

Chapter 4

Early Days: Parliamentary Speech (1559) and the Woodstock Epigrams

She made me a great discourse of the friendship that her people bore her, telling me that it was unbelievable, and how she loved them no less than they her, and she would die rather than see any diminution on the one part or the other. I replied that I was well informed on that score.¹

The Husband This Woman May Take

When Elizabeth was crowned in 1559, there were serious doubts about whether, as a woman, she had the capability to rule the country herself. Her status as an unmarried woman had dominated discourse from court gossip and diplomatic dispatches to parliamentary debate. “The more I think over this business, the more certain I am that everything depends upon the husband this woman may take,” the Spanish ambassador reported. Everyone assumed that a suitable match would soon be arranged—everyone, that is, except Elizabeth herself.²

Elizabeth convened parliament only three times during the first decade of her reign, in 1559, 1563, and 1566, and each time the principal state business was the queen’s marriage. The first parliament was required to authorize the new government. Elizabeth convened the 1563 and 1566 parliaments because she needed them to authorize much needed subsidies, or financial backing. Parliament seized all three occasions to petition the queen to marry forthwith. In so doing, Elizabeth’s government was trying to fulfill its fundamental patriarchal responsibility—to preserve the social order by securing a husband for the queen and an heir to the crown. Elizabeth had strong incentives to acquiesce, not only to get parliament to grant a subsidy but also to produce a strategic foreign alliance and to settle the succession for the present and future stability of the country. But instead of bowing to parliamentary pressure, Elizabeth bristled and hedged and then proceeded to write some of the most politically consequential speeches of the reign. They show her refining and developing her rhetorical skills to establish her political power.³ Her goals were threefold: first, to decide for herself whether or not she would marry; second, to choose the man she would marry, if she decided to marry; third, to rule the country herself, whether or not she chose to marry. It is difficult to imagine and impossible to overstate just how radical those demands were

I. Bell, Elizabeth I
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because monarchical marriages were the primary means of consolidating international alliances and because the reigning patriarchal ideology subordinated women to men. Elizabeth was expected to marry for the good of the country and, as Philip II of Spain put it, to “relieve her of those labours which are only fit for men.”

**Supreme Head**

The first major confrontation between the queen and parliament concerned the sensitive and highly symbolic question of her title. Should she be named the “Supreme Head of the Church”? The title was claimed by Elizabeth’s father, Henry VIII, when he broke from Rome to marry her mother, Anne Boleyn. The issue had not arisen during Mary’s reign because the Pope once again became the supreme head of the English church. Protestant members of parliament joined forces with the bishops and refused to make Elizabeth the head, lest, that make them the feet. Archbishop Heath gave a detailed account of why Elizabeth as a woman could not stand in Christ’s stead, could not preach, could not administer sacraments, and thus could not be named Supreme Head of the Church. According to the traditional patriarchal analogy, Christ ruled over the church as the monarch ruled over his people and as the husband ruled over his wife. Indeed, as John Knox explains, the biblical metaphor of the head and feet was a synecdoche for the entire patriarchal system of government:

> for the man is heade to the woman, and Christ is heade to the congregation, and he is the saviour of the bodie: but the congregation is subject to Christ, even so oght women to be to their husbandes in all thinges. He procedeth further saying: women are commanded to be subject to men by the lawe of nature… as Christ is the head of the churche, so is man of the woman…. all woman is commanded, to serve, to be in humilitie and subjection…. the head shuld not folowe the feet.

To those Elizabethans who agreed with Knox, Mary’s disturbing reign provided proof that a woman should never be given power over men. Yet, Elizabeth was Henry’s only remaining child, and she was England’s best hope for preserving the social order and restoring the reformed church. The bishops and parliament had no choice but to accept Elizabeth’s reign, but they refused to concede her power over the church.

After protracted discussion a compromise was reached: Elizabeth was named governor, which was neither as provocative to her opponents as “head” nor as demeaning to Elizabeth herself as the previous proposal, “governess.” Elizabeth concurred, the Spanish ambassador reported, and “only left open for consideration the clause where she is to take the title of head of the Church and for the present only assumes the style of ‘Governor.’ This is said to have been done on the ground that she may marry and her husband might then take the title.” If parliament hoped that Elizabeth
would soon marry and resolve the issue along with the other problems posed by her female reign, Elizabeth hoped to reclaim the title. “It is only a question of words as ‘governor’ and ‘head’ after all mean the same thing,” the Spanish ambassador concluded quite sensibly but a bit naively, since the distinction struck at the heart of Elizabeth’s power to rule. To assure their discomfiting subordination to a woman, parliament used the symbolic and ideological power of words. That discursive battleground suited the new queen perfectly.

To officially open parliament on January 25, Lord Keeper Nicholas Bacon gave the two traditional speeches on the monarch’s behalf. Elizabeth seized this opportunity to assert her authority: “Now her Majestie having this authoritie in her as head of the politique bodye of this realme…” The lord keeper’s speeches are filled with the requisite, tradition-bound formalities, but they nonetheless reveal a great deal about the complexities created by Elizabeth’s position as female monarch. It was the lord keeper’s responsibility to speak for the new monarch; therefore, Elizabeth’s concerns and expectations are still visible beneath his formal rhetoric. Significantly, his first speech began by asserting her royal prerogative and declaring that the issues facing the government could not be “reformed without Parliamente.”

The conventional format and elaborate, official rhetoric masked an important underlying, unresolved question. Was parliament’s power an inherent right claimed by virtue of its historic inheritance, or was it a conditional right granted by the monarch as long as parliament acted as the monarch saw fit? This question was heatedly debated throughout Elizabeth’s reign and beyond and is still actively disputed by modern studies of parliamentary history.

Much as Elizabeth used her words to insert her views into the traditional pre-coronation procession, here too she used the lord keeper’s traditional speeches to assert her right to grant the members of parliament the power they sought—as long as they behaved as she saw fit. Thus, the lord keeper went on to explain, Elizabeth had brought them together because she “meaneth not at this time to make any resolucion in any matter of weight before it shalbe by you sufficiently and fully debated, examined and considered.” Thus Elizabeth promised the members of parliament that she would consult them when important decisions needed to be made; however, the qualifier “at this tyme” contains a pointed warning that she would continue to bring important matters to parliament only if they fully and readily acknowledged her authority now.

By observing that he himself did not know what was the best course of action, the lord keeper pointedly reminded the more aggressive members of parliament that they too did not necessarily know the best course for Elizabeth or her newly formed government to follow. Elizabeth asked each member of parliament to put aside his “private affection” and to embrace the common good. In exchange, she promised that she would do only what was “just and acceptable in Gode’s sight.” Thus, the lord keeper reminded parliament that Elizabeth’s imperial monarchy rested upon the
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divine right of kings. Her power was an extension of God’s will, and it was
God who chose to make her, though a woman, his divine representative on
earth: “God of his devine power and ordynance hath brought the imperiall
crowne of this realme to a princesse.” Therefore, she trusted that there
was nothing that she could ask of them, “her loving subjects,” that they
would not willingly grant of their own freewill:

so greate is the trust and confidence that she reposeth in them and the
love and affection that her Highnes beareth towards them, nothing at
all doubting but that they will soe lovingly, carefully and prudentlie wey
and consider this great and weightie matter that such provision shall out
of hande be taken therein as her Highnes shalbe preserved in all honor
and royall dignitie, and you and the rest of her loving subjectes in common
quiette and suertie."

Through the lord keeper’s traditional opening speech Elizabeth extended
to parliament the amorous dialogue she introduced so dramatically and
effectively during the coronation procession. Her father had also used the
rhetoric of reciprocal love, but Elizabeth’s expression of love for parlia-
ment and her expectation of their answering love were more fraught than
her father’s had been, not only because the language of love was traditional
male discourse but also because the preceding debate over her title made it
impossible to forget that she was “a princesse” cast in the traditional male
role of monarch.

As a woman, her authority would be questioned at every turn. Therefore,
parliament needed to be all the more “careful”—and the word is repeated
a number of times—to ensure and preserve her “honor and royall dignitie.”
Although the official rhetoric sounds pro forma, there was actually a “great
and weightie matter” at stake, as the lord keeper’s gendered epithets make
clear: “our soveraigne Ladye and Mistris” could become “so princely a
patronesse” only if her male subjects ratified and fully supported her
female power. The concerns were real. A failure to respect her “honor and
royall dignitie” would be disastrous, not only for Elizabeth and individual
members of parliament but for the country as a whole.12

Eschewing the Danger

The second major topic of parliamentary debate was the queen’s marriage,
which once again brought her female sex to the fore. The traditional
patriarchal view of government and society rested on the analogy between
the household and the state. The monarch derived his power from the
father’s authority over his family, as passed down from Adam to the bibili-
cal patriarchs. Robert Filmer’s Patriarcha is the classic exposition of the
theory:

To confirm this Natural Right of Regal Power, we find in the Decalogue,
That the Law which enjoyns Obedience to Kings, is delivered in the terms
of Honour thine Father, as if all power were originally in the Father…. If we
compare the Natural Rights of a Father with those of a King, we find them all one, without any difference at all, but only in the Latitude or Extent of them: as the Father over one Family, so the King as Father over many Families extends his care to preserve, feed, cloth, instruct and defend the whole Commonwealth. His War, his Peace, his Courts of Justice, and all his Acts of Sovereignty tend only to preserve and distribute to every subordinate and inferiour Father, and to their Children, their Rights and Privileges; so that all the Duties of a King are summed up in an Universal Fatherly Care of his People.13

Not surprisingly, Filmer’s treatise was published after Elizabeth’s death, when the restoration of male monarchy gave the ancient analogy a renewed sense of inevitability. A female monarch threw the whole system into disarray. If the king ruled over his subjects as a man ruled over his wife and children, how could a woman rule over her male subjects? And what would happen if the monarch became a married woman? On one hand, if her husband ruled over her in marriage, how could she rule over her male subjects? On the other hand, if she ruled over her husband, what then? As John Knox put it, the “empire of women is the subversion of good ordre equitie and justice.”

Elizabeth’s debut speech was delivered by the speaker on February 10, 1559. She was twenty-five years old. She had been exiled from court and incarcerated for much of her sister Mary’s reign. Perhaps Elizabeth felt unprepared to address that venerable body, or perhaps her advisors discouraged her from speaking in deference to the reigning ideology that God commanded women not to speak in public. God subjected woman to one man, Knox explained, and God “will never permit her to reigne over manie. Seing he hath commanded her to heare, and obey one, he will not suffre that she speake, and with usurped authoritie command realmes and nations.”14 Even though Elizabeth did not rise to address parliament in her own voice, she wrote the speech herself, and her words reverberated through the chambers of government, asserting her right to “command realmes and nations.”

Since Elizabeth’s speech was a reply to the House of Commons’ marriage petition, to some extent she was on the defensive, responding to a situation she did not create and did not relish. At moments, she sounded young and hesitant; at other times, she sounded imperial and authoritative. Her words strove to establish her prerogative, even as she strained to avow what could not be said as forcefully or openly as she might have liked. The result was a remarkable combination of unshakable determination and profound uncertainty. Rather than trying to suppress the challenges facing her, Elizabeth chose to confront the gap between her youthful inexperience and the regal authority she needed to establish: “my youth and words may seem to some hardly to agree together.”15 By acknowledging that “some” members of parliament doubted her authority, Elizabeth invited those who were ready to recognize her will, despite her age and sex, to step forward and declare their support. When she then paused to address the lord treasurer directly, she introduced a method of governance
that would characterize her reign: direct personal communication with advisors chosen by her for their loyalty to her.\textsuperscript{16}

The members of parliament knew her history, but she nonetheless took the opportunity to recount the dangers she had passed in order to demonstrate her courage and eloquence, much as Othello does when he tells the Senate his story “of hair-breadth scapes i’ th’ imminent deadly breach, / Of being taken by the insolent foe / And sold to slavery, of my redemption thence / And portance in my travel’s history” (1.3.136–39).\textsuperscript{17} Elizabeth began by reminding parliament that she had already successfully evaded a number of previous marriages that had been proposed out of political expediency. Elizabeth represented the earlier attempts to force her into marriage as one of the greatest dangers confronting her when she was a beleaguered princess:

\begin{quote}
[I]f either ambition of high estate offered to me in marriage by the pleasure and appointment of my prince (whereof I have some records in this presence, as you our lord treasurer well know); or if the eschewing of the danger of mine enemies; or the avoiding of the peril of death, whose messenger or rather continual watchman, the prince’s indignation, was not little time daily before mine eyes, by whose means although I know or justly may suspect, yet will not now utter. (CW 56–57)
\end{quote}

The epigrammatic brevity gives the account a weight that exceeds its length. Elizabeth invites parliament to empathize with her suffering and to share her point of view. By equating arranged marriage with “the danger of mine enemies,” “the prince’s indignation,” and “the peril of death,” Elizabeth highlighted the depth of her aversion, not to marriage itself, but to any attempt to subordinate her will through marriage. Having evaded so many perils when she was a powerless princess through her discriminating choice of words, Elizabeth was not about to be forced into marriage by remaining silent now that she was the queen.

Elizabeth does not detail her grievances against her sister Mary since she thought the dead should be allowed to rest in peace. Nonetheless, her cryptic reference to “the prince’s indignation” reminded parliament of her own imprisonment in the Tower of London and her ensuing house arrest. At the same time, by referring to Mary as “the prince” rather than the princess, Elizabeth alluded to the statute passed during Mary’s reign that granted all monarchs, whether male or female, the right to rule in “the name of King”: “the kingly or regal office of the realm, and all dignities, prerogative royal, power, preeminent, privileges, authorities, and jurisdictions thereunto annexed, united, or belonging, being invested either in male or female, are and be and ought to be as fully, wholly, absolutely, and entirely deemed, judged, accepted, invested, and taken in the one as in the other.”\textsuperscript{18}

While asserting her independence from parliament’s control, Elizabeth was also posing another related question: were those who were now trying to force her into marriage the same men who had incited her sister’s anger
against her? Elizabeth wanted her opponents to know that she knew or at least suspected who they were (“by whose means although I know or justly may suspect, yet will not now utter”), and that she would take steps to prevent them from stirring up further trouble should that prove necessary. At the same time, she did not want to provoke their hostility by attacking them directly. The evasive diction and ambiguous syntax were the residue of her immediate past when anything she said could have been used against her.

**Much Suspected by Me**

Elizabeth had learned the value of enigmatic, elusive language during her perilously insecure younger years, when she was placed under house arrest at Woodstock Castle after being accused of supporting Wyatt’s plot to prevent Mary’s marriage. Confined to a decrepit, drafty old castle and restricted to a small private garden, Elizabeth was refused permission to wander in the park, or to study with her tutor, or to see anyone other than her guard, Sir Bedingfield, without special permission. It was under these conditions that Elizabeth wrote the epigram that she carved with a diamond on a window at Woodstock:

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Much suspected by me,
Nothing proved can be.
Quod Elizabeth the prisoner
(CW 46)
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This couplet, with a total of eight words and twelve syllables, is about as concise as an epigram can be. The brevity and concision embody the circumscribed role assigned her, the role of prisoner and suspected traitor. The epigram demonstrates how little—and how much—could be made out of a few, carefully chosen words. The terse poetic diction epitomizes what the poem asserts: Elizabeth’s enemies were waiting to use her words against her, but they could elicit only what she chose to speak. The epigram asserts Elizabeth’s control over her own speech and writing, even as the verbal ambiguity acknowledges that she could not control the meaning that others would place on her words. This fundamental hermeneutical assumption—a foundational principle of modern critical theory—was a central guiding principle of Elizabeth’s rhetoric and reign.

The oppressive constraints of Elizabeth’s incarceration and the ominous, unresolved charges against her pervade and propel the poem. The passive construction (“Nothing proved can be”) captures Elizabeth’s situation: as prisoner, she was reduced to an unwelcome yet undeniable position of passivity; her response, her only recourse, was constant vigilance and continued resistance. The first words of the two lines, “Much” and “Nothing,” announce that there had been “much” ado about “nothing,” and that (although the outcome was not hers to decide) she would continue to do everything she could to ensure that nothing would come of nothing.
The epigram provides only the barest facts because Elizabeth was wary of saying anything that might jeopardize her legal standing. If “by” is taken in the Elizabethan sense of concerning, the couplet declared that although much was suspected about or concerning her, nothing could be proven against her. The poem did not say Elizabeth had done nothing, since her opponents would contest that regardless of what she said. Instead, it only said that nothing could be proven—a point she made again and again, both when she was being interrogated and when she wrote to her sister demanding justice and seeking love and compassion. Mary responded coldly to Elizabeth’s first letter, and Bedingfield refused to forward her pleas to the Council. Complaining that this made her position worse than that of a common prisoner at Newgate Prison, Elizabeth continued to lobby for permission to write to the queen and the Privy Council because she believed (or at least hoped) that her rhetorical skill would convince them of her innocence.

Elizabeth was well aware that she might be condemned and executed without due cause, but, the poem argued, that would be an injustice, for she was innocent until proven guilty. The epigram acknowledges Elizabeth’s vulnerability and powerlessness while demonstrating her courage and strength. That tension gives her words a second, deeper meaning. If “by me” is taken not only as a prepositional phrase, meaning, much is suspected about me, but also as the implied subject of the passive verb “suspected,” then the words transform Elizabeth from a passive victim into an agent, telling her accusers that much is also suspected about them “by me.” They may have their suspicions about her, but Elizabeth also had her suspicions about them. The two assertions coexist, shifting the position of subject and object, balancing her enemies’ interpretation of events against her own quite different interpretation of the situation.

But why engrave the poem on a window? First of all, Elizabeth’s access to writing materials was carefully controlled; the Privy Council warned her jailer to prevent her from sending tokens, letters, or messages to her friends and supporters. The window and diamond were there, ready to be used, and Elizabeth was clever enough to take advantage of them. By engraving the poem on the glass, which could easily shatter under pressure but did not, Elizabeth could see herself reflected in the somewhat murky surface of a sixteenth-century window, both a mirror of her innocence and an image of the distortions forced upon her. By using her own diamond ring, one of the few remaining vestiges of her privileged status, as her instrument, Elizabeth could use its strength to combat her vulnerability. The diamond’s hard core and sharp edges were far more important in her current situation than its beauty or net worth.

The multifaceted form of the diamond offers an analogy to the interpretive challenge the poem represents, reminding both its author and its potential readers that words have different facets when refracted in different lights or seen from different points of view. The window and diamond were the medium, but they were also the message. Writing the poem enabled Elizabeth to imagine Mary reading the poem and speaking
the words quoted above. The materiality of the poem invites Mary and her proxies to adopt Elizabeth’s perspective. If the men sent by Mary to interrogate Elizabeth relayed the poem, and if Mary read the poem herself, then she (or they) might be induced to admit, “Nothing proved can be.”

The indefinite pronouns, cryptic diction, and ambiguous syntax could be most readily comprehended by viewing the poem and the situation from within, from Elizabeth’s vantage point. Viewed from outside, the letters were reversed, so the meaning was less accessible, though not entirely impenetrable, since the text was short enough to be deciphered and remembered by anyone who cared enough to do so. The epigram would have had different meanings to different readers. First of all, it consoled and exhorted Elizabeth herself, reminding her that she needed to use all her wit and vigilance to avoid incriminating herself. Second, it was a message to Mary and her agents, warning them not to confuse their suspicions with legally verifiable proof. Third, it assured Elizabeth’s supporters that she was well and reminded them to remain vigilant and circumspect. If they said nothing to incriminate her, the situation (like the writing on the window) could be reversed.

Elizabeth was not allowed to communicate directly with her allies, either in writing or in person. Yet Elizabeth’s old friend, Thomas Parry, had taken lodgings at a local inn. From there, he managed Elizabeth’s finances, gathered provisions to be delivered to the castle, and received visits from scores of Elizabeth’s supporters. Parry was permitted to bring funds for the kitchen staff and to send servants bearing provisions. Elizabeth was lodged in the gatehouse rather than the castle, so her window would have been visible to Parry and his staff as they walked past. The epigram was an ingenious way of assuring her allies that she was safe, and of informing them that her foes had no evidence against her. Most important of all, it warned them to be exceedingly careful since anything they said or did could potentially be used against her and them.

Ultimately, the epigram addressed posterity. If Elizabeth had been executed, it would have survived, eternizing her innocent martyrdom. After she became queen, Woodstock Castle became a famous tourist destination, and the epigram, a widely admired emblem of her ability to triumph against adversity. By choosing language that was as artfully evasive as it was bluntly assertive, Elizabeth outmaneuvered her interrogators, thwarted her enemies, heartened and warned her supporters, and thus gained a small measure of control over a situation that threatened to render her not only powerless but defunct—to turn her into the “nothing” that the poem’s very creation sought to hold at bay.

The final line, “Quod Elizabeth the prisoner,” could have been added when the poem was later copied onto the wall where it was admired and transcribed by foreign visitors to England in the 1590s, but I think it was written by Elizabeth herself to frame the epigram—to transform her life into art and to turn her personal suffering into history. By writing the epigram, Elizabeth reconstructed the situation, giving it her own form and meaning. Just as the artful doubleness of “Much suspected by me” enabled
Elizabeth to transform herself from the object of others’ designs to the critic and judge of their actions, the narrative frame transformed her from a helpless victim into the leading actor in a drama, or the main character in a narrative that she both constructed and enacted.

When Elizabeth ascended the throne, her experience at Woodstock still weighed on her mind. The painfully acquired knowledge that anything she wrote and said could be misconstrued and used against her colored her first parliamentary speech as it had propelled the Woodstock epigram. Indeed, her parliamentary speech characterized her situation so obliquely (“this kind of life in which I yet live,” “this estate wherein you see me,” “which trade of life I am so thoroughly acquainted”) (CW 57) that one can still sense the danger Elizabeth felt as she began to rally her supporters and suppress her enemies. By turning her private experience into a public story, Elizabeth’s parliamentary speech continued the narrative purpose that motivated the epigram—the verbal challenge of transforming herself from a vulnerable victim to a stalwart survivor and powerful prince, resourcefully using language to outwit her foes.

The dense, ambiguous language of Elizabeth’s parliamentary speeches recycles many of the defensive strategies developed in the Woodstock epigrams, as the passage from the first parliamentary speech that we examined above illustrates: “the eschewing the danger of mine enemies; or the avoiding of the peril of death, whose messenger or rather continual watchman, the prince’s indignation, was not little time daily before mine eyes” (CW 56–57). In personifying “the prince’s indignation” and giving it a metaphorical embodiment as death’s “watchman,” Elizabeth was once again carefully choosing her words to exercise control over a problematic situation. At the same time, the murky causality demonstrates just how fraught with danger and difficulty the situation still seemed to her. The clotted syntax inserts “the prince’s indignation” as an appositional phrase: “the avoiding of the peril of death, whose messenger or rather continual watchman, the prince’s indignation, was not little time daily before mine eyes, by whose means although I know or justly may suspect…” Because it is not clear how “the princes indignation” relates to the surrounding participial phrases and the central passive verb, the members of parliament would have to work their way through the constituent parts of the sentence to figure out the causal links Elizabeth was herself piecing together. The strained diction and syntax were the residue of her immediate past when language was at once her only means of self-defense and a constant danger of self-incrimination. Could the enigmatic, ambiguous language that saved her from being “proven” a traitor protect her against the latest threat to her liberty—parliament’s marriage petition?

Much as the epigram gave her earlier plight a formal structure and future voice, Elizabeth’s first parliamentary speech presented her recent history as a narrative of triumph over oppression. Like the epigram, the speech invited her listeners to sympathize with her suffering, to applaud her courage, and to recognize her ability to outwit her detractors. At the same time, it warned any former opponents who were still members of
parliament that the situation was now reversed, just as she hoped it would be when she engraved her epigram on the window at Woodstock.

Newly empowered but still cognizant of the dangers she had passed, Elizabeth put her listeners on notice: “some” of them were still “much suspected” by her: “by whose means although I know, or justly may suspect, yet will not now utter” (CW 57). The word “suspect,” so prominent in the epigram, reappears in the speech, linking this retrospective account to her earlier epigrammatic intervention. The clipped definitiveness of the words, with the repeated “t” sounds, “yet will not utter,” recapitulates the concision and force of “Nothing proved can be.” Once again, Elizabeth deliberately chose to say “nothing” in order not to give her adversaries any verbal ammunition to use against her. Yet, here as in the epigram, saying that she was saying nothing was itself a way of doing something. By announcing that she would “not utter” their names because she had no wish to reignite their hostility, Elizabeth claimed the upper hand. Although she was not planning to take any action against them at present, she would be monitoring their activities, and she would not hesitate to act, should they try to curtail her freedom or her ability to rule by pressuring her to marry against her will.

Distrust was so deeply ingrained in Elizabeth’s history and psyche that she was prepared to confront it and fight it wherever it surfaced, both in herself and in her opponents. The verbal equivocations of the Woodstock epigram challenged her opponents’ suspicions of her while simultaneously voicing and hedging her suspicions of them (“Much suspected by me”). Now that their positions had been reversed, Elizabeth could more openly express her own thoughts about those “by whose means although I know, or justly may suspect.” At the same time, she had reason to think her opponents were harboring their own suspicions of her:

[If any of you be in suspect that, wh ensever it may please God to incline my heart to another kind of life, [my determination] is not to do or determine anything with which the realm may or shall have just cause to be discontented. (CW 57)

The repetition of the word “suspect” again connects the speech to the epigram, allying those who incited her sister’s “indignation” with those who are now trying to force her into marriage. At stake was not only Elizabeth’s own dearly prized and recently acquired liberty but also the stability of the country. Elizabeth insisted that she would only marry “whenever it may please God to incline my heart to another kind of life.” By declaring that she would follow God’s will and not parliament’s petition, Elizabeth asserted the newly acquired power of her imperial monarchy. At the same time, she declared that she would marry only when and if “it may please God to incline my heart” (CW 57).

In *Arcana microcosmi: Or, The Hid Secrets of Man’s Body Discovered*, Alexander Ross explained that the heart was understood to be “the fountain of heat” and “the seat of Passions.” Elizabeth’s few carefully chosen
words deftly introduce the attitude toward marriage that would govern her decisions for the next two decades. On one hand, she would not let parliament force her into marriage for pragmatic reasons alone, whether political, dynastic, diplomatic, economic, or military. She would marry only if her heart made her desire to marry. On the other hand, she would not allow herself to be so carried away by passion or emotion that the country had “just cause to be discontented” with her choice of a husband.

Thus, the first parliamentary speech, like the Woodstock epigram, demonstrated Elizabeth’s determination to outmaneuver her opponents even as it assured her supporters that she was equal to the challenges and dangers facing her. In isolating her foes, Elizabeth was building a political base, reminding her allies that she was still under attack and that she needed their backing now more than ever. In asserting her authority, she defined the terms that would govern any future marriage negotiations. Finally, and remarkably given her youth and vulnerability, Elizabeth was addressing posterity, meticulously and cannily constructing a personal narrative of triumph over adversity to fortify the image of a formidable yet loving monarch.

Fraught with Cares

To buttress her imperial power, Elizabeth invoked the divine right of kings, reminding parliament that God, having saved her from her enemies, would now provide the requisite guidance: “With which trade of life I am so thoroughly acquainted that I trust God, who hath hitherto therein preserved and led me by the hand, will not now of His goodness suffer me to go alone.” In attributing her victory and vindication to God, Elizabeth deployed a rhetorical strategy that she had worked out in another, somewhat longer epigram that she also wrote while imprisoned at Woodstock:

O Fortune, thy wrestling, wavering state
Hath fraught with cares my troubled wit,
Whose witness this present prison late
Could bear, where once was joy flown quite.
Thou causedst the guilty to be loosed
From lands where innocents were enclosed,
And caused the guiltless to be reserved,
And freed those that death had well deserved.
But all herein can be naught wrought,
So God grant to my foes as they have thought.

Finis. Elisabetha a prisoner, 1555 (CW 46)

Like the brief tale of adversity that introduces the parliamentary speech, this poem begins with a terse but surprisingly powerful expression of personal distress: “Hath fraught with cares my troubled wit.” By providing only a glimpse rather than a full-fledged narrative, the epigram, like
the speech, avoids self-pity, asserts righteousness, and claims justice in the hope of garnering support.

The poem focuses less on physical suffering than on intellectual and emotional constraint. Here too Elizabeth seeks support from history, specifically her place in the history of Woodstock Castle, which witnessed a long line of injustices. Elizabeth traced her own sorrow back to an original moment: “where once was joy flown quite” (my emphasis). Woodstock Castle was the legendary home of Henry II and his mistress, Rosamund Clifford. The medieval castle had been destroyed by Elizabeth’s day, but Rosamund’s story was well known. It was widely believed that Rosamund was poisoned by Henry’s wife Eleanor of Acquitaine when she discovered the secret passage leading to the apartment where Henry and Rosamund enjoyed their illicit love. The vagueness of the reference (“where once was joy flown quite”) protects Elizabeth from any direct association with Rosamund’s sexual dishonor while expressing sympathy for the loss of her joie de vivre.

The final couplet—“But all herein can be naught wrought, / So God grant to my foes as they have thought”—imagines that Woodstock’s history of releasing the guilty and restraining the innocent “can be” reversed, when or if fortune’s random acts are overturned by God’s justice. The final rhymes, “wrought” and “thought,” strengthened by the internal rhyme, “naught wrought” and “fraught,” echo and envisage a release from the constraint that “Hath fraught with cares my troubled wit.” The conclusion, “So God grant,” posits a much-anticipated answer to the prayer the poem comprises. The liberation the final couplet foresees could take a number of different forms, depending on how one interprets the phrase “all herein can be naught wrought.”

To begin with, all those who remain imprisoned “herein,” that is, “here in” Woodstock Castle, “can be” made “naught” if God grants Elizabeth’s foes what they wanted, the opportunity to convict and execute her. Death would make her “naught,” but it would also bring a welcome liberation from the “cares” of this world, giving the previous line—“And freed those that death had well deserved”—a positive spin. Yet the line “all herein can be naught wrought” could also mean that all Elizabeth has said “here in” the poem will be turned to “naught” if God fulfills what her foes “thought.” Not only would their schemes be negated and nullified (for there’s a pun on naught/not), but they would also be shown to be “naught” in the sense of evil, wicked, or wrong.

If God did to Elizabeth’s foes what they thought about doing to her, if Elizabeth was released from prison, they would be “naught” as would the poem’s previous claims, for it would no longer be true that the guilty are “freed” while the “guiltless” are “reserved” in prison. By warning her enemies that God would punish them for treating her unjustly, Elizabeth exercised some limited measure of control over her fate, a measure of control that she would later reprise and fortify in warning the first Elizabethan parliament that they could not force her to marry because her decision
would be guided by God alone, “who hath hitherto therein preserved and led me by the hand” (CW 57).

A final, even more veiled meaning gives the poem’s final epigrammatic turn yet another interpretation. If God should grant what her foes have thought—if the treason plots she has been accused of should come to pass—then Mary would be killed, her foes would be rendered “naught,” Elizabeth would be crowned queen, and everything they “wrought” by imprisoning her would be undone. Of course, Elizabeth could not ally herself with the rebellion against Mary’s government without incriminating herself and bringing about her own execution. Elizabeth could prophesy her foes’ defeat only by concealing it, as an amphibologous subtext, beneath the poem’s more obvious image of her own destruction.

As the poem draws to a close, it makes a self-reflexive move, meditating on its own enigmatic form: since her foes “caused the guiltless to be reserved” (in the sense of close-mouthed), Elizabeth would remain tersely self-protective, using the epigram’s oblique twists and turns both to protest her bondage and to declare her innocence. They imprisoned her, but perhaps even worse, they took away her freedom of speech, forcing her to be “reserved” in the sense of oblique and evasive. Curt and cautious, the epigram’s twists and turns protest Elizabeth’s bondage and declare her innocence. If Mary and her representatives chose to identify with the “guilty,” let that knowledge weigh on their consciences. If challenged, Elizabeth could always cite the penultimate line, claiming that she was merely praying for their will to be done. Having acknowledged that words are always subject to reinterpretation based on the reader’s own goals and presuppositions, the ending takes a final epigrammatic turn that mirrors the other Woodstock epigram. If “naught” can be made of “all” that is written “herein,” then “Nothing proved can be.”

To Be Queen of This Realm

Elizabeth conceived her first parliamentary speech much as she imagined the Woodstock epigrams: as a way to evade danger and transcend constraint. Tactics developed in the epigrams recur in the speech as she summons her verbal skills and political acumen to protect her newly acquired liberty, assert her power, and defend her character and reputation. Even as monarch, she knew, her power would be challenged and could be severely circumscribed if she was not vigilant. Thus, Elizabeth told parliament, God would guide and protect her now as He had in the past, for God could still do to them what they once thought about doing to her.

At this key moment, as Elizabeth turns to address the question of her marriage, her diction and syntax become even more deeply evasive:

With which trade of life I am so thoroughly acquainted that I trust God, who hath hitherto therein preserved and led me by the hand, will not now of His goodness suffer me to go alone. (CW 57)
This convoluted sentence seems to mean that a single life was thoroughly acceptable to Elizabeth because God, who had protected her from previous attempts to subordinate her through marriage, was still present, providing solace and guidance as she continued her current state “alone” without a husband. But the sentence can also mean that Elizabeth might not remain single for long because God, always her guide and savior, “will not now of His goodness suffer me to go alone.” The cryptic diction makes it impossible to know whether or not she would marry. As so often with Elizabeth’s rhetoric, the enigma is itself the point. It was no more possible to know whether she would be freed from house arrest at Woodstock than it was possible to know now, at the outset of her reign, whether Providence would provide a husband she would want to marry. Parliament’s marriage petitions were moot because she would decide for herself, guided only by God and not by them, whether or not any given suitor was both desirable to her and advantageous for the country.

In both the poem and the speech Elizabeth balanced her feelings of anxiety and constraint which “hath fraught with cares my troubled wit” with her determination to assert her own judgment and will. Thus after warning parliament not to interfere, she proceeded to praise them for endorsing her right to marry whomever she desired, whether an Englishman or a foreigner: “the manner of your petition I do well like of and take in good part, because that it is simple and containeth no limitation of place or person” (CW 57). Then, recognizing the very real danger that her female “will” and “liking” could easily be subjected by those domineering men who were all too willing to rule for her until they could find a man to rule over her, Elizabeth continued:

If it had been otherwise, I must needs have misliked it very much and thought it in you a very great presumption, being unfitting and altogether unmeet for you to require them that may command, or those to appoint whose parts are to desire, or such to bind and limit whose duties are to obey, or to take upon you to draw my love to your liking or frame my will to your fantasies. (CW 57)

While leaving her underlying motives and ultimate intentions inscrutable, Elizabeth made it absolutely clear that she would not countenance any attempt to limit her marital freedom of choice. Still, the force of the statement is tempered by the syntax, which is descriptive rather than declarative. Sternly forbidding and yet tentative, Elizabeth told parliament what she would have thought “if it had been otherwise.” Then she proceeded to declare, in no uncertain terms, how she would have felt had they tried to limit her freedom of choice: “I must needs have disliked it.”

Here, as in the second Woodstock epigram, Elizabeth uses the first person singular “I” to express her own strong feelings. Yet, much as the epigram’s signature distanced and framed her words for a potential, future audience, the 1559 speech mutes the immediacy and intensity of her personal experience, first by having the speaker read the speech aloud and
then by moving from the first person singular to the third person plural: “them that may command, or those to appoint whose parts are to desire” (CW 57). This impersonal third person pronoun associates Elizabeth with all those powerful monarchs whose will was their subjects’ command. At the same time, the ambiguous pronouns that lack a clear antecedent abstract and veil the queen’s private “desire,” much as the epigram allegorized and distanced Rosamund Clifford’s sexual pleasure (“Where once was joy flown quite”). Finally, the complexity of the syntax and the ambiguity of the pronouns pose the question at the heart of the debate between Elizabeth and parliament: who “may command” and who may “desire”?

Yet, despite the syntactical slippage and the resulting interpretive uncertainties, the bottom line is clear. Elizabeth left no doubt that she would act according to her own “liking” rather than parliament’s “fantasies.” At this key moment, Elizabeth sounds rather like Hermia when, at the opening of A Midsummer Night’s Dream, she is informed that she must marry Demetrius, her father’s choice, rather than Lysander, the object of her love and desire. Hermia quips, “I would my father look’d but with my eyes” (1.1.56). Like Hermia, Elizabeth declared that she would marry only if she found someone who pleased her eyes, her heart, and her mind.

In asking parliament to recognize her “will”—meaning not only determination to act, wishes, and inclination, but also carnal desire—Elizabeth was raising a matter so delicate and potentially dangerous to her female honor that it could not be spoken in public, not even by a monarch whose speech was being read for her, except in carefully guarded fragments of displaced poetic language: “love,” “desire,” “liking,” “will,” and “fantasies.” To allude to her “desire” for sexual pleasure was to risk arousing the most potent and potentially damaging misogynist stereotypes of the time: the deeply ingrained and widespread belief that women were vain, irrational, inconstant, and completely unsuited for governance because they were driven by uncontrollable passion and lust. John Knox put the case for women’s “naturall weaknes, and inordinat appetites” pithily: “[they] haue burned with such inordinat lust, that for the quenching of the same, they haue betrayed to strangiers their countrie.”

Along with these antifeminist stereotypes, Elizabeth was bucking historical precedent, which dictated that monarchical marriage should be arranged for political, dynastic, financial, and military reasons. Misogynists might immediately assume she was nothing but a weak, self-indulgent, lustful, irrational woman, but that was far from the case. By warning parliament not to try to bend her “will” to their “fantasies,” Elizabeth was being pragmatic and surprisingly mature for someone who had been held in isolation for so long, because, as she was all too aware, her marriage would produce the all-important heir to the throne only if her husband aroused her “will” and “liking.” She was not about to repeat the mistake her father made when he married Anne of Cleves, who looked appealing enough in her formal portrait but proved so undesirable in person that Henry could not wait to be rid of her. Elizabeth also had a scientific reason to insist that any future husband must satisfy her “will” and “desire” because it
was widely believed that female orgasm was necessary to conception.\textsuperscript{25} If parliament forced her to marry a man who repulsed her or infuriated her, there would be no heir to the throne.

Defending her conjugal freedom of choice was Elizabeth's most pressing concern, but the debate also had much larger political ramifications, which set the terms for her future relationship to parliament. After the opening sermons and the debate over her title, Elizabeth had reason to fear that her opponents in parliament would try to use her female sex to subordinate her to their will. She, therefore, took the opportunity of this first parliamentary speech to declare, first, that she planned to govern the country herself whether or not she married, and, second, that it would be “unmeet” and “unfitting” for them who thought they could command to try to exert their power over her because it was she, not they, who had the divinely given authority to “command.”

Drawing upon the original meaning of the word “unmeet,” Elizabeth suggested that any attempt to impose parliament’s will over and against hers would be \textit{immoderate} or \textit{excessive}. The second meaning of “unmeet”—\textit{unequal, unevenly matched}—asserted what the rest of the speech demonstrated: the parliamentary debate over her marriage was the occasion for a much larger power struggle, and Elizabeth wanted to make it very clear that parliament was the unequal or weaker party.\textsuperscript{26} Finally, therefore, Elizabeth used the word “unmeet” in a third sense, meaning that it was \textit{not fitting} or \textit{not proper} for parliament to try to subordinate her will to theirs. The latter meaning is reinforced by her second adjective, “unfitting,” which also means, \textit{not fitting or suitable; unbecoming, improper}, though interestingly, the first usage cited by the Oxford English Dictionary is from 1590, three decades after Elizabeth’s speech. Perhaps “unfitting” was a recent coinage, just beginning to be used by the Elizabethans when Elizabeth wrote her speech in 1559. More likely, it was a neologism, coined by Elizabeth to emphasize the inappropriateness of parliament’s attempt to force her into marriage.

Whether Elizabeth coined a new word or used a newly created, colloquialism, the word’s very newness suggests that rather than resorting to conventional political discourse, Elizabeth was seeking “new-made idiom” (to borrow a term from Donne) to re-conceive and redefine the relation between monarch and parliament. The reiteration stands in sharp contrast to the preceding obliquity, reminding her audience that she could make her meaning absolutely clear when it was advantageous for her to do so.

To drive this key point home, Elizabeth’s language suddenly becomes as blunt as it is commanding: “put that clean out of your heads” (CW 57). Even if she could not control her opponents’ thoughts, Elizabeth’s regal tone and imperial imperative, strengthened by the simple colloquial diction and straightforward syntax, counters their apprehensions and misapprehensions, rather like Prince Hal’s chilling reply to Henry IV’s accusations: “Do not think so, you shall not find it so” (3.2.129). Turning once again to those skeptics who “suspected” her judgment, Elizabeth answered their doubts and accusations, lucidly and definitively: “I will never in that
matter conclude anything that shall be prejudicial to the realm” (CW 57). At this crucial juncture, there could be no mistaking her meaning: parliament need not interfere because she would not marry for passion alone any more than for expediency alone.

Elizabeth’s Speech vs. Camden’s

Modern scholars have neglected Elizabeth’s defense of her right to decide for herself whether to marry and whom to marry for two reasons. First, neither historians nor literary critics have given Elizabeth’s language sufficiently close analysis. Second, the right or need to choose her future husband herself was nullified by the prevailing and mistaken view that Elizabeth never considered the possibility of marriage. This erroneous premise stems from William Camden’s posthumous history of her reign. In fact, Camden rewrote Elizabeth’s first parliamentary speech to make it seem as if she was committed from day one to living and dying a holy virgin.27 Camden’s myth of the Virgin Queen, married to God and country, underlies so much of what has been written about Elizabeth over the last half century that it shapes our assumptions and misshapes our reading of the documentary evidence in ways that we do not even realize. It is, therefore, crucial to salvage Elizabeth’s words from Camden’s distortions.

Ironically, one of the most frequently quoted remarks from all of Elizabeth’s parliamentary speeches is a passage from the first parliamentary speech that Camden apparently fabricated, since it does not appear in Elizabethan versions of the speech: “I have already joyned my selfe in marriage to an husband, namely, the Kingdome of England. And behold (said she, which I marvaile ye have forgotten,) the pledge of this my wedlocke and marriage with my Kingdome, (and therewith, she drew the Ring from her finger and shewed it . . . .”28 Camden celebrated Elizabeth as a type of the Virgin Mary at the very moment when the Protestant reformation was discrediting the cult of the Virgin, closing the nunneries, smashing beloved images of holy mother and child, and sanctioning marriage for the clergy, thereby ending the medieval exaltation of chastity over marriage. To enforce the iconic image of the Virgin Queen, Camden ignored key differences between Elizabeth and Mary, namely that Elizabeth did not give birth to the son and savior her government so desperately desired. Nor, as we shall see in the following chapters, did she speak or act like a saint, sublimely free from carnal desires and worldly considerations.

Elizabeth’s symbolic marriage to her country, with its implicit rejection of any other marriage, is conspicuously absent from Elizabethan versions of the speech, which explicitly declare that Elizabeth will consider the possibility of marriage “whensoever it may please God to incline my heart to another kind of life” (CW 57). Unlike Camden’s interpolations, Elizabeth’s own language suggests that the decision to marry was not merely a matter of submitting to parliament’s petitions. It was also a question of a “heart” and “will” “inclined” to “love” and “liking.”
Camden’s creative revisions make the young queen seem like a nun, seeking spiritual fulfillment through pure devotion to God and country: “Hereupon have I chosen that kinde of life, which is most free from the troublesome cares of this world, that I might attend the service of God alone.” Camden’s Elizabeth disdains the very idea of marriage as utter folly: “now that the publike care of governing the Kingdome is laid upon me, to drawe upon me also the cares of marriage, may seeme a point of inconsiderate folly.” This pointed rejection of marriage is repeatedly cited or presumed by modern scholars, but it does not appear in Elizabethan texts. To Elizabeth, who was rapidly discovering the unique political power of courtship, it was not marriage but a categorical commitment to virginity that would have been “a point of inconsiderate folly.”

The disparity between Elizabeth’s original speech and Camden’s mythic reconfiguration culminates in the two different conclusions:

And in the end this shall be for me sufficient: that a marble stone shall declare that a queen, having reigned such a time, lived and died a virgin. (CW 58)

And to me it shall be a full satisfaction both for the memoriall of my name, and for my glory also, if when I shall let my last breath, it be ingraven upon my Marble Tombe, Here lieth Elizabeth, which Raigned a Virgin, and died a Virgin. (Camden 27)

Whereas Camden gave priority to Elizabeth’s virginity—he repeated the word to give it added importance—Elizabeth gave priority to her sovereignty, asserting first and above all that she wanted to be remembered as “a Queen” who “reigned such a time,” and mentioning only secondarily that she would be satisfied in the end if she lived and died a virgin. Camden’s “And to me it shall be a full satisfaction” (my emphasis) created an inalienable, absolute commitment to virginity. By contrast, Elizabeth’s choice of words, “this shall be for me sufficient” (my emphasis), made the ultimate determination dependent on a measured balance and as yet unresolved tension between long-range personal and professional priorities. Elizabeth concluded her speech by declaring that she might never marry because she wanted parliament to understand that its petitions could not force her to do what she did not desire.

As a newly crowned queen whose qualifications were being judged by all and attacked by many, Elizabeth had every reason to fear that she would be remembered for a prompt, dutiful marriage rather than a long, successful reign. Camden’s interpolations and revisions confirmed his overarching vision of Elizabeth as the Virgin Queen wedded to God and country. Elizabeth’s original speech made it impossible to know whether she would marry or not, though her words made it absolutely clear that she would marry only if she herself desired and chose to do so.
Figure 6. Elizabeth I Receiving Ambassadors, unknown Artist, 16th century