in Rome to make it “clear in my conscience, that it was lawful and meritorious” to kill Elizabeth. Only when all

other means of effecting change had failed, he said, did he turn to plotting in earnest.⁵⁵ Elected to parliament, he spoke vehemently against a bill dealing with Jesuits; according to Camden's report, Parry opined that the measure was "cruel, bloody, full of desperation, and hurtful to the English nation."⁵⁶ When that intervention produced no result save his disgrace, Parry continued discussions with Edmund Neville about restoring Catholicism to the country. Neville initially talked of fairly traditional means, hoping to do so by freeing Mary Queen of Scots or by seizing Berwick. Parry, however, promoted "another manner of Enterprise." They would shoot the queen as she rode abroad, and perhaps other leading figures, too. But Neville proved a fickle friend and in February of 1585 denounced Parry to the authorities.⁵⁷

Here, then, we seem to have a man of middling rank deciding that he might justly kill the queen, and others, in order to effect a public good. But Parry's case might be other than it initially appears: at his trial and on the scaffold, Parry vehemently denied any intent to kill the queen, maintaining that privy councillors had extorted his confession with threats of torture. He had previously served as an intelligencer and spy for his queen and may well have been caught in a double game.⁵⁸ For the death of William of Orange served not just as the archetype of the new political killing, but also triggered changes in the English authorities' responses to threats against Elizabeth.

Parry's trial at Westminster accompanied parliamentary discussions of how best to regularize by statute an extraordinary experiment begun in October of the year before:

⁵⁵ Howell, *State Trials*, I, cols. 1095-1112.

⁵⁶ Camden, *Annals*, p. 272.

⁵⁷ Howell, *State Trials*, I, cols. 1095-1112; TNA, SP 12/176/1, f. 154.

⁵⁸ Opinions on Parry's guilt remain mixed—given the evidence available, such doubts seem likely to persist—but both Jardine and John Bossy believe him innocent: Jardine, *Awful End*, pp. 109-11, John Bossy, *Under the Molehill: An Elizabethan Spy Story* (New Haven, 2001), pp. 96-9, 132-4, 149, 151. Stephen Alford's recent study, however, suggests that Parry did do what he confessed; *Watchers*, pp. 81-7, 147-51, 179-92.

the Bond of Association, or to give more of its full title, “The Instrument of an Association for the Preservation of Her Majesty's Royal Person...to defend her against all Estates, Dignities, and earthly Powers whatsoever, and to pursue to utter extermination all that shall attempt by any act, counsel, or consent to anything that shall tend to the harm of Her Majesty's Royal Person.” The Bond was drawn up under the direction of Lord Burghley and Sir Francis Walsingham in the wake of William of Orange’s death and a plot on half of Mary Queen of Scots. It created a sworn “fellowship and society” of hundreds of signatories from across the country, pledged to immediate retribution for attacks on the queen. Fears of her sudden death, compounded by lack of an obvious Protestant successor, prompted Burghley to devise a “quasi-republican” solution that would allow a conciliar and parliamentary interregnum to govern the country while hunting down the killers and selecting a suitable successor. In devising responses to threats against an individual monarch, Elizabeth’s councillors embraced notions that had the potential to threaten monarchy itself, at least in its hereditary, divine-right manifestation. Some aspects of these plans went too far for Elizabeth’s own comfort. The resulting *Act for the Queen’s Safety* carefully exempted the heir of a claimant from sanctions for any plots to which he was not privy, gutted plans for a parliamentary interregnum and, unlike the Bond, required a public trial before letting subjects loose with license to kill.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ For the Bond, see various copies in TNA, SP 12/274; for the Act, see 27 Elizabeth I, c. 1. For discussions of the political and constitutional implications of these manoeuvres, see J.E. Neale, *Elizabeth I and her Parliaments, 1584-1601* (London, 1957), pp. 13-18, 28-37, 44-53; David Cressy, “Binding the Nation: the Bonds of Association, 1584 and 1696,” in DeLloyd J. Guth and John W. McKenna (eds.), *Tudor Rule and Revolution* (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 217-34; Collinson, “Monarchical Republic”; essays in McDiarmid (ed.), *Monarchical Republic of Early Modern England*; and Stephen Alford, “Patrick Collinson’s Elizabethan Commonwealth,” *Reformation* 17 (2012), 7-27. On other experiments to which the political crisis of 1584-5 gave rise, see Neil Younger, “Securing the Monarchical Republic: The Remaking of the Lord Lieutenancies in 1585,” *Historical Research* 84 (2011), pp. 249-65. On the broader context of the

If individuals of all sorts now threatened the queen, so could people of all backgrounds now participate in avenging her death. All now had a related duty to secure her person through prayer, both for her sake and for theirs. As declared in the 1586 *Order of Prayer and Thanksgiving for the Preservation of Her Majesty and the Realm*, all subjects owed thanks to the Almighty for having preserved the queen from attempts thus far, and so having “kept our blood from flowing in every street like water.”⁶⁰ The order issued in 1594 opined that “every true hearted English man and faithful subject will both privately and publicly from the bottom of his heart” pray frequently to implore God’s continued favour. It recited a long list of “privy conspiracies and open hostilities practiced both inward and outward,” plans both to invade the realm and to kill the queen, and asserted that: “All which whosoever he be that will attentively weigh and consider, and cannot see the very finger of God mightily working herein by his providence and mercy, no doubt he is insensible blockish.”⁶¹ This was a form of popular political action authorities could encourage. Praying for and celebrating the queen’s providential, even miraculous deliverances became common features of political culture that served both to unite and to divide the populace, while the deliverances themselves served as evidence of God’s approbation of her reign.⁶²

regime’s increasingly obsessive security fears in the midst of this “exclusion crisis,” see also Stephen Alford, “The Political Creed of William Cecil,” in McDiarmid (ed.), *Monarchical Republic*, pp. 75-90 and J.P.D. Cooper, *The Queen’s Agent: Francis Walsingham at the Court of Elizabeth I* (London, 2011).

⁶⁰ *Order of Prayer and Thankesgiuing for the preseruotion of her Majesty and the Realme* (London, 1586), sig. A2r.

⁶¹ *Order for Prayer and Thankes-guing (necessary to be used in these dangerous times) for the safetie and preseruotion of her majesty and this realm* (London, 1594), sig. A3v.

⁶² Natalie Mears, “Public Worship and Political Participation in Elizabethan England,” *Journal of British Studies* 51 (2012), pp. 4-25; Alexandra Walsham, “‘A Very Deborah?’: The Myth of Elizabeth I as a Providential Monarch,” in Susan Doran and Thomas S. Freeman (eds.), *The Myth of Elizabeth* (Basingstoke, 2003), pp. 143-70.

Councillors sought to publicize and capitalize on threats to the queen's life, and even perhaps to exaggerate the dangers. They and their agents depicted such attempts as the most reprehensible of all the conspiracies hatched by papists and used them to strengthen claims that they prosecuted Catholics for treason rather than for conscience. More generally, they used accounts of such threats to denounce the English Catholics abroad and the papacy to which they owed allegiance. Nearer the end of the century, they also used tales of these "devilish devices" to attack the Spanish. In 1594, Dr. Roderigo Lopez, the queen's physician, was executed on charges of having planned to poison his mistress at the behest of King Philip of Spain. Though some writers tried linking him to the Jesuits, they settled for emphasizing mercenary motives. Lopez lacked the by now standard religious rationale adduced for such attempts; a practising Protestant of Portuguese Jewish origin, if he had a covert faith, it was not Catholic. Confessions of other conspirators suggested that they wanted to do something to "the benefit of the world." Lopez had sought them out, they said, claiming that "though his body was in England, his heart was in Spain," and that the robberies and piracies Elizabeth allowed her subjects to inflict upon the Spanish needed to be redressed. If the queen died her subjects would be more easily divided and conquered.⁶³ Though some people then, as now, believed Lopez to be innocent, his case became infamous, reflected in anti-Semitic performances on London's stages and in attacks on his supposed paymaster.⁶⁴

⁶³ BL, Harleian 871, fols. 7-64, esp. fols. 27d, 29, 33, 44.

⁶⁴ For the Lopez plot, and its ties to the drama of the day, see: Arthur Dimock, "The Conspiracy of Dr. Lopez," *English Historical Review* 9 (1894), pp. 440-72; David S. Katz, *The Jews in the History of England* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 49-55, 72-106; Margaret Hotine, "The Politics of Anti-Semitism: 'The Jew of Malta' and 'The Merchant of Venice'," *Notes and Queries* 38 (1991), pp. 35-8; and Dominic Green, *The Double Life of Doctor Lopez* (London, 2003). Alford deems the plot "very unlikely," arguing that the doctor became caught in a "game for advantage in a visceral political contest between the Earl of Essex and the Cecils": *Watchers*, p. 304.

An anonymous tract, possibly by Burghley, purported to offer its English, French and Dutch readerships *A True Report of Sundry Horrible Conspiracies of late time detected to have (by Barbarous Murders) taken away the life of the Queens Most Excellent Majesty*. It insisted upon the particular infamy of such killings, depicting them as being done upon the instigation or payment of others. While the killers might maintain that they acted for the public good, they truly did so only for hope of reward. It cited the Lopez case as evidence by which to judge the actions and hence the honour of Philip compared to Elizabeth. It maintained that contrary to “all warlike, princely, manlike or Christian examples in any wars,” Philip sought to take the queen’s life “sundry secret ways by secret murder.”⁶⁵ Or, as the French version stated, “non par armes & par les actions ordinaires de la guerre mais clandestinement & par assassines recherches en diuerses sortes.”⁶⁶ Francis Bacon likewise elaborated on the shamefulness of such slayings in a tract penned about the Lopez case, describing such a secret and suborned attempt to kill as “not only against all Christianity and religion, but against nature, the law of nations, the honour of arms, the civil law, the rules of morality and policy; finally, to be the most condemned, barbarous and ferine act that can be imagined.”⁶⁷

Thomas Fitzherbert, said to have been involved in Edward Squire’s purported plot to kill the queen, penned *A Defence of the Catholyke Cause* that derided the *True Report* and related works as purveyors of falsehoods. He accepted the reprehensibility of such attacks; he sought not to defend them, but to deny the existence of murder plots by

⁶⁵ *A True Report of Sundry Horrible Conspiracies of late time detected to have (by Barbarous Murders) taken away the life of the Queens Most Excellent Majesty* (London, 1594), sig. A3r.

⁶⁶ *Discours Veritable de Diuerses Conspirations negueres contre la proper vie* (London, 1594), p. 6. See also the 9 September 1594 “breviate of the accusations against any the king of Spain’s ministers or any English fugitive...practising conspiracy and assassination against her sacred Majesty’s life” in the Cecil Papers, BL, CP 28/36.

⁶⁷ “A True Report of the Detestable Treason intended by Dr. Roderigo Lopez,” in *Works of Francis Bacon*, (ed.) R.L. Ellis, J. Spedding, and D.D. Heath (London, 1861), VIII, p. 275.

himself or fellow English Catholics abroad. While he allowed that the Jesuit John Ballard, mixed up in the Babington plot, might have been guilty as charged, he vehemently denied the rest. He painted such charges as slanders and calumnies of the sort true Christians had always faced, now more specifically intended by Elizabeth's councillors to pressure the queen to tighten measures against Catholics, to incense her against the Spanish, and more generally, to make her more pliable to do their bidding through fear. The executions of English Catholics served as evidence not of their own nefarious intent but of councillors' willingness to engage in political killings of a different sort: judicial murders based on witness testimony suborned by money or on torture wrongly applied. Torture ought only be used upon strong evidence of wrongdoing, he wrote, even in cases of "assassinat treason or any other like heinous crime."⁶⁸

In such exchanges, then, "assassination" entered the language as a term to mark some political killings as particularly opprobrious murders. Covering both killings suborned by money and those motivated by misguided public aims, the word designated a political tool that discredited its users. Richard James was quite right to note that "attempts on the lives of great personages" were made "hateful under the name of assassination." But the label did little to resolve the blurred line between legitimate and illegitimate uses of deadly force. To what killings the label might attach remained a matter of dispute, depending on the killer, the cause, the victim and the audience.

Laws human, natural, and divine all prohibited killing, but not all killing. They had long been taken to acknowledge gradations of guilt and, indeed, exceptions. The standards of the day held premeditated killings to be worse than the spontaneous, and the stealthy worse than the open. Slayings in self-defence had always been justifiable,

⁶⁸ Fitzherbert, *Defence of the Catholyke Cause*, p. 14.

however, as were killings done in service of law. A constable might lawfully kill in the exercise of his duties; an executioner, of course, could kill upon warrant; and anyone might justly kill an outlaw. Monarchs themselves sometimes stretched the limits of such license, and its ambiguities: just as Philip ordered the death of William of Orange, so did Elizabeth's agents put bounties on the heads of Irish "rebels."⁶⁹ The queen herself urged the quiet killing of Mary Queen of Scots in 1587, arguing that the Bond of Association and statute for her own protection authorized the deed, but the men she approached to do so felt that a public warrant of the usual kind was wiser.⁷⁰ And, indeed, after Henri III had the Cardinal and Duke of Guise slain, in the torrent of condemnations that flowed from the presses, one French writer compared him unfavourably to Elizabeth in opining that as heinous as Elizabeth's killing of Mary had been, at least she had proceeded publicly upon warrant of a sort.⁷¹

Who or what might provide sufficient warrant to kill admitted of no easy or agreed upon answer, but clearly by the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, more people believed themselves and other licensed to do so. When King James presided over debates on the Oath of Allegiance in the wake of the 1605 plot to kill him and his MPs with kegs of gunpowder under the parliament building, or intervened in the debates of the French Estates General following the killing of Henri IV on whether kings could ever be deposed, on any authority,⁷² did he recall the writings of his childhood tutor, George Buchanan? In a dialogue written around the time of Queen Mary's deposition,

⁶⁹ Hiram Morgan, "'Treason against Traitors': Thomas Walker, Hugh O'Neill's Would-Be Assassin," *History Ireland* 18.2 (2010), pp. 18-21.

⁷⁰ John Guy, *The True Life of Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots* (Boston, 2004), pp. 479-81.

⁷¹ Alexander Wilkinson, "'Homicides Royaux': The Assassination of the Duc and Cardinal de Guise and the Radicalization of French Public Opinion," *French History* 18.2 (2004), p. 149.

⁷² See: *Declaration due Serenissime Roy Jacques I, Roy de la Grand Bretagne & Irlande, Defenseur de la Foy, Pur Le Droit des Rois et independence de leurs Couronnes, contre la Harangue de L'Illustrissime Cardinal du Perron pronouncee en la chamber due tiers Estate le 15 Janvier 1615.*

Buchanan enunciated, in historian Roger Mason's words, "not just a theory of collective resistance to tyranny, but his belief in the legitimacy of single-handed tyrannicide."

Buchanan's "populist radicalism," moreover, mandated no institutional checks on a "public-spirited assassin." While Buchanan later retreated to a somewhat more conservative view that baronial councils alone might forcibly despatch a tyrant,⁷³ his one-time pupil King James, and then James's successor, faced a world in which debates on the legitimacy of king-killing had spread beyond the political elite. And some few came to believe that the common good and public interest provided sufficient warrant to kill.

When the obscure naval lieutenant John Felton stuck his knife in the all-powerful Duke of Buckingham in 1628, he left behind him a letter opining that "The safety of the people is the chiefest law...God himself hath enacted this law, that all things that are for the good, profit, and benefit of the commonwealth should be accounted lawful."⁷⁴

Whatever the range of his "true" motives or the degree of his melancholy, Felton consistently portrayed his strike as something lawful, done for the good of his country. Some of the libels produced in response to the assassination expressed approval of Felton and his act. That the duke's misdeeds merited justice, in one form or another, proved a common theme. As one opined: "The heavens approve brave Felton's resolution/ That

⁷³ Roger A. Mason and Martin S. Smith, *A Dialogue on the Law of Kingship among the Scots: A Critical Edition and Translation of George Buchanan's De Iure Regni apud Scotos Dialogus* (Aldershot, 2004), pp. lvii, lxii, 96-7, 117, 155-7.

⁷⁴ Quoted from James Holstun, "'God Bless Thee, Little David!': John Felton and his Allies," *English Literary Heritage* 59.3 (1992), pp. 513-52, at p. 525. See also Thomas Cogwell, "John Felton, Popular Political Culture, and the Assassination of the Duke of Buckingham," *Historical Journal* 2 (2006), pp. 357-85.

breath'd no murder, but an Execution."⁷⁵ The victim's non-regal status may have accounted for the readiness of much of the support Felton received. In one case, however, the libeller explicitly went further, suggesting that anyone who escaped justice for his misdeeds, no matter how mighty, might justly suffer at the hands of a private killer doing God's work: when sin is ripe, "it then must down/ Gods sickle spares not either king or crown."⁷⁶

The language of "lawfulness" in these responses and in the confessions of assassins and their would-be fellows is striking. Some killers may well have embarked on their plans through hopes of reward, financial or spiritual, but many spoke of their intentions as "lawful" and hence justified. Studies of assassins often assume madness and focus on the psychological motivation of the individual.⁷⁷ Given the pervasive language of lawfulness, and the sudden spate of such killings, one might instead attend to context.

These killings and attempted killings can be deemed "political" not just in having political aims and being directed against people of political importance, but also in being shaped by the nature of the polity in which they took place, a polity that was increasingly participatory. Sir Thomas Smith wrote that the prince "is the life, the head, and the authority of all things that be done in the realm of England."⁷⁸ But as Smith recognized, a prince ruled not in his or her own interests alone. Throughout their debates on what to do with Mary Queen of Scots, members of parliament insisted upon this most clearly in

⁷⁵ "Early Stuart Libels: an edition of poetry from manuscript sources," (ed.) Alastair Bellany and Andrew McRae. *Early Modern Literary Studies* Text Series I (2005). <<http://purl.oclc.org/emls/texts/libels/>> item Pii4.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, item Pii6.

⁷⁷ See, for example, Anita M. Walker and Edmund H. Dickerman, "Mind of an Assassin: Ravailac and the Murder of Henry IV of France," *Canadian Journal of History* 30 (1995), pp. 201-29. On the need to dig past accounts of individual motivations and madness, see Steve Poole, *The Politics of Regicide in England, 1760-1850* (Manchester, 2000).

⁷⁸ Sir Thomas Smith (ed. Mary Dewar), *De Republica Anglorum* (Cambridge, 1982), p. 88.

reference to Mary herself, but also in their arguments that Elizabeth's safety was a *public* issue.⁷⁹ These same debates manifested the "quasi-republicanism" mentioned above, defined by John McDiarmid as "thought and practice grounded in the sense that a power inhered in the English body politic to sustain and rule itself, and that if need be, this power might be exercised without a monarch's sanction or even against a monarch's will."⁸⁰ This "quasi-republicanism" waxed and waned over the years, but contributed to an emerging and enduring perception of a "state," or public realm separable from and superior to private interests.⁸¹ The defence of public interests licensed subjects to act, in all sorts of ways. Some few believed it licensed them to kill.

Roland Mousnier argued that the assassination of Henri IV contributed to the rise of "absolutism" in France.⁸² Lisa Jardine maintains that the assassination of William of Orange assisted the growth of a "security state" in England.⁸³ Stephen Alford observes that the ruthless campaign of Elizabeth's councillors against those thought to threaten her life—relying on propaganda, surveillance, espionage, brutal interrogations, and torture—saw them "fashioning the tools of modern government" even while sometimes "subverting the will of the queen they sought to serve."⁸⁴ Certainly, political violence by individuals drew forth, as it also drew from, state violence. In looking at political killings not just as causes but also as culminations, though, one might also see them as signs of polities working out the nature and limits of participation in the wake of the Reformation. As we have seen here, even while the politically powerful continued to face all the usual

⁷⁹ T.E. Hartley (ed.), *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I* (Leicester, 1981), I, pp. 274-90, esp. 281.

⁸⁰ McDiarmid, "Introduction," *Monarchical Republic*, p. 11.

⁸¹ John Guy, *Tudor England* (Oxford, 1988), p. 352; see also McDiarmid (ed.), *Monarchical Republic*.

⁸² Mousnier, *Assassination of Henry IV*, p. 283.

⁸³ Jardine, *Awful End*, pp. 114-5.

⁸⁴ Alford, *Watchers*, pp. 12, 13.

threats to their persons, they encountered new dangers as individuals of many sorts came to think themselves authorized to serve the public good by killing their leaders. Refining modern sociological definitions of the state, Michael Braddick notes that its early modern variant, broadly participatory at its base, claimed to be the “ultimate arbiter of what constitutes legitimate force.”⁸⁵ The emergence of “assassination”—in practice and in the writings of the day—speaks to the ongoing contestation of this claim.

⁸⁵ Michael Braddick, *State Formation*, p. 18.