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Elizabeth I ‘in sight and view of all the world’: an unpublished Spanish letter

Carlo M. Bajetta

1. Always on a stage

Elizabeth I was always on a stage – and she was fully aware of this (cf. Elizabeth I, 2000: 194 and *infra*). She was literally on display in the Presence Chamber, her courtiers being a most attentive audience to any gesture which could indicate the Queen’s inclination and mood. If she was the prime actress there, her most important noblemen and collaborators had been assigned parts, too: William Cecil, Lord Burghley was her ‘Spirit’, and his son Robert her ‘Pigmy’; Sir Francis Walsingham was her ‘Moor’; Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, her ‘Eyes’; Sir Christopher Hatton her ‘Lids’; Sir Walter Raleigh her ‘Water’ (see Doran 2015: 117-64; 219-301). Such staging went on within and outside her court. Throughout her long reign she had countless occasions in which she was asked to take part in a performance, be it during the Accession Day or New Year’s ceremonies, or her summer progresses (see May [1991] 1999; Lawson 2013; Goldring et al., 2014).

The latter in particular were in themselves elaborate itinerant displays of her affection to the people of England. They often featured extempore short speeches accompanied by acts which were meant to be their visual counterparts (if one could not hear, the Queen could be seen to perform a significant gesture),¹ and shows in which she was asked to join in. Sir Philip Sidney’s *The Lady of May* can provide a significant example of this. In this play, performed in 1578 on the occasion of the Royal visit to Leicester’s house at Wanstead, the Queen is asked (more than once) to actively participate in the action, and finally be the judge of the contention (Sidney 1989: 5-13). As the later printed editions (from the 1599 *Arcadia* onwards) testify, Elizabeth obliged the request. Quite typically, the words of the enigmatic Queen of England did not reach the press; we do know, however, that she allowed the onlookers to know her mind concerning who was the best husband for the Lady (Sidney 1989: 12):

[I]t pleased her Maiesty to judge that Espilus did the better deserve her; but what words, what reasons she used for it, this paper, which carrieth so base names, is not worthy to contain. Sufficeth it that upon the judgment given, the shepherds and foresters made a full consort of their cornets and recorders, and then did Espilus sing this song, tending to the greatness of his own joy, and yet to the comfort of the other side, since they were overthrown by a most worthy adversary.

2. In ‘view of all the world’: Elizabeth’s Spanish letter to Maximilian II

Elizabeth, however, was not just —to paraphrase her famous saying— ‘set on a stage’ at home. She was constantly, ‘in the sight and view of all the world’ (Elizabeth I, 2000: 194). It is no wonder, then, that her understanding of the theatrical dimensions of each and every gesture of hers also affected her correspondence. Her ministers and the members of what we would nowadays term her ‘Foreign Office’ (Platt 1994) were

¹ During her Coronation procession in 1558, for example, the queen was given a copy of the Bible in English. Elizabeth thanked “the citie therefore, promysed the reading therof most diligentlie, and incontinent commaunded, that it shoulde be brought. At the receit wherof, how reuerently did she with both her handes take it, kisse it, & lay it vpon her brest? to the great comfort of the lookers on” (Goldring et al., 2014: 139)

perfectly conscious of this. In one of his missives (The National Archives, Kew, State Papers [henceforth “SP”] 12/284, fol. 21) Cecil once reminded Elizabeth’s trusted private secretary Thomas Windebank that

the style is not to be neglected in these cases, especially where the memory is to be left to all Adges, in the passadge wherof (both for the Past and future) our Soveraines papers will be fownd the Records of more Piety Learning and dolceness then ever Prince dyd leaue behynd them.

Windebank, probably, hardly needed any such recommendation. He had worked with the Cecils for a long time and, after becoming one of Elizabeth’s most trusted collaborators and her favourite scribe, he soon began assembling a collection of her most significant letters (see Barnett 1969: 146-54; Elizabeth I 2017: xlvi-xlvii).

It was Windebank who, in the early 1590s, transcribed a copy of one of Elizabeth’s Spanish missives, together with some others related to the marriage negotiations with Charles, Archduke of Austria, which had taken place some thirty years earlier, in the mid-1560s (on which see Diemer 1969: 155-276 and Doran 1989: 908-26). The context of this epistolary exchange has been described elsewhere (Elizabeth I 2017: 21-62), and only a brief summary will suffice here. While the idea of an Austrian marriage dated back to 1559, it was only in May 1565 that the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian II (who acted on behalf of his brother) sent an envoy to England. The negotiations proceed slowly, as some serious disagreements on matters of religion could not be ignored. Within two years, the negotiations came to an end, as it became clear that Elizabeth would not tolerate, at this stage, a marriage with a Catholic prince (cf. Diemer 1696: 247-48). In her words, she prized “a quiet conscience and the continuation of peace” in her realm “over any favours which may be granted me or all the kingdoms which may be conferred upon me by the Princes of this world” (Elizabeth I 2017: 59).

While most of the correspondence went on, on Elizabeth’s side, in Italian, the final acts of this exchange were accompanied by letters in other languages. As with her courtiers, Elizabeth seems to have assigned roles here as well: Maximilian (who usually wrote in Spanish or Latin) was treated like an affectionate kinsman (“padre”, “Zio” or even “fratello”); he was generally addressed in Italian, and sent letters penned personally by the Queen. Charles —by no means the most ardent of Elizabeth’s suitors— was just a “most Excellent Prince”, and was written to (by Cecil) in formal and rather detached Latin.² Spanish was reserved for Maximilian’s wife Maria, daughter of Charles V.

The Empress had written to Elizabeth and had entrusted the English envoy, Henry Cobham (later Sir Henry), with an oral message. Elizabeth’s answer, the letter printed below, is evidently a polite reply to this.³ The Queen, however, was cognisant of the silent presence of another interlocutor. Throughout the negotiations, Maria’s brother, Philip II, was constantly informed of the development of events (Elizabeth I 2017: 25; 43). One is tempted to think that Elizabeth chose to write in Spanish both as a polite gesture to Maria and to let Philip understand she knew he was getting copies of the correspondence.

Elizabeth, in fact, knew Spanish tolerably well, at least, well enough to read the important documents which she signed —something which she invariably did (see Pryor 2003: 7). It was in this language that her letters to the Queen of Spain (cf. SP 94/1, fol. 3) and the King of Morocco (cf. SP 71/12, fol. 53; SP 104/163, fol. 45, and British Library, Add. MS 48126, fol. 261) were written. At least on one occasion, moreover, she added a final Spanish salutation in her own hand in a missive to the Governors of Portugal (SP 89/1, fol. 100). Most of the letters, however, were probably penned by her collaborators. A likely candidate for this period is Barnard Hampton, a former member of William Cecil’s household who served as clerk of the Privy Council from 1551 until his death in 1572. Hampton was a man “well versed in the Spanish tongue”, and was “so talented that he served as Spanish secretary to Queen Mary during his clerkship” (Vaughan 2006: 78). After Armagil Waad, still during Mary’s reign, stopped being a regular member of the Queen’s “Foreign Office” Hampton was left as the best translator from this language (Vaughan 2006: 27; on Hampton see also Rhodes 2014).

Writing to Maria in her native language would serve to create rapport with the Emperor’s wife. This was crucial in view of what would soon be publicized. No matter how amicable the relations with Vienna, a

² Cf. SP 70/95, fol. 125, a copy in a scribal hand of Cecil’s original, now SP 70/95, fol. 126.

³ Cobham had been sent back to England for instructions in late October; he arrived in London on 7 November and was back in Vienna on 31 December 1567 (Hume 1896-99: I, 683, no. 450; Diemer 1969: 251). The fact that no copy of the letter has been found in the Vienna archives among the documents concerned with the marriage negotiations need not stupefy. This after all, was —at least, in theory— a private communication, and would have ended up among Maria’s papers.

decision had been taken: the Queen of England could not countenance the return of Papism in any form in her realm. In her letter, in fact, Elizabeth declares to be most indebted and willing to reciprocate Maria's tokens of esteem, as well as the very cordial treatment of her Ambassador, the Earl of Sussex. She goes as far as to ask the Empress to let her know how she can "oblige and delight" her, which points to the fact that their friendly relationship should continue beyond the end of the marriage negotiations.

If this may strike a personal note, one may observe that the letter is particularly insistent in addressing Maria as "Vuestra Majestad", as well as in the use of formal terms, such as, for example, "la carta que fue servida enviarme" or "señalados favores". Elizabeth's tone, in her three holograph letters to Maximilian, is quite dissimilar: while always respectful, it is never so deferent (see Bajetta 2014). This, together with the unresolved variants in the final salutation ("Hermana" / "Prima") suggests that someone else collaborated in penning this missive. Whether or not the missive in the State Papers was meant to send a message to the Spanish King as well as to his sister, one can certainly argue that Elizabeth's secretaries—who often played an important role in the shaping of her correspondence—collaborated in creating the "dramatic effect" of this letter. Elizabeth was always on a stage. Hers, however, was frequently not a monologue.

3. Elizabeth's Spanish letter to Maximilian II

This text is found in British Library, Cotton MS Nero B IX, fol. 116, a copy, dating most probably from the mid-1590s, in the hand of Thomas Windebank.⁴ The transcription below preserves the spelling and punctuation of the original and does not attempt to modernize or correct it unless where mistakes may hinder the understanding of the text. Brevigraphs and contractions (on which see Carlin [1999] 2003) have been expanded (in this case, superscripts have been silently lowered), and supplied letters have been italicised. The manuscript is dated "1567 | x^o Decembre./" And entitled "A Mynute [i.e. a copy of a draft] from the Queens *Maiestie* to the Empresse".

Seniora.

Henrique Cobham portador desta me ha hecho muy complida relation de lo *que vuestra Magestad*⁵ le encargo me dixesse de su parte. con lo qual y con la carta que fue seruida embiarme con el, me ha puesto *vuestra Magestad* en muy grande obligation de reconosser por todas las vias *que podiere*[.] la *merced* que en ello me hazer, sera mandar me en que la poder servir y complazer; Que puede *vuestra Magestad* creer lo hare con aquella voluntad y aficion que la razon requiere obligando me a ello allende de otros muchos respetos la honrra y señalados fauores que del Emperador y de *vuestra Magestad* ha receuido el Conde de Sussex. que por ser ello hecho por mi respeto no pudo yo dexar de tenerlo en la misma cuenta, que si a mi propria se hizieran y por *que* este portador podra dar a *vuestra Magestad* pa[r]ticula[r] cuenta. y assi se lo he mandado de todo lo de mas que de las cosas de por aca fuere seruida de entender[.] dexare por agora de dar mas pesadumbre a *vuestra Magestad*. Cuya *Serenisima* persona nuestro Señor guarde como dessea.

De Hampton Court a x de *decembre* de 1567.

De *vuestra Magestad* Buena Hermana
Prima

⁴ Cf. the text on fol. 115r-v, and Cotton MS Titus F XII, fols. 103-4, dated 1594. A watermark identical to the one visible here is also found in Cotton MS Julius E II, fol. 82, a missive to Ferdinando, Duke of Tuscany, dated 11 November 1596.

⁵ **Magestad**: a common and by no means erroneous form in sixteenth-century Spanish (cf. Carlin [1999] 2003: 79).

My Lady,

Henry Cobham,⁶ the bearer of this letter, has fully related what Your Majesty asked him to tell me on her part. This, together with the letter you deigned to send me through him, indeed compels me to return, in anything I can, the favour shown me. What you will be pleased to do for me, Your Majesty, is to let me know how I can oblige and delight you. This Your Majesty may believe I will do with all determination and affection, as it is required by reason: it is demanded, in fact —beyond the many tokens of your esteem— by the many other honours and notable favours which the Earl of Sussex⁷ has received from the Emperor and You. Since this was done out of respect for me, I cannot but consider it as if it had been done to my own person, as this bearer will explain to Your Majesty in detail. I have also entrusted him with all the other things which I have been pleased to understand here. I will cease, for now, to trouble Your Majesty, whose most serene person may our Lord protect according to His will.

From Hampton Court, the 10th of December 1567

Your Majesty's Good Sister
Cousin⁸

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⁶ **Cobham**: Henry Cobham (1538–1592), the English envoy.

⁷ **Sussex**: Thomas Radcliffe, Earl of Sussex (1526/7–1583), sent as special ambassador to Vienna.

⁸ **Sister / Cousin**: as sister-in-law of Philip II, and daughter of Henry VIII, Elizabeth could have used both terms indifferently. Both words were used in her correspondence with foreign rulers; she had, however, signed her first letter to Maximilian "Affectionatissima Sorella della Maesta Vostra", while "Sorella et Cugina" was used in her second and third missives (cf. Elizabeth I 2017: 21-62). One may want to remember that the latter bears the same date as the document printed here.

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