Chapter 5

Diplomacy and Correspondency: Elizabeth’s Reported Speech

Lost, is it, buried? One more missing piece?
But nothing’s lost. Or else: all is translation
And every bit of us is lost in it
(Or found . . .)

James Merrill, “Lost in Translation”

No Desire to Marry

Shortly after being crowned queen of England in January 1559, Elizabeth began discussing her first serious marriage prospect, King Philip II of Spain, her sister Mary’s widowed husband. Elizabeth discussed the possibility with Philip’s trusted advisor and close friend Don Gomez Suarex de Figueroa, Count de Feria. Feria had accompanied King Philip to England for his marriage to Elizabeth’s sister, Queen Mary, in 1554, and made England his home when he married one of Mary’s maids of honor. Feria was, therefore, on location when Mary died in November 1558, and he stayed on to serve as the Spanish ambassador to the new regime.

For the first four months of Elizabeth’s reign, Feria and Philip exchanged frequent letters discussing the pros and cons of marriage to the new English queen, but the courtship floundered almost as soon as it began for a number of reasons. First of all, Elizabeth was caught up in her new responsibilities and reluctant to consider marriage until she had a chance to establish her authority as queen regnant. Second, Philip pursued the possibility only half-heartedly out of a sense of religious duty, thinking it might deter the Protestant reformers who were gathering their forces to reinstitute the Edwardian, reformed Church of England. Third, Feria’s close ties to Mary and Philip and to Roman Catholicism, combined with his irascible temper and barely disguised scorn for the new English regime, made it difficult for him to carry out his ambassadorial duties, “for truly they run away from me as if I were the devil.”

The negotiations with Philip came to an end in May when Elizabeth told Feria, who related the conversation in a letter to Philip, that the marriage was impossible because of “the impediment she discovered in the fact of your Majesty having married her sister, and after that she denied
Henry VIII’s first marriage to Catherine of Aragon was annulled by the newly created English Protestant church on the grounds that Catherine was his brother Arthur’s widow. Consequently, Elizabeth could not marry her own deceased sister’s widower without rejecting the legal grounds for her parents’ marriage and thereby undermining her own legitimacy and right to the throne.

Surely, that would have been explanation enough for terminating the courtship, but Elizabeth proceeded to present a number of additional reasons, religious, political, and personal. Philip had said he would marry Elizabeth only if she converted to Roman Catholicism, so Elizabeth told Feria “she could not marry your Majesty as she was a heretic.” Moreover, she explained, her “people did not wish her to marry a foreigner.” In addition, “several persons had told her that your Majesty would come here and then go off to Spain directly,” which meant that he could not offer the conjugal intimacy that might induce Elizabeth to give up her unmarried state. Under the circumstances, Elizabeth said she “had no desire to marry, as she had intimated from the first day.”

Most scholars have taken Elizabeth’s declaration that “she had no desire to marry” to mean that she had already “from the first day” defined herself as the Virgin Queen, but that is not what her remarks to Feria (and subsequent ambassadors) implied any more than it is what her first parliamentary speech declared. In context, Elizabeth’s words suggested that she had changed her mind because Philip’s lackluster courtship had failed to make her “desire to marry” him, which is virtually the same formulation Elizabeth used when she told parliament that she would only marry a suitor who aroused her “love” and “liking.” When speaking publicly to parliament, Elizabeth was extremely discrete, lest by speaking too openly or emphatically about her own personal “desire” she mar her reputation as an unmarried woman and undermine her authority as monarch. When speaking privately to the Spanish ambassador, Elizabeth was again careful to demonstrate her political judgment and protect her maidenly reputation. Feria discerned her meaning nonetheless, for he reported she was not at all pleased that Philip had failed to woo her with the fervor she might have wished.

Although she could not marry him, Elizabeth was eager to maintain Philip’s friendship in order to deter a Spanish attack on England—an attack that materialized in the 1588 Spanish Armada. Furthermore, Philip’s protection might ward off military threats from France and Scotland. Philip was also in a position to help broker a politically desirable (though religiously problematic) marriage with one of his Hapsburg cousins, the archdukes Ferdinand and Charles, sons of the Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand I. For these reasons, it was important for Elizabeth both to provide Philip with a face-saving excuse for the failure of his courtship and to clarify her own thoughts about marriage in general.

Consequently, Elizabeth told Feria and Philip what she had already told parliament. She had no immediate desire to marry, but she might nonetheless be swayed by a suitor who wooed her more seriously and convincingly