

Elizabeth I's Power and Influence Perpetuated by her Speech

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The English Queen Elizabeth I (r. 1558–1603) is arguably one of the world's most recognized and beloved monarchs. She helped to finance famous artists such as William Shakespeare and ushered in a time of prosperity and relative peace for the English people.¹ She was popular among her people because of her many accomplishments and long reign. Robert Bucholz and Newton Key, authors of *Early Modern England 1485–1714: A Narrative History*, described her as “highly intelligent, witty, hardworking, and well educated She wrote poetry and could speak effectively when she chose to do so.”² When she did speak, she captured the minds and hearts of her people, while reminding the world outside of England of her power. Queen Elizabeth's speeches helped raise the English people's opinion of her while keeping foreign powers at bay. Her speeches were both a sword and a shield, helping her gain power and respect within her own country while ensuring she could also protect it. She would rouse troops before a battle and put foreign dignitaries in their place with her words. Unlike any woman in authority before her, Queen Elizabeth took advantage of her sovereignty through proficient speeches which served to increase the respect of her people, her troops, and foreign dignitaries.

Specifically, Queen Elizabeth I did not come into power with a particularly loyal England. When her sister, Queen Mary, died the country became filled with lots of doubt towards a second female leader. At the time, England had an active Catholic population, with Elizabeth herself having close ties to Catholicism since her father and sister were devout Catholics at one time.³ Mary persecuted thousands of Protestants and sent many to their deaths, as recorded during Queen Elizabeth's reign in John Foxe's *Act and Monuments* in 1563.⁴ This book was the second most popular book in England for several hundred years, only passed up by the Bible itself.⁵ During Mary's reign, many feared that England might fall back under papal authority, an outcome that even the pope thought was only averted by her death.⁶ In addition, people were scared Queen Elizabeth would marry a king from a rival country like her sister, but “[Elizabeth] was . . .

¹ Robert Bucholz and Newton Key, *Early Modern England 1485–1714: A Narrative History* (Oxford, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 116.

² Bucholz and Key, *Early Modern England 1485–1714: A Narrative History*, 116.

³ Ted W. Booth, “Elizabeth I and Pope Paul IV: Reticence and Reformation,” *Church History and Religious Culture*, vol. 94, no. 3 (2014): 316–336 at 317.

⁴ John Foxe, *The Unabridged Acts and Monuments Online or TAMO* (1563 Edition), *The Digital Humanities Institute*, <https://www.dhi.ac.uk/foxe/index.php?realm=text&edition=1563&gototype=> (accessed November 18, 2020).

⁵ Bucholz and Key, *Early Modern England 1485–1714: A Narrative History*, 112.

⁶ Booth, “Elizabeth I and Pope Paul IV: Reticence and Reformation,” 317.

determined not to make the same mistakes her sister had in forcing an unpopular religious settlement or marrying a hated foreigner.”⁷ Queen Elizabeth also became monarch at a time when women rulers were disliked by the male hierarchy, but it became even worse after Queen Mary’s reign.

This was because Queen Elizabeth came into power during a time when the idea of a woman ruling was abhorrent. John Knox, a Scottish reformer, had published his *First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* in 1558, just a few months before Queen Elizabeth took the throne.⁸ The aforementioned stirred up trouble as “Protestant Reformers John Calvin and Heinrich Bullinger join in opposition to the right of female rulers.”⁹ While John Calvin and Heinrich Bullinger accepted female rulers in urgent situations, John Knox did not agree. He disliked the idea of women ruling at all, calling back to the Bible and the superiority of men. Thus few held high hopes for Queen Elizabeth. As Reformation historian Ted Booth explains, “from the very beginning as well as throughout her reign, Elizabeth had to deal with those who questioned her authority to rule either due to her sex or her right as a secular ruler to make decisions in religion.”¹⁰ Elizabeth’s politics and religious policies were uncertain, which created considerable anxiety as she ascended the throne. However, through her speeches and her writing, Queen Elizabeth would show parliament just how different she was from her siblings.

What set Queen Elizabeth apart from Queen Mary and her other predecessors, was her eloquence. She knew exactly what to say and when to say it in order to gain the favor of both her subjects and those beyond the English borders. Her right to rule under God, however, was called to question in John Knox’s *First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* as he said, “I am assured that God has revealed to some in this our age, that it is more than a monster in nature that a woman shall reign and have empire above man.”¹¹ Here he states that women ruling would be offensive in the eyes of God. People would question whether Queen Elizabeth was the rightful monarch under the Great Chain of Being. Any question against her right to rule was extremely dangerous, especially early on in her reign. Elizabeth fought back against this by adding scripture to a great deal of her public speeches. In one public procession through London, she made a great impact upon the crowd when she said, “I acknowledge that Thou hast

⁷ Carole Levin, *The Heart and Stomach of a King: Elizabeth I and the Politics of Sex and Power* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 8.

⁸ John Knox, *First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* (1558), *Presbyterian Heritage Publications*, <http://www.swrb.com/newslett/actualNLS/firblast.htm> (accessed November 19, 2020).

⁹ Ted Booth, *A Body Politic to Govern: The Political Humanism of Elizabeth I* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2013), 45.

¹⁰ Booth, *A Body Politic to Govern: The Political Humanism of Elizabeth I*, 46.

¹¹ Knox, *First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*.

dealt as wonderfully and as mercifully with me as Thou didst with Thy true and faithful servant Daniel, Thy prophet, whom Thou delivered out of the den from the cruelty of the greedy and raging lions.”¹² Elizabeth made a great impression upon the crowd, as Richard Mulcaster, a well renowned headmaster at several different English Institutions, said, “Now, therefore, all English hearts and her natural people must needs praise God’s mercy, which hath sent them so worthy a prince [Queen Elizabeth], and pray for her grace’s long continuance amongst us.”¹³ Her comparison of herself to biblical figures in her speeches helped to cement her as God’s chosen monarch and left little doubt to feel otherwise. Her use of scripture captured the love and respect of her subjects, despite the fact that she was a woman. Ted Booth said that, “They projected Elizabeth’s chosen image of a ruler who had been uniquely chosen and favored by God and saved through all adversity.”¹⁴ The aforementioned speech had been held just before her coronation and helped to put any doubts about her right to rule aside. Thus, her speech helped influence her subjects and allowed for her reign to be a stable and steady one.

Queen Elizabeth I was one of the first female authority figures to gain what was considered a man’s power in the Western world. Her speeches and writings only helped to cement this. Ted Booth described her as “a public figure whose literary output and records of government are well-chronicled and preserved.”¹⁵ Part of that is how revolutionary she was; while women did not normally receive a formal education in early modern England, Elizabeth I was an exception. Because she was a princess, she was given a well-rounded humanist education. However, many would not tolerate a woman having a formal education, and the acceptance of female scholars was slow.¹⁶ She became fluent in several different languages such as Latin and Spanish and was well versed in Catholic and Protestant doctrines like her sister Mary. However, she was set far apart from Mary, and the rest of the Tudor monarchs, very early on; Henry VIII rarely addressed Parliament, and Edward VI, Mary I, and Mary Stewart never themselves addressed Parliament.¹⁷ In this way, Elizabeth set herself apart from her predecessors, and set the standard for English royalty. Unlike former rulers, she spoke to Parliament on equal terms, speaking to them how they

¹² Richard Mulcaster, “Richard Mulcaster’s Account of Queen Elizabeth’s Speech and Prayer During Her Passage Through London to Westminster the Day Before Her Coronation, January 14, 1559,” in *Elizabeth I: Collected Works*, ed. Leah S. Marcus, Janel Mueller, and Mary Beth Rose (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 55.

¹³ Mulcaster, *Richard Mulcaster’s Account of Queen Elizabeth’s Speech and Prayer During Her Passage Through London to Westminster the Day Before Her Coronation, January 14, 1559*, 55.

¹⁴ Booth, *A Body Politic to Govern: The Political Humanism of Elizabeth I*, 47.

¹⁵ Booth, *A Body Politic to Govern: The Political Humanism of Elizabeth I*, 2.

¹⁶ Booth, *A Body Politic to Govern: The Political Humanism of Elizabeth I*, 6.

¹⁷ Booth, *A Body Politic to Govern: The Political Humanism of Elizabeth I*, 49.

would speak to each other. Queen Elizabeth knew that in order to rule, she would have to speak the same “language” as members of Parliament. Relying on her education, she developed speeches that reflected the same tone and language that Parliament used in their regular meetings. This “language” that Parliament had was largely influenced by the writings of Cicero and Seneca.¹⁸ Elizabeth called and addressed the first Parliament of her reign in 1559 in order to authorize her rule.¹⁹ Here she responded to the lower house’s concern about marriage, “I may say unto you that from my years of understanding, sith I first had consideration of myself to be a servitor of almighty God, I happily chose this king of life in which I yet live, which I assure you for mine own part hath hitherto best contented myself and I trust hath been most acceptable to God.”²⁰ In the prior, she responded to the lower house’s questioning in a well-handled manner. God is called into her explanation, once again showing her position on the Great Chain of Being as God’s chosen monarch. This is used to uphold her argument that she chose not to be married at that time, and because she chose so, and because she is God’s chosen Queen, she cannot be married. Her ability to subvert expectations, at a time when Parliament expected her to wed soon, left an imprint on that body. She also chose suitable language in her speech, which caused Parliament to see her not only as a woman, but as the ruling Queen of England, and one who knew what she was doing.

Not only was Queen Elizabeth able to capture the attention of Parliament, but she also caused her subjects to respect her through her speeches and writings. During the war between Spain and England, she made a speech to her troops as they prepared for a naval battle, which would later be known as the Battle of Tilbury (1588). This was not just any battle, but the future victory of England against the Spanish Armada. Queen Elizabeth knew how important this battle would be, as Spain seemingly had the upper hand, as they had a larger number of ships and finances that were needed to win the war. The men fighting must have been fearful, so an in-person speech from her royal majesty could either make or break the upcoming battle. That is why this speech by Queen Elizabeth is so important, there she said. “Let tyrants fear; I have always so behaved myself that, under God, I have placed my chiefest strength and safeguard in the loyal hearts and goodwill of my subjects. And therefore, I am come amongst you at this time . . . in the midst and heat of the battle . . . I myself will take up arms; I myself will be your general, judge, and rewarder of every one of your virtues in the field.”²¹ Here Queen Elizabeth dedicated herself to fight with the soldiers. While it is obvious that she does not mean physically, but rather supporting her soldiers with

¹⁸ Booth, *A Body Politic to Govern: The Political Humanism of Elizabeth I*, 52.

¹⁹ Bell Iona, *Elizabeth I: Voice of a Monarch* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 45.

²⁰ Elizabeth I, “Queen Elizabeth’s First Speech Before Parliament, February 10, 1559,” in *Elizabeth I: Collected Works*, ed. Marcus, Mueller, and Rose, 56.

²¹ Elizabeth I, *Elizabeth’s Tilbury Speech* (1588), *British Library: Learning Timelines: Sources from History*, <http://www.bl.uk/learning/timeline/item102878.html> (accessed November 18, 2020).

everything she can as the monarch. Queen Elizabeth, once again, showed how similar she was to her predecessors, such as her grandfather Henry VII who would make speeches upon the battlefield. She shows how she is not just a woman, but the commander of England. Queen Elizabeth did make this speech later in her career in 1588, so she already had the people's hearts. She did not have to make such a speech, yet she did. She commanded attention and respect while spurring on her soldiers for battle. The speech was effective in boosting morale and acted as a contributing factor to the English victory that was forever imprinted on the hearts of the English people. The queen's spirited and successful defense of her kingdom against such an ominous threat only increased the esteem with which her subjects held her and increased the sense of pride and nationalism among the English people. Not only did Elizabeth lift her soldiers' morale, but she also created a source of pride that the English people had not had in quite a while: a victory against Spain.²²

Although Queen Elizabeth was beloved by her subjects for most of her reign, by the end of her life she began to receive harsh criticism. Queen Elizabeth was beloved by her subjects for most of her reign. She was witty, educated, savvy in economics, and had an ability to capture the hearts of the English people with her speeches. Moreover, she also impacted foreign dignitaries. By the end of her reign, however, she began to draw criticism. She was aging and had been on the throne for long time.²³ Thus, certain foreign dignitaries may have chosen to take more leniency in approaching Queen Elizabeth I. The Queen, while advancing in age, was not at all feeble-minded. In fact, one of the things that the English people adored about her was her rhetorical skills, which had not faded with her age. She demonstrated this on July 25, 1597, as the Polish ambassador Paul De Jaline complained to the Queen quite loudly and rudely in Latin in front of her court.²⁴ Within a beat, she responded in perfect Latin, "O how have I been deceived! I expected an embassy, but you have brought to me a complaint; I was certified by letters that you were an ambassador, but I have found you a herald."²⁵ While he was an ambassador, she insulted him by calling him a herald, which was a lower position that made declarations such as a declaration of war.²⁶ Here, it one sees what happens when someone tries to go up against her Majesty. The reaction from the

²² Introduction to *Elizabeth's Tilbury Speech* (1588), *British Library: Learning Timelines: Sources from History*, <http://www.bl.uk/learning/timeline/item102878.html> (accessed November 18, 2020).

²³ Janet M. Green, "Queen Elizabeth I's Latin Reply to the Polish Ambassador," *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, vol. 31, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 987–1008 at 987.

²⁴ Green, "Queen Elizabeth I's Latin Reply to the Polish Ambassador," 987–88.

²⁵ Elizabeth I, "Queen Elizabeth's Latin Rebuke to the Polish Ambassador, Paul De Jaline, July 25, 1597," in *Elizabeth I: Collected Works*, ed. Marcus, Mueller, and Rose, 332.

²⁶ Queen Elizabeth, *Queen Elizabeth's Latin Rebuke to the Polish Ambassador, Paul De Jaline, July 25, 1597*, 333.

court was enormous, with many writing praises over her response. This included secretary of state Sir Robert Cecil, who to the Earl of Essex, stated, "To this I swear by the living God, that her majestie made one of the best aunswers, ex tempore, in Latin, that ever I heard, being much moved to be so challenged in publick, especially so much against her expectation."²⁷ Cecil's remarks shows how much love and respect that the people still held for Queen Elizabeth, and how their admiration grew with every speech and remark she gave.

To sum up, Queen Elizabeth held a power that no woman ruler had truly taken advantage of before, and she did this through her speeches. With her intellect and wit, she could turn an insult against her into power with a single response. She was able to turn around the opinions over female rulers and become one of England's most beloved monarchs ever to rule, despite her gender. Her education in foreign languages and rhetoric gave her the ability to outsmart most men in the room and stand toe to toe with Parliament. These abilities won her the hearts of the English people, even though she neither married nor had children. She perpetuated her power and rule through her speeches, and with that, she became one of the most well-known female rulers in world history. Speeches by Queen Elizabeth have been studied for so long that they may no longer seem important. However, because Queen Elizabeth was truly the first example of a leading woman in the Western world, her speeches show a true insight into who she was as a person—how she spoke to her people, and what she thought of others. While it may seem like an over studied subject, this is the reason why new emerging historians, especially women who have an idea of what she may have gone through, need to study this. The major problem that exists within the study of Elizabeth's speeches is the lack of female thoughts and opinions on the matter. Thus, it is important for people to understand just how influential and powerful Queen Elizabeth I was, and she was able to hold that influence and power through her speeches.

²⁷Green, "Queen Elizabeth I's Latin Reply to the Polish Ambassador," 989–991.

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