Queen Elizabeth
By Hayley Samela

Queen Elizabeth challenged society in the sixteenth century by not taking a husband and thereby ruling as England’s sole ruler. Throughout her reign, Queen Elizabeth had an enormous burden and responsibility to her people and country to secure a husband. She was pressured by Parliament and by her people to consider a marriage with a great leader of another country, and in return England’s borders would be secure from any future attack. This intended act would also secure the English throne in terms of succession. The common belief of women being thought of as weak and lesser creatures compared to men left doubt in many people’s minds as to how effective of a leader Elizabeth would be. However, Queen Elizabeth’s reign proved to the world that she was a strong and smart individual. Through her own speeches, it is clear that Elizabeth embraced her womanhood and used it to her advantage while also taking on the role of King, as England’s sovereign ruler by proclaiming that God has made her England’s ruler through Divine Right.

As England’s Protestant ruler, Queen Elizabeth was termed a “heretic” by Catholic rulers, but by looking at her speeches given to Parliament and to the Commons, Queen Elizabeth saw herself as “God’s Creature.” Queen Elizabeth insisted that God has rightfully made her England’s ruler, and in return she has chosen to serve a life devoted to God. In her first speech spoken to the lords, Elizabeth says,

“… Considering I am God’s creature, ordained to obey His appointment, I will thereto yield, desiring… that I may have assistance of His grace to be the minister of His heavenly will in this office now committed to me” (Elizabeth I 52).

Elizabeth may rule the people of England, but she is under God’s rule. Recognizing herself as God’s “creature,” she exists to serve and obey his commands. “His heavenly will” indicates to listeners of her speech that it is God who wishes her to be England’s ruler. So as God’s “creature,” Elizabeth mandates to her people that she is ruling because God ordains it, and it is with the help of God that she will rule: “…God hath made me to be a queen… and to be the mean under God to conserve you in a safety and preserve you from danger” (Elizabeth I 337). This passage from Elizabeth’s Golden
Speech makes it clear to the people of England that God has made her Queen, and it is through the will of God that she will defend her people. While some people may not accept their leader and therefore defy him or her, it is different in regards to God. To disobey and go against God would be to commit a terrible and unthinkable act. The incorporation of a highly respected religious figure, such as God in her speeches gives Queen Elizabeth a powerful source to draw support from.

As some people look to the Bible for God’s guidance, Elizabeth is able to act as God’s “mouthpiece” or “instrument to her people” in relaying his message. As God’s chosen ruler on Earth, and first and foremost his “creature,” Elizabeth also refers to herself as God’s “Instrument” in several speeches. By calling herself God’s “instrument,” she lets her people know that God has chosen her to carry out his will and commands. In Elizabeth’s Golden Speech she says,

“And as I am that person which still yet under God hath delivered you, so I trust by the almighty power of God that I shall be His instrument to preserve you from envy, peril, dishonor, shame, tyranny, and oppression…” (Elizabeth I 337).

It is through God’s power that Elizabeth is able to win the support of her people. If God has chosen Elizabeth as their ruler and his “instrument,” then God has chosen Elizabeth to protect and lead them. It is through God and his direct relationship with Elizabeth that England’s Queen insists that she has the right to rule. It is not Elizabeth that has proclaimed her right to rule, but rather it is God’s intended will for his chosen “creature” to lead the people of England, regardless of her womanly stature.

The status of women has always been debated and challenged upon, especially in regards to Queen Elizabeth in the sixteenth century. The view of women in the late 1500s was that they should be married, and therefore be protected by their husband. A woman’s role was to be a faithful wife, as well as to bear her husband’s children. Throughout Elizabeth’s life, she never took a husband, nor did she bear any children. The question on many people’s minds was who would continue the Tudor line if the Queen did not produce a successor. Elizabeth did not concern herself with who would be her successor. Instead she focused on more important matters, such as the advantages for herself, as well as the country, if she did not bind herself to a foreign ruler. In the meantime, to refute
arguments personally made against her gender, Elizabeth called upon God’s will. In her first speech made before Parliament concerning the issue of marriage, Elizabeth says,

“…Sith I first had consideration of myself to be born a servitor of almighty God, I happily chose this kind 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” (Elizabeth I 56).

Elizabeth chose a life served to God above all others and she is content and happy in being devoted to God instead of a man who she might call her husband. Along with letting it be known that she serves God above all others, she adds that God accepts and approves of her choice. If God approves of Elizabeth’s choice, then the people should follow in accordance with God’s views. In a response to a petition from the Commons that she marry, Elizabeth restates her position:

“… I have been ever persuaded that I was born by God to consider and, above all things, do those, which appertain unto His glory. And therefore it is that I have made choice of this kind of life, which is most free and agreeable for such human affairs as may tend to His service only” (Elizabeth I 59)

By not entering into a marriage, Elizabeth is free to do as she wishes, which in her response just given is for her to serve God in the best way possible. Since God has created her, Elizabeth feels that she owes it to God to serve him above all others, and especially before any mortal man. Despite all of her suitors and the pressure from her people to accept a marriage proposal, Queen Elizabeth chose to live a life of solitude. She may have rejected any notion of marriage, however, Queen Elizabeth did not reject her motherly duties to her “children,” the people of England.

As a result of not taking a husband and not bearing any children, Queen Elizabeth, the “Virgin Queen,” found a greater way to apply her maternal nature that ended up benefiting herself, as well as her people. In the same speech that Elizabeth gave to the Commons petition regarding the issue of marriage, Elizabeth says, “… If when I have expired my last breath, this may be inscribed upon my tomb: Here lies interred Elizabeth, a virgin pure until her death” (Elizabeth I 59). Queen Elizabeth used her highly praised virginity to emphasize a woman’s virtue and purity. This reputation of hers was used in her favor to gain the love, admiration, and respect of her people. Associated with the
“virgin Mary” who was Jesus’ mother after the Immaculate Conception, Elizabeth in the same way applied the same love to her people. While Elizabeth was a virgin who did not have any children of her own, she assumed the role of “mother” to her people in the same way that the virgin Mary became Jesus’ mother.

Queen Elizabeth ruled by the love of her people. She had a genuine respect and care towards them, and in return they grew to love her and proudly accept her as their ruler. The people of England were Elizabeth’s substitution for marriage and children. In her answer to the Commons petition that she marry in 1559, she said, “… that I have no children: for every one of you, and as many as are English, are my children and kinsfolks…” (Elizabeth I 59). It would be throughout her life that Queen Elizabeth would devote herself to her people. She tried to do everything that was in their best interest, such as by not conquering other lands without the people’s support or approval. Also, Queen Elizabeth’s love is evident whenever she addresses them in her speeches, such as in her infamous Armada Speech to the troops at Tilbury as “My loving people…” (Elizabeth I 325). The Queen’s love offered stability to the country. The country was secure in that they trusted their leader to rule by their love for her, and not by the Queen’s own personal ambitions or motivations.

As the role of mother entails, she is with her people, guiding them, such as when in battle, and she is very open about how much she cares for them: “And so I assure you all that though after my death you may have many stepdames, yet shall you never have any a more mother than I mean to be unto you all” (Elizabeth I 72). Queen Elizabeth embraced her role as mother to her people, knowing that this relationship kept her in power. Her people trusted her, and believed from her speeches that no harm would come to them if she ruled. In Queen Elizabeth’s Speech at the Closing of Parliament in 1593 she says how she has never put glory and ambition before the safety of her people and country:

“For in th’ ambition of glory I have never sought to enlarge territories of my land, nor thereby to advance you. If I have used my forces to keep the wars from you, I have thereby thought your safety the greater and your danger the less” (Elizabeth I 331).

Queen Elizabeth has always put her people first, which clearly shows how much she values their love. In many of her speeches Elizabeth thanks her loyal subjects and praises
their love and the faithfulness that they have for her. She holds her people’s love in the highest regard and attributes the success of her reign to them. In Elizabeth’s Golden Speech given in 1601, she says,

“There is no jewel, be it of never so rich a price, which I set before this jewel – I mean your loves. For I do more esteem it than treasure or riches, for that we know how to prize. But love and thanks I count unvaluable, and though God hath raised me high, yet this I count the glory of my crown: that I have reigned with your loves” (Elizabeth I 337)

The more Elizabeth came to love her people, the more they came to love her. Her love for the people as their mother justified her rule as a single woman. They felt secure in each other’s relationship, and so it can be said that while Elizabeth kept her people from peril, oppression, and invasion, they in return kept her in power. According to Susan C. Staub in her article, *My Throbbing Heart Shall Rock You Day and Night*, Elizabeth manipulated “motherhood” to serve her political agenda: “…Maternity provided a strategem to turn the biological reality of her womanhood to her advantage by transforming her anomalous political authority into a socially sanctioned nurturing maternal authority” (17). The relationship between Queen Elizabeth and her people led to her overall success as one of England’s most beloved rulers.

While Elizabeth was a motherly figure to her people, she also had to present herself as a powerful leader. As a smart and educated woman, Elizabeth realized that “her greatest political disadvantage lay in the lamentable fact of her gender” (Heisch 35). The reference to her two bodies, natural and political, is present in many of her speeches. In Queen Elizabeth’s first speech spoken to the lords, she points out that God has given her the strength of a King to enable her to rule:

“And as I am but one body naturally to be considered, though by His permission a body politic to govern… so I shall desire you all, my lords, to be assistant to me, that I with my ruling and you with your service may make a good account to almighty God and leave some comfort to our posterity in Earth” (Elizabeth I 52)
Queen Elizabeth does not deny that she is a woman, or that women do have their faults, however, she says that she is different. Elizabeth states what all men believed and then made it known to everyone that “God had made an exception in her case,” (Heisch 35) therefore attributing her right to rule as a claim of Divine Right. God has made her different and given her the abilities of a Prince. In Queen Elizabeth’s speech at the closing of Parliament, she says,

“I acknowledge my womanhood and weakness in that respect, but it hath not been to obtain or doubt how to keep the things so obtained that hath withheld me from these attempts; only my mind was… only contented to reign over my own and to rule as a just prince” (Elizabeth I 328).

Similar to how Queen Elizabeth compared herself to be the best mother or stepdame England will ever have in her speech to the Commons’ Petition that she marry in 1563, she does the same for her title as “Prince.” She may not measure up to other princes who may exhibit masculine aspects such as nobleness, victory, fortitude and wisdom. However, she notes that she exceeds all other princes in her love, care, sincerity, and justice. Elizabeth therefore ends her speech at the closing of Parliament in 1593 by saying, “I will compare with any prince that ever you have or ever shall have” (Elizabeth I 328). Queen Elizabeth saw herself as equal, if not better, to any other male ruler. While Elizabeth used her gender to relate as a mother to her people, she did not let her gender get in the way of politics. According to Louis Montrose in The Gendering of Authority in the Public Speeches of Elizabeth I by Mary Beth Rose, he says “Elizabeth perpetuates her maidenhood in a cult of virginity; transfers her wifely duties from the household to the state; and invests her maternity in her political rather than in her natural body,” (1077). Elizabeth used her gender to her advantage as opposed to being restricted by the limitations society imposed on women. She assumes the motherly role of nurturer and caretaker to her people, while also at the same time letting others perceive her as a strong and independent minded woman unable to be challenged by men.

Elizabeth’s famous Armada Speech to the troops at Tilbury in 1588 is one of the best-known examples in which she makes many references to her political body, as well
as her natural one. England is on the brink of war with Spain, and as a woman she does not have the means to physically fight or lead her people into battle. All she can do is portray herself as their protector through a masculine dominated speech. In her speech she acknowledges her gender and the weaknesses that come with it, however, she also points out that she is unique in her God-given capabilities: “I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a King and of a King of England too” (Elizabeth I 325). In *The Gendering of Authority in the Public Speeches of Elizabeth I* by Mary Beth Rose, she writes, “Her rhetorical technique involves appeasing widespread fears about female rule by adhering to conventions that assert the inferiority of the female gender only to supersede those conventions… Elizabeth does indeed frequently disarm her subjects’ insecurities about female rule by inscribing herself in the prestige of male heroism and kingship” (1079)

Elizabeth gives her speech to the troops as a woman, but she takes on the voice of a strong, powerful, and heroic man. She reassures her kingdom through the usage of heroic language of self-sacrifice, which is the willingness to die: “…being resolved in the midst and heat of the battle to live and die amongst you all, to lay down for my God and for my kingdom and for my people mine honor and my blood even in the dust” (Elizabeth I 325). This heroism is common of male rulers and men in general since they are the ones who fought battles in the sixteenth century. Elizabeth’s male-like heroism defied the traditional role of women, yet she still holds onto her maternal figure for most mothers would do anything for their children, even if it meant giving up their own life. Queen Elizabeth’s love for her people is evident throughout this entire speech. Self-sacrifice is a heroic trait that Elizabeth portrays in her political body, as well as in her natural body. As a woman, Elizabeth takes a heroic trait and uses it to coincide with her maternal instincts of protecting and defending her people and country.

Queen Elizabeth may have only been a woman, but she ruled her country as well as any King would. The success that resulted from Elizabeth’s reign was unexpected. Many people underestimated their new Queen for fear that her reign would be just as disastrous as their former Queen, Elizabeth’s sister Mary. The people of England were insecure and frightened of having another female ruler, especially one who was not Catholic and who did not take a husband. Queen Elizabeth used her wit and intelligence
when it came to marriage. She used her speeches to the Commons and to Parliament to put off the idea of marriage, telling them she chose to serve a life devoted to God and to her people. Throughout this, Elizabeth used her virginity as a prized virtue. It was her virginity that she wished to devote to God, and as a result of that the people of England came to love her even more. As a virgin, Elizabeth took on the maternal role of mother to her people. She truly and genuinely cared for them and they in return loved her.

As England’s “mother,” Elizabeth kept her country from harm and instead wished nothing but the best for her children’s well being. This is not to say that when opposition did present itself Elizabeth cowered away. In fact, Elizabeth had two bodies, political and natural, that she made use of in many of her speeches. Her political body gave her the power of a man. It made her equal, if not superior; to other rulers for Elizabeth also claimed in her speeches that it was by God’s will that she became England’s ruler. Elizabeth used her divine right to rule against those who did not support her. As God’s chosen one, Elizabeth saw herself as different from other women. Instead of being seen as the typical weak and feeble woman, Elizabeth in many of her speeches claimed that God has chosen her, his “creature;” to carry out his will on Earth. According to Allison Heisch’s article Queen Elizabeth I: Parliamentary Rhetoric and the Exercise of Power, “The effect of her comfortable words was to reassure her people of those things ultimately most important to them: her care for them, her faith in them, and her will to rule,” (55). It is evident from Queen Elizabeth’s reign that she made excellent use of rhetoric in her speeches. It was through her speeches that her love, virginity, devotion, and two bodies were made apparent to her people.

Queen Elizabeth’s reign from 1558 - 1603 is known today as the Elizabethan era, a time of prosperity and progress. England flourished with the advancements of theater, literature, and new discoveries from abroad. Conquering the New World and defeating the Spanish Armada helped to secure England’s stability, as well as its reputation among other large countries that once posed as a threat. Had Elizabeth not been a free and independent ruler not bound by marriage, it is questionable whether or not England would have become as prosperous as it did during the Elizabethan era.