

GOLDEN-AGE FEMINISM

Elizabethan playwright digs deep into scandal and political maneuverings

by Kyla Neufeld



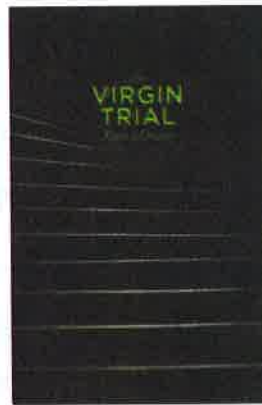
The *Virgin Trial*, a new play by Kate Hennig set to premiere at the Stratford Festival this summer, explores key periods of the young teenage life of Elizabeth I of England. It is the second play in Hennig's Queenmaker Trilogy – the first, *The Last Wife*, tells the story of Henry VIII's sixth (and last) wife, Katherine Parr, and the third, "Father's Daughter," will pick up when Mary becomes queen.

Hennig had no idea that *The Last Wife* would blossom into three plays. "I guess I didn't have that much interest in Mary and Elizabeth until I started writing about Katherine Parr and considering the influence she had over the first two reigning queens of England."

While others have written extensively about the women of the Tudor line, Hennig wanted to explore the stories from a feminist point of view.

"There is a lot of new feminist insight that is being blown through the stuffy history of England, and it is really exciting to read new discoveries and differing points of view," she says.

In *The Virgin Trial*, Hennig digs deep into the scandal and political maneuverings that surrounded Elizabeth as a young girl, specifically her inappropriate relationship with Thomas Seymour, her stepmother's new husband. After Parr's death, Thomas was arrested for attempting to marry Elizabeth and overthrow his brother, the



THE VIRGIN TRIAL

Kate Hennig
Playwrights Canada
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Lord Protector, and both Thomas and Elizabeth were questioned extensively. The play includes interrogation scenes interspersed with others that show Elizabeth's relationship with Thomas, as well as her relationship with her older half-sister Mary.

"The story of Elizabeth and Thomas Seymour comes down to us through a few letters and one testimony of Elizabeth's governess, Kat Ashley," says Hennig. "The rest has to be pieced together: imagined. It's so much fun to just fill in the blanks, and I always look for the most dramatic way to do that. Elizabeth I is deified by history while her sister is vilified. I want to make both of them more human. I want to show the nasty side of Bess, and show the noble side of Mary."

Hennig's ideas for the Queenmaker Trilogy developed in 2011 during the Arab Spring. "I was watching the news, and kept wondering where the women were behind these autocratic male rulers who were suddenly faced with their demise," she says. "What were the wives of these men like?" And, while she felt that the story of the Middle East wasn't hers to tell, the women caught up in Henry VIII's life caught her eye.

As much as *The Virgin Trial* is about one woman who faces manipulation, sexual abuse, and interrogation, Hennig says it's about all women.

"[These] are aspects of women's lives that we are currently and constantly dealing with. I expect they did historically, too, but none of it was ever written down. I see the plays I am writing as contemporary stories written in an historical context.

"So the 'heavy material' is just part of our contemporary story as women, and the history gives us a mirror through which to observe and further understand it." ✍