Elizabeth Pursued and Pursuing: The Valois Marriage Stakes

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The story of Elizabeth's marriage stakes is generally well known, but perhaps some of the details are not; I think of those surrounding the approaches made by France to Elizabeth, and Elizabeth's responses to France. The language used in the negotiations is of particular interest; looking at what was said by the principal figures one cannot help but feel, at times, to be a spectator at a play. Their words are revelatory of their specific characters – the blunt, the worldly-wise, the diplomatic, the shrewd, the cunning, the naive. Shakespeare would need but little labour to work them onto his stage. Indeed, the crafted functionality of this language makes one feel that these historical personages perceived *themselves* to be actors on a stage with specific dramatic roles to serve. Perhaps what I have in mind is T.S. Eliot's notion of "unified sensibility", extended from the realm of drama and poetry into that of everyday affairs. For in the various excerpts from the state papers consulted by Edith Sichel, Maria Perry and Josephine Ross which I use in this essay we will see that "feeling", to refer to Eliot's term, has not become dissociated from intellect.[1] This language is an entertainment in its own right, reason enough to present the subject to the reader, perhaps.

I place my overview of such heightened language at the centre of certain of Elizabeth's courtships, however, not only because of this, not only because of her reliance on verbal reports and intricate negotiations, and not only because of her psychological predisposition as the confirmed virgin who is

[1] T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1951), pp. 287–88.

nevertheless passionate and sensual, the abstainer who must absorb all she can of earthly satisfaction through the more refined senses, as if she were a figure from Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano*.[2] At the core of the verbal play, with its implications and undercurrents, Elizabeth's principal motivating force was political. While there is no doubt she enjoyed the play of courtship, it was also "play" in another sense, being unreal, a fabrication, or at least a front for political manipulation. Such double-dealing had its own attraction, where, as I hope to show in what follows, heightened language usage, eroticism and politics contributed each to the other, and where questions of morality might justifiably, in the sovereign's mind, take second place to political expediency, a fact which casts light, for example, on Elizabeth's policy of simultaneous religious persecution at home and tolerance abroad in her foreign marriage negotiations.[3]

Elizabeth was considered eligible from the start, despite the dubious status attached to both her and Mary because of Henry VIII's ceaseless spousal manoeuvrings. She was third in line to the throne after Edward and Mary, and was even in her teens a desirable choice among princes and nobles in search of fortune and power.[4] Were we to consider a timeline of Elizabeth's

[2] Balthazar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. Thomas Hoby (London: Everyman, 1974). I have in mind Bembo's words concerning the wise man's response to the beauty of a woman: 'if they be inflamed with beautie, and to it bend their coveting, guided by reasonable choice, they bee not deceived, and possesse beautie perfectly . . . with the bridle of reason [they] restraine the ill disposition of sense . . . ' (p. 306).

[3] I hold that Elizabeth was indeed the mistress of her political circumstances, and this due to her inherent nature, despite the contrary case argued by Susan Doran, *Monarchy and Matrimony: The Courtships of Elizabeth I* (New York: Routledge, 1996). Doran writes: 'in practically all of her many courtships Elizabeth was straightforward and direct with those who wooed her, so much so that on several notable occasions Cecil intervened to advise a more cautious and evasive approach' (p. 217). As we shall see, my interpretation of the various verbal interchanges offered below is somewhat different.

[4] Over the years these were numerous; even the illegitimate son of James V, the Protestant James Stuart, was in 1559 considered a suitable match. See A. McLaren, 'The Quest for a King: Gender, Marriage, and Succession in Elizabethan England', *Journal of British Studies*, 41 (2002): 259–90, p. 260.

suitors, we would see that, like a graph, it rises from a single point in her thirteenth year, peaks in 1559, the year of her coronation (some ten to twelve proposals were made in October of that year),[5] and sinks back to a single point twenty-two years later, when she is in her post-menopausal forty-eighth year. For almost four decades, then, she was a sought-after marriage partner, and enjoyed being so, whatever her political motives for prevarication.[6] The motives were serious enough. As Josephine Ross summarises the matter, Elizabeth had to walk a fine line between France and Spain, between the Valois and the Habsburgs, and all the collateral issues, events and groupings attending their two camps.[7] So, like some Penelope at her loom, she kept weaving and then unpicking the thread on which the variously constituted hopes of her suitors depended. I want to focus on the parts played by four of the French royalty in this drama of courtship, parts which involve in particular the final sixteen years of the imagined timeline.

Let me begin by looking at the language used by one of those unsung heroes of the royal matrimonial stakes, who had to combine the sweet articulacy of the poet with the sound commonsensical utterances of the statesman, the pliable diplomacy of the ambassador with the stiff but just wisdom of the patriarch; he who was lover by proxy, but needs must be brother by inclination: the royal envoy. Here are the words of Sir Thomas Smith, communicating in exasperated confidence with Minister Cecil

[5] Maria Perry, *Elizabeth I: The Word of a Prince: A Life from Contemporary Documents* (London: Folio Society, 1990), p. 151.

[6] Carole Levin, *'The Heart and Stomach of a King': Elizabeth I and the Politics of Sexual Power* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), p. 39. See also Susan Doran, 'Religion and Politics at the Court of Elizabeth I: The Habsburg Marriage Negotiations of 1559–1567', *English Historical Review* 104 (1989): 908–26, where it is pointed out that Sir Thomas Smith's book opposing a foreign match for Elizabeth, *Dialogue on the Queen's Marriage* (1560), was dominated by 'political not religious considerations' (p. 911).

[7] Josephine Ross, *The Men Who Would Be King: Suitors to Queen Elizabeth I* (London: Phoenix, 2005), p. 193.

concerning the would-be ally of the English, the Prince de Condé, brother of the great Huguenot Commander, Admiral Coligny:

> Tell me your wishes . . . without talking Greek and without the ambiguities of an oracle of Nostradamus. I have only a dense kind of mind and cannot guess riddles. The Prince de Condé is re-established in full authority; but those who are most zealous for religion have become offended with him. His indifference and coldness about sacred things awaken their distrust. And then he has taken to going wild over women.[8]

Smith's language here is typical of what was said behind closed doors on both sides of the Channel concerning the very people with whom the opposite tone had to be used when there was a need for flattering unction, even though, as we shall see, Smith tended to remain true to character before and behind closed doors. What is fascinating is the way Smith's language (the spelling is modernised by Sichel) conveys his down-to-earth Englishness; he becomes thereby a caricature (almost) of an honest creature of the queen and state, grumbling because he has to negotiate with unpredictable foreigners.

One of the other characters in the drama playing out before us is the Queen Mother of France, Catherine de' Medici, and various of her own utterances have also been preserved in archival papers.[9] Historians often present her as a she-Machiavelli, but she had a more complex mind than such a label, strictly applied, allows. Consider her observations on a dance where

[8] Edith Sichel, *The Later Years of Catherine de' Medici* (London: Archibald Constable & Co Ltd, 1908), p. 58. Sichel draws extensively on the *Archives Curieuses de l'Histoire de France* and the *Revue Rétrospective, ou Bibiliothèque Historique*. Ross draws on, for example, SP Domestic 1, 10, 11, 12 and SP Foreign 70. She also draws on the *Burghley State Papers*, ed. S. Haynes (London, 1740) and ed. W. Murdin (London, 1740).

[9] My quoted material is drawn largely from Sichel, but various archival materials of the period have been electronically transcribed and are available on the internet, including the dispatches of La Mothe-Fénélon. A useful central site with an effective search engine is *Internet Archive* at http://www.archive.org/index.php.

Catholics and Protestants mingled peacefully; the recipient of her letter was one of the Guise women, which makes me believe that Catherine was covertly appealing to that influential and most resolute of Catholic families, through the good offices of her sex, for religious toleration:

> Everybody dances together, Huguenots, Papists and all, so smoothly that it is impossible to believe that they are as they are. If God willed that they were as wise elsewhere as they are here, we should at last be at rest.[10]

She was an equivocator, no doubt, but she had even more need than Elizabeth to be so. If Elizabeth in her courtship manoeuvrings had to maintain a balance among various political forces it was for the sake of England and herself (almost a single entity in her mind). Catherine had to think of France, herself, and each offspring of both sexes, concerning the same political forces.

She had first approached Elizabeth through Sir Thomas Smith in 1564, on behalf of her son, Charles IX of France, then fourteen years old.[11] Edith Sichel gives Elizabeth's age as twenty-five, but she was, in fact, in her thirty-first year.[12] Sichel then highlights the false figure of "some" ten years' difference in age between Elizabeth and the king, not the actual sixteen, as if accepting the diplomatically sweetened figure in the original documentation at face value. Catherine herself does not, as far as I can tell, and begins to respond to Smith's considered objections to the marriage by taking the offensive: 'The first objection you have urged is the age of my son. But if the Queen Elizabeth will put up with it, I will put up with the age

[10] Sichel, *The Later Years of Catherine de' Medici*, p. 56.

[11] Catherine, in approaching England, showed that she had her eyes on two possible futures for France: a traditional, Catholic one; and a liberal, latitudinarian one, which would tolerate all religious persuasions. See A.M.F. Robinson, 'Queen Elizabeth and the Valois Princes', *The English Historical Review*, 2 (1887): 40–77, p.70.

[12] Sichel, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

of the Queen.'[13] Was she referring to the carefully concealed six years? It is not clear. But this firm tilting over matters of age (again, Shakespearean in quality) can be part of a woman's martial stock, and perhaps Catherine thereby shows her opponent how little impressed she is with the usual niceties displayed in such proceedings. Her young son, for his part, reveals his character in all its youthful naïveté when in place of her sophisticated snideness he underlines her sentiments (as he thinks) thus: 'I should be very glad if your mistress would be as well pleased with my age, as I am well pleased with hers.' Smith, in reporting this exchange, shows how attuned his ear is to variations in sense, for all his self-deprecating pleas about having a 'dense kind of mind'; but the subtle courtier can also reveal his profound *savoir-faire* in his response to the boy: 'If you were but three or four years older, if you had but seen the Queen, and if you were really in love with her, I should not be astonished at this haste.' When Charles objected that he indeed loved Elizabeth, Smith responded: 'At your age, Sire, none knoweth what love is; soon you will pass by that place, for every man passeth thereby, be he peasant or prince. Yet it is surely the maddest thing on earth, the most importunate, and that which hath least respect.' 'His love is no mad affection,' said an indignant Catherine. 'That I acknowledge,' replied Smith, 'but for that a love of such nature must rest upon grave reasons, and worthy and sober considerations, we must not go forward in this enterprise except upon ripe reflection.'[14]

Charles's suit was, "upon ripe reflection", taken seriously by Elizabeth and her councillors, but was eventually abandoned in the face of numerous obstacles.[15] A more attractive contender as far as Elizabeth was concerned

[13] Sichel, *The Later Years of Catherine de' Medici*, p. 7.

[14] *Ibid*., p. 58.

[15] Religion and inheritance posed problems. Concerning the latter, Robinson writes: 'if one child alone were born to inherit both kingdoms, it was arranged that the seat of rule must be in France, and England governed by a viceroy. This was a hard prospect for English pride to face' ('Queen Elizabeth and the Valois Princes', p. 44).

was Catherine's second son, the Duke of Anjou, Henri, who was brought into the lists much later, when Elizabeth was in her thirty-ninth year. The apple of his mother's eye, he might have been expected, but was not so inclined, to listen to her in the matter of marriage with Elizabeth.[16] Anjou was considered by those with influence, on both sides of the Channel, as a fitting candidate. Cecil, Walsingham and Leicester, for instance, were sincere in their promotion of his match with Elizabeth, as was Chatillon in France.[17] Of course all were aware of the risks involved (the English people's responses to a French Catholic king being chief among them),[18] but if reasonable conditions could be agreed upon for all concerned, and if as a result of the union Elizabeth bore an heir to the throne, the risks would have been worth it.

We have seen Thomas Smith's solid ambassadorial efforts for queen and country; let us now look at a French envoy at work. He is La Mothe-Fénélon, and it was Leicester, Robert Dudley himself, Elizabeth's favourite, who introduced him to the Queen. La Mothe was surely flattered to find the Queen, in his words, 'all wreathed in smiles and more richly decked than usual'. She told him she regretted the fact that she had not married early in life, and the gallant La Mothe, recognising his cue, suggested she consider the Duke of Anjou, 'the most accomplished man there was to marry'.[19] She was eighteen years this Prince's senior, but a young male, in this case, was more pleasurable for Elizabeth to contemplate than in the case of the rather puny

[16] France was intent on a relationship with England, as we gather from Catherine's perseverance. Elizabeth's acceptance of a French husband might have changed the state of affairs in Europe dramatically, as Robinson notes (*ibid*., p. 51).

[17] Sichel, *The Later Years of Catherine de' Medici*, p. 92. According to Sichel, Coligny fervently desired an English match, though with Henri de Navarre (p. 103). Robinson, however, writes of the proposed marriage to Anjou, 'It would prove [for Coligny] a solid bond more durable than league or amity', and so be invaluable in the struggle in the Netherlands (*art. cit.*, p. 50).

[18] Perry, *Elizabeth I: The Word of a Prince*, p. 238.

[19] Sichel, *op. cit*., p. 93.

Charles. Anjou's military prestige, for one thing, excited her;[20] he had been the nominal victor at Jarnac and Moncontour.[21] Apart from Anjou's military triumphs, the catalogue of his physical perfections was impressive; he was said to be handsome and graceful. And much was made, by all ambassadors, of his *hands*. We will return to this singular attraction presently. According to Josephine Ross, Elizabeth derived as much satisfaction as she could from the game of courtship, knowing she would never physically give herself to any man.[22] Thus she prolonged the pleasures of courtship to obtain her sublimated sensual rewards, the internalised gratification in part inspired by the language of the envoys, the proxy wooers, with all their outright praise and and all their socio-sexual innuendos.

The prolonging of courtship rituals sometimes required coyness. For example, Elizabeth said to La Mothe, according to his verbatim report (wherein her strategy appears blatant enough), that surely 'the Duke made for higher game'. After all, she was 'very old', and except for the fact that she wished to leave an heir, she should 'blush even to mention a husband', for 'already she counted among those who are desired for their kingdoms, not for their persons'.[23] Her words, however, also reveal that she wants the other party to appreciate her precise understanding of the situation. Still, we should not think that political shrewdness invariably outweighed her love of pleasure or the vanity of her nature. The game she played could accommodate all three – politics, pleasure and vanity; so while La Mothe excitedly reported that his courting caused London to ring with news 'of

[20] Sichel, *The Later Years of Catherine de' Medici*, p. 93.

[21] He was victor over the Huguenots, be it noted; did perceived masculine robustness count more than religious persuasion in Elizabeth's eyes? At least at the highest levels of sixteenth century society there is a surprising fluidity of temporal and spiritual allegiance, not simply answerable to political expediency. After the defeat of the Spanish Armada even Pope Sixtus showed the greatest admiration for the heroic Sir Francis Drake. See J.E. Neale, *Elizabeth I* (London: Folio Society, 2005), p. 292.

[22] Ross, *The Men Who Would Be King*, p. 122.

[23] Sichel, *loc. cit.*

the French marriage', Elizabeth, enjoying the stir created by her charms, was also buying political time. The longer she could draw out her negotiations with various suitors, the more time she could buy, the more speculation she could prompt, and the more influence she could wield on the world stage; she thus made herself at once a rare commodity and a potentially accessible key of great strategic importance in European politics.[24]

La Mothe returned for a second interview. Now he underscored the desirability of a French husband by pointing to the marital bliss of the recently betrothed Charles IX and his wife. Elizabeth could wield as sharp a weapon as Catherine when it came to snideness: 'I confess', she said, 'that the thought of Madame d'Etampes and of Madame de Valentinois [referring to famous royal mistresses of the time] makes me feel a trifle anxious – I wish to be loved as well as honoured.' Judging from his feeble response, La Mothe was taken aback. The Duke, Prince Henri, was 'both loving and loveable', he said. Perhaps the apparent camaraderie of the previous interview had not prepared him for such a forthright attack on French morals. After all, more could be said, and was said, across the Channel, of Elizabeth and Robert Dudley. The interview was adjourned, and Elizabeth met with her Council to discuss the marriage. One of her Councillors, of the same blunt ilk as Smith, pointed out that she was too old for the Duke. Now it was Elizabeth's turn to be upset by the merciless application of a dose of reality. Her words have been preserved: 'What mean you by that, sir? Am I not still of an age to please?'[25] Was there a danger that her countrymen might so annoy her as to push her into the

[24] More pressingly, the conspiracies of Ridolfi and Norfolk had made Elizabeth very aware of the precariousness of her position. Her strategies may have depended on mere game-playing, but this much, according to Robinson, was actual: 'In the hope of a child, Elizabeth saw her best defence from Mary Stuart; in becoming the wife of catholic Anjou, her safest protection against a catholic assassin' ('Queen Elizabeth and the Valois Princes', p. 51).

[25] Sichel, *loc..cit.*

arms of the French against her own better judgement? No; as in the case of Charles, there were other, far more formidable obstacles than the age gap. And the Duke of Anjou himself refused to continue with the offer. Guillaume de Tavannes, the royalist historian, recorded the Duke's most undiplomatic response, which, thankfully, never reached Elizabeth's ears: 'The Queen of England's age and her ugliness . . . freeze M. d'Anjou'.[26] Indeed, M. d'Anjou had fallen in love with one Renée de Châteauneuf and wanted to live with her (apparently; though Ross claims he was homosexual).[27] Such facts were hardly fit for official purposes, so Catherine turned the *mauvais moeurs* weapon on the English: 'He doth not wish to marry her, even if she be willing, for he hath too often heard ill reports about her honour and hath read many letters on the subject from every ambassador that hath been in England. He feareth that he would suffer dishonour and lose all the reputation he hath gained.'[28]

Elizabeth, surprisingly, took this criticism in her stride; she knew, it may be, she could prove the allegations baseless if matters should ever come to a head. It was now her turn to send an envoy to Paris, and Lord Buckhurst was her man.[29] Her ostensible reason was to offer formal congratulations to Charles IX upon his marriage; in reality, she wanted Buckhurst to sound Catherine further on the Anjou question. As a good tourist might, Buckhurst was walking in the Tuileries Gardens, when chance (or the Queen Mother's spies) placed Catherine in his path. She told him that she had a deep affection for Elizabeth; she next rather pointedly remarked that Elizabeth certainly would not 'make game of Anjou as she had done of her other suitors', so hoping to obtain, it seems to me, a guarantee. Wisely, Buckhurst gave her no direct answer. He did emphasise

[26] Sichel, *The Later Years of Catherine de' Medici*, p. 93.

[27] Ross, *The Men Who Would Be King*, p. 138.

[28] Sichel, *loc. cit*.

[29] Sichel, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

that Elizabeth 'was resolved to marry out of England and only [to] a Prince of her own rank'. The tone of Catherine's reply is difficult to determine, though Buckhurst took her words as a cue. She said: 'it was not for women to seek out men, and so she would say no more'. Was she offended by Elizabeth's independent attitude, by her not guaranteeing to fix on Anjou? But if she would say no more, the artfully adaptable Buckhurst slipped into her hands Elizabeth's portrait, as if to signal another means of communicating.[30]

Indeed, so pleased was Catherine by this portrait that not long after she sent Elizabeth two pictures of Anjou by Clouet, one a portrait, the other full-length. Elizabeth was in turn well pleased, and when La Mothe-Fénélon next visited her one of the pictures was in her hand. 'This is only a chalk drawing,' she remarked, 'and rather smudged with charcoal. But there is about the whole countenance a great air of true dignity and of a serious maturity the which pleases me infinitely; for in sooth I do not desire to be led to Church by a child.' The ambassador, anticipating Shakespeare's Cleopatra by a few decades, knew his business: 'Age has no hold upon you, Madam', was his prompt response. Pictures of the handsome Anjou tended to make a deep impression, but, claimed his friends, the pictures were nothing compared with the living man. 'It is his misfortune', wrote one friend to Walsingham, knowing that these words would be conveyed to Elizabeth, 'that his portraits do not do him justice. Janet [Clouet] himself

[30] Catherine's perseverance indeed seems extraordinary. At this time, however, she was prejudiced against Spain because of the 'sudden and mysterious death' of her daughter, Elisabeth, Phillip's third wife (Robinson, 'Queen Elizabeth and the Valois Princes', p. 50). Alliance with England was particularly attractive, as it would have laid the foundation for an extensive latitudinarian league. In the summer of 1572, before the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre, Charles IX was even considering an anti-Spanish league proposed by the Venetians and Turks. Robinson blames Elizabeth for the massacre; when it seemed clear that she was to pull her troops out of the Netherlands, Catherine became convinced that the cause of Protestantism was doomed, and so precipitated the tragic events by conspiring to assassinate Coligny (*ibid.*, pp. 55–57).

has not succeeded in depicting that certain something which nature has given him. His eyes, that gracious turn of the mouth when he speaks, that sweetness which wins all who approach him, cannot be reproduced by pen or pencil.' True to a by now well-established formula, he singles out the Prince's *hand*: 'His hand is so beautiful that if it were turned [on a potter's wheel] it could not be more perfectly modelled.' Such a hand so moves the Prince's promoter that its description effortlessly segues into exclamations regarding the love he has inspired: 'Do not ask me whether he has inspired the passion of love! He has conquered wherever he has cast his eyes.' Walsingham had observed the Prince in the flesh, and countered this glowing description with the following: 'The Duke is rather sallow, his bodie is very good shape, his legs long and thin, but reasonably well proportioned. And yet . . . I do not find him so well coloured as when I was last there.' But Elizabeth, ever conscious of her own wardrobe, needs must also linger over the Venetian ambassador's account: 'The Duke is covered with perfumes and essences. He wears a double row of rings, and pendants at his ears, and spends vast sums on shirts and clothes.'[31]

La Mothe-Fénélon had by now succeeded in coaxing Elizabeth to write to the reluctant Anjou in her own hand. In her letter she maintains the necessary opacity and ambiguity of one who is not committed but who would at the same time capitalise all she can on the maidenly image she has of herself, so well-buttressed by La Mothe's honeyed tongue: 'Monsieur . . . [t]he idea which, as I hear, you have conceived of my poor charms, undeserving though they be, gives me hope that the law of our lives will be determined by the force of things more excellent than aught that I have yet felt in my breast'. And she takes special pains to ask the owner of the world's most beautiful hand whether 'any one had spoken to him about the beauty of her foot and arm'.[32] She was enraged when a report was spread in Paris a

[31] Sichel, *The Later Years of Catherine de' Medici*, p. 95.

[32] *Ibidem.*

short while later that one of her legs suffered from an incurable sore. (This, some French joker urged, would be a good pretext for Anjou to give her a "French potion" that would make him a widower so that he could then marry the Queen of Scots and become absolute ruler of the isle.) To be sure, so angered was Elizabeth when she heard the rumour about her leg that, for a while, she began to talk openly of reconciliation with Spain.[33] When she had regained her composure she told La Mothe that she was 'sorry that he had not seen her dance at the Marquis of Northampton's ball, which would have enabled him to assure the Duke that he ran no risk of marrying a cripple'.[34]

Anjou, with initial tongue-in-cheek gallantry, remained adamant in his refusal: 'The Queen was the rarest creature that was in Europe these five hundred years', he wrote, but he did not want to marry her. He underlined his insincerity by playing his mother's *mauvais moeurs* card (trumping both women at once): he claimed that the stories about Elizabeth and Leicester shocked him. Indeed, these stories were fair game for the French court; the wiseacres had their day. Even Tavannes, the royalist historian, could write: 'If [the Duke] was to marry "Millort Robert's mistress" had he not better return the compliment and marry [My Lord Robert] to Mademoiselle de Châteauneuf?' And what would become of Anjou's religion? One of the court buffoons suggested that the Duke's religion *was* Mademoiselle de Châteauneuf. Anjou was actually a devout Catholic; too devout as far as his mother was concerned. She spoke anxiously of this to Sir Thomas Smith:

> If he did not hear Mass often, he would look upon himself as damned. He has grown so devout that he hears it two and three times a day. And he observes all the fasts so scrupulously that his

[33] This was for many years one of her deeper political considerations.

[34] Sichel, *loc. cit.*

> face has grown pale from the strain. I would far rather see him a Huguenot than watch him thus endanger his health.[35]

The Italian mother in Catherine seems to shoulder out the Catholic queen.

Not long afterwards, Anjou was elected King of Poland; soon after that Charles IX died and Anjou returned to France as King Henri III. But Catherine had not abandoned her English hopes. She had a final son to offer to Elizabeth, and he was in certain respects the most unlikely. The Duke of Alençon (who, confusingly, inherited the dukedom of Anjou after his brother became king)[36] was not a very prepossessing figure: he was slight, his nose was large, and his features had been blighted by smallpox. And yet he, the brother furthest from Elizabeth in age, was to prove the most enduring and determined, and was very nearly successful in his wooing of Elizabeth. He was the only one to pay her court in person; to her surprise she really liked him; he could flatter her and provide her with the verbal titillation on which she thrived. 'My Frog' she called him;[37] for his part he really seemed to like her. In a moment of abandonment in 1581 she gave her oral consent to his proposal, the only time she had ever done so with any of her numerous suitors, but then on panicked reflection withdrew the offer.[38] He left her court in confusion for an eventually disastrous military career in the Netherlands, whence he retreated to die of a fever at his home castle of Château-Thierry in 1584.[39] Elizabeth condoled with Catherine; we might think that her sincerity was evident in the pains she took in doing so. Need she have taken such pains? Surely the political game was long since over? Unfortunately, this was not the case. Although Elizabeth had been so desirous of placating the Spanish that she had burned

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[35] Sichel, *The Later Years of Catherine de' Medici*, p. 96.

[36] Neale, *Elizabeth I*, p. 385.

[37] *Ibid.*, p. 233.

[38] Ross, *The Men Who Would Be King*, p. 174.

[39] Sichel, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

two Anabaptists at the stake in London in 1574,[40] she was now very aware of how fragile England's continuing independence was. She realised she needed all the French support she could get, and so became eloquent in her grief:

> Although you were his mother [she wrote to Catherine], you have several other children, but for myself I find no consolation, if it be not death in which I hope we shall be re-united. Madame, if you could see the image of my heart you would see there the picture of a body without a soul, but I will not trouble you with sorrows for you have too many of your own. I will turn a great part of my love for him to the King my good brother and you, assuring you that you will find me the most faithful daughter and sister that ever Princes had.[41]

Elizabeth was a most articulate opportunist indeed, to assume such close kinship on the basis of a phantom marriage. A.M.F. Robinson, as long ago as 1887, thought that Elizabeth had now faced up to the following facts: that through her own doing she had lost 'an instrument of her security' in her struggle with Spain; that the Netherlands was a hopeless cause; and that the Guises, backers of Mary Queen of Scots, had a firmer degree of control over French affairs than in the past. Robinson's conclusion is dramatic indeed:

> The moment of sincere and profitable league with France had passed away. Elizabeth had let the moment slip. Four years thence, unsupported save by the States she had deserted, only the accident of a storm, the singular chance victory, interposed

[40] Robinson, 'Queen Elizabeth and the Valois Princes', p. 70. See also *Martyrs Mirror (1660)*, ed. T.J. van Braght, trans. J.F. Sohm (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1950), p. 1010. Although the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre had prejudiced her against Catholic France, Elizabeth had also lost faith in the Protestant cause on the Continent. She thus sought Spanish sympathy.

[41] Ross, *The Men Who Would Be King*, p. 178.

> to save the kingdom of England from the condition of a Spanish province.[42]

Present-day historians might accuse Robinson of indulging in melodrama, but his point (as so often in his still very readable essay) remains valid – Protestant England was in a most precarious position prior to the sudden collapse of the Great Enterprise.

Let us briefly return to Elizabeth's play of courtship, before delivering a final verdict on her involvement in this play. What pictures do Elizabeth's envoys leave us of Alençon, her poor prince turned Frog, he who almost won her hand? Hardly the stuff of hearts and souls, but then the envoys' task was to be their sovereign's eyes and ears. Thus Walsingham wrote, for his queen's benefit, twelve years before the unfortunate Prince's death:

> [T]he only thing I fear in this match is the delicacy of Her Majesty's eye and the hard favour of the gentleman, besides his disfiguring with the smallpox, which, if she should see with her eye, I misdoubt much it would withdraw her liking to proceed.[43]

And a year later, Smith wrote from Paris:

> The pock holes are no great disfigurement because they are rather thick than deep or great. They upon the blunt end of his nose are great and deep, how much to be disliked may be as it pleaseth God to move the heart of the beholder.[44]

Actually, the English far preferred Alençon to Anjou; apart from describing him, Smith also characterised him as 'a good fellow and a lusty prince'.[45]

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[42] Robinson, 'Queen Elizabeth and the Valois Princes', pp. 76–77.

[43] Ross, *The Men Who Would Be King*, p. 147.

[44] *Ibid.*, p. 153.

[45] Robinson, *art. cit.*, p. 54.

While it is true that Elizabeth was always impressed by a fine figure of a man, and would be right up until she faced the storms surrounding Essex towards the end of her life, verbal gratification, with its vicarious sensual potential, surely held more sway with a frankly sensual queen who was nevertheless committed to physical renunciation? The homely Alençon could provide such gratification. It is difficult for us to appreciate the *frisson* she must have derived from, for instance, even such rather juvenile outpourings: 'Kissing and rekissing all that Your beautiful Majesty can think of, he who burns with desire' waits for 'the sweet consummation that I desire more than my life'.[46] And let us not forget that his words had been anticipated and reinforced by the much more skilful wooing of his envoys; his was the coarse salt to their meat, and no less welcome for that, it may be. But there was never really any doubt that Alençon would only play a walk-on role in Elizabeth's great drama in the politics of international courtship.

As we take our leave of this drama and all its accompanying artifice, it is a relief to record one instance of sincerity: although that fine figure of a man Robert Dudley became stout and grey, Elizabeth loved him until the end. After he died in 1588 the memento she kept in her bedside drawer for the remaining fifteen years of her life was not his portrait but his last letter to her. Indeed, she herself had underlined its particular verbal significance by writing on it: 'His last letter'.[47] For once she offers no protracted eloquence in commentary; her brevity is a cipher of her present inability to find an adequate means to express herself.

Such private candidness was exceptional. For if Catherine was Machiavellian, Elizabeth usually outmatched her. Consider, for instance, the way in which Elizabeth intensified religious persecution at home in the 1570s and 1580s, at precisely the time when her foreign relations were

[46] Ross, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

[47] Perry, *Elizabeth I: The Word of a Prince*, p. 289.

conducted with an air of religious tolerance.[48] This extreme disparity, I believe, was meant to help convey a complex political message, which gestured towards a not-to-be-questioned degree of State control where religion was concerned. In other words, the matter of religious tolerance versus intolerance was primarily a political one in her eyes, rather than a theological one. Her inconsistent treatment of her subjects and her suitors thus had a pragmatic Machiavellian basis that naturally extended into her courtship of the Valois princes. As our overview of the language used has shown, this courtship was in fact a skilfully improvised drama, comprising elaborate set-pieces, almost in the manner of a chess-game or battle between opposing armies. The wielding of political and psychological power implicit in such machinations had extraordinary overtones that incorporated a strong erotic element along with the linguistic one; hence its vividly dramatic nature, so well suited to Elizabeth's interplay with her co-actors, both envoys and princes, who, though also carefully rehearsed in the set-pieces of politically-charged diplomacy, were never quite her match.

[48] She was even more devious than this characterisation would imply. Robinson notes that 'in all her relations with Spain' prior to the Great Enterprise 'Elizabeth describes herself as a catholic at heart, estranged from Rome by a mere political difference' (Robinson, 'Queen Elizabeth and the Valois Princes', p. 71). And, to counter Doran's view of Elizabeth's political "innocence" once more, I note that Retha Warnicke, in 'Elizabeth I: Gender, Religion and Politics: Did It Matter the Fifth Tudor Monarch Was a Woman Rather Than a Man?', *History Review* 58 (2007): 30–35, sees her as being wiser than her councillors in her prevarications, even in her old age (p. 35). For Elizabeth's keen awareness of at least her Irish subjects' animus against her policies see Constantia Maxwell, *Irish History from Contemporary Sources, 1509–1610* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1923), pp. 136–37. By way of comparison, though the historical conditions were of course different, and though the royal marriage negotiations certainly had as background the quarrels of contending factions, the government policy followed regarding a foreign Catholic marriage in Stuart England was, for the most part, transparently consistent at home and abroad. Thus Michael Questier can note, for example, in *Catholicism and Community in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 'The proposed [Spanish] marriage enabled clerics such as John Bennett to put the case to the regime that a Catholic bishop, as long as he was one of the anti-Jesuit secular clergymen, would be a source of political support, an authority who, the Stuarts could be sure, would underwrite their Spanish policy' (p. 399).