

Portuguese Diplomacy and the Written Representations of Queen Elizabeth I: a Bridge between Two Worlds

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The young Elizabeth Tudor admitted that “the invention of letters seems to me the most clever, excellent, and ingenious” (11). Historians and biographers have long made use of letters to shed some light into the past, and one often finds *personalis* (private letters) and *negotialis* (letters of affairs) as primary sources in their works. In this context, diplomatic correspondence, which belongs to the latter category, stands out as a significant contribution to our understanding of the past, a sort of a metaphorical bridge between two worlds: the past and the present.

In the early modern period, monarchs rarely met in person. Charles Beem highlights the importance of the ambassadors’ reports, as well as of literary and iconographic depictions during Elizabeth’s reign, a “queen who never left her kingdom” (iii). Therefore, ambassadors may also be perceived as metaphorical bridges, in the sense of being the channel through which the nations communicated and negotiated with one another: they were their sovereigns’ ears and eyes in foreign courts, and the success of foreign affairs depended largely on them.

Diplomatic correspondence encapsulated, therefore, invaluable information sent to their home courts, much of which included the ambassadors’ own representations of ‘Otherness’. According to James Young, the ambassadors’ written descriptions of ‘Otherness’ may be considered representations, since “all conditions of being a representation can be met by a description”: the authors intended to represent an “object”, and their readers recognised that the ambassadors’ descriptions stood for the “object” (Young 130). And, as Emma Mason observes, historians are particularly indebted to such foreign accounts of ‘Otherness’, by virtue of the ambassadors’ penchant for detailed and witty descriptions.¹ Ambassadors become, once again, a metaphorical bridge, for they connect *sameness* and *difference*, in the sense that

1 Especially with reference to the French ambassadors to the Tudor court, Eustace Chapuys and Charles de Marillac, (*History Extra* “Through Foreign Eyes”, 30th November 2016).

they are required to establish alternative strategic approaches to diversity, while simultaneously connecting to their familiar references of 'self' and 'sameness'.

The reference to the concepts of *sameness* and *difference* used here pertains to the ancient Greek sameness/difference duality, that traditional principle of a 'either/or' choice, still common today, notwithstanding the complexities of contemporary societies. In present times, just like in the early modern period, one tends to group similarities and separate them from what is different. This categorising and generalising approach undermines today's fundamental discourses of societal equality and inclusiveness. It is, therefore, stimulating to bring the early modern diplomatic descriptions of 'Otherness' to bear on issues of contemporary concern on *difference* and *sameness*.

In this light, this article aims at analysing the representations of the Tudor Queen Elizabeth through the eyes of the resident ambassadors based at her court. Moreover, it also intends to address a rather paradoxical element in the use of ambassadorial correspondence among primary sources. In fact, although the Anglo-Portuguese Alliance stands out as the longest-established coalition in history, dating back to the fourteenth century, one hardly ever finds references to the Portuguese ambassadors' written accounts at the Tudor court. Therefore, this paper is also an attempt to compensate for such neglect, while it simultaneously suggests some of its underlying probable causes.

The analysis of early modern ambassadorial correspondence is closely associated with the modern form of diplomacy which was being shaped in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, namely with the creation and the subsequent proliferation of resident embassies throughout Europe. Keeping a resident ambassador in a foreign court meant, among other things, that a sovereign could expect a constant flow of information. Nevertheless, all resident ambassadors in London during Elizabeth's rule must have been aware of the extant wide net of English intelligence, especially under Walsingham's instructions, which might have included the disregard for the diplomatic correspondence inviolability. Therefore, ambassadors' written accounts were often a practice of "writing between the lines", as Leo Strauss observed (24), while contemporary analysis of such documents must include a practice of "reading between the lines", as Patterson suggested (7).

It is interesting to note how ambassadors engaged in their written duties, according to comparatively different ways: some composed very detailed

and descriptive missives, others favoured brief observations in short letters; some ambassadors wrote daily, others were not so industrious. One cannot dissociate these different descriptions of the 'Other' from the sovereigns represented by the ambassadors. In fact, the most powerful and demanding governments expected – and were dependent on – everyday information. Such was the case of Venice, as Mattingly observed, whose Senate encouraged their ambassadors to include a wide range of topics in their reports, such as the country's geography, history and economy, governmental structure and habits (107).

The Venetian ambassador, Giovanni Michiel, wrote a detailed report of England to the Venetian Senate, on the 13th of May 1557, which follows the above-mentioned Venetian model (*CSP Venice 1041-1095*). Michiel comprehensively describes the country, the city of London, the merchants, the navy, the army, Queen Mary, her debts and her love for King Philip, to mention but a few of the matters included in the ambassador's lengthy letter. To the present analysis, however, it is significant to focus on the ambassador's account of Princess Elizabeth Tudor:

My Lady Elizabeth... is now 23 years old. She is a young woman, whose mind is considered no less excellent (*bello*) than her person, although her face is comely (*gratiosa*) rather than handsome, but she is tall and well formed, with a good skin, although swarthy; she has fine eyes and above all a beautiful hand of which she makes a display; and her intellect and understanding are wonderful... As a linguist she excels the Queen... She is proud and haughty, as although she knows that she was born of such a mother, she nevertheless does not consider herself of inferior degree to the Queen, whom she equals in self-esteem" (*CSP Venice 1041-1095*)

The imagery in this passage clearly shows the author's attempt to create a favourable mental picture of Elizabeth Tudor in the mind of his readers. Meaningfully, Michiel makes reference to Elizabeth's fine eyes, the 'eyes' being a significant and ever-present Renaissance motif, the microcosm evoking of the macrocosm, the stars, the light and, therefore, Knowledge and Beauty. The ambassador describes Elizabeth's hands as her most outstanding beauty feature, of which she is well-aware. But for Michiel, Elizabeth's physical and psychological traits are intertwined – the Princess's mind is considered no less excellent than her outward appearance. The ambassador builds

up Elizabeth's physical description in terms of antithetical ideas of beauty – her face is gracious rather than pretty; she has a good skin, although swarthy – and that structure of contrast is amplified by the repetition of the conjunction “although”. Moreover, Michiel also employs the comparison device to assert Elizabeth's greater linguistic skills than those of the Queen's, and their equivalent sense of self-esteem. The author justifies the Princess's traits of pride and overconfidence as features inherited from Anne Boleyn, thus juxtaposing the qualities of both daughter and mother. As a whole, this excerpt exemplifies a very sympathetic representation of young Elizabeth, while it also suggests how ambassador's correspondence may be associated with the paradigms of the Renaissance, namely Beauty and Knowledge.

Forty years later, the French ambassador, André De Maise, presented his court with an equally long and detailed description. Elizabeth was then 65 years old and she had been the Queen of England for 39. The ensuing passage is a glimpse into De Maise's account:

She looked at me kindly... She was strangely attired in a dress of silver cloth, white and crimson... This dress had slashed sleeves ... with other little sleeves that hung down to the ground, which she was for ever twisting and untwisting... She kept the front of her dress open, and one could see the whole of her bosom... Her bosom is somewhat wrinkled as well as one can see... but lower down her flesh is exceeding white and delicate, so far as one could see... On her head she wore a garland... and beneath it a great reddish-coloured wig. As for her face, it is and appears to be very aged. It is long and thin, and her teeth are very yellow and unequal... and on the left side less than on the right. Many of them are missing so that one cannot understand her easily when she speaks quickly (57-58).

Through the eyes of the French ambassador, one comes across a matured, wrinkled, almost toothless woman, wearing a red wig, dressed in a rather revealing fashion, and yet still elaborately and opulently adorned. De Maise's written depiction constitutes a clear contrast to Elizabeth's projection of her public *persona*, as confirmed by the official portrait commissioned three years later, *The Rainbow Portrait*. For political purposes, this iconographic depiction represents an ageless, beautiful Queen, the personification of strength and wisdom, lavishly dressed and adorned. Although De Maise's physical depiction of the English Queen differs from that of

Elizabethan propaganda, both representations concur in what the ambassador captures in the following lines: “Her figure is fair and tall and graceful in whatever she does” (58).

Notwithstanding Michiel’s and De Massie’s contributions, Bertolet remarks that ambassadors were “the most biased group of observers”, for they were conditioned by their political agendas (83). However, it is also important to consider Beem’s and Levin’s perspective, which points out that when Elizabeth’s image was presented to Europeans in portraits, coins and miniatures, people would want to know “if the portraits they saw were [the] genuine likeness of the queen” (19). Then, those who met the Queen in person, like the ambassadors, could certainly be called to confirm as to the accuracy of the Queen’s image representation.

Quite a different approach on how ambassadors described Elizabeth may be found in the Spanish and the Portuguese ambassadors’ correspondence. These written representations tend to focus both on Elizabeth’s psychological traits and on her political temperament.

Clearly, one should not disregard that the Spanish ambassadors represented England’s arch-enemy. They were among the most prolific diplomatic writers, often making quite direct remarks on the English Queen in their letters, which also often resulted in falling into Elizabeth’s displeasure, whenever the letters were intercepted by her agents. One of the many examples of such bluntness comes to light in the letter sent by Bernardino de Mendoza to the Spanish King, on the 4th of May 1581, in which he describes the Queen’s politic nature:

It was this knowledge [of military matters] which allowed me to present a bold front to the Queen on many occasions after I saw how abashed she was when I gave her smart answers, and it has been of advantage in making her more modest than if I had treated her softly (*CLSP* 113).

Subliminally embedded in Mendoza’s representation of the Queen’s political figure is the ever-present patriarchal thought that depicted Elizabeth as a woman. As such, she was required to conform to the virtue expected of the biblical concept of women as “the weaker vessel”: modesty (*First Epistle of Peter* 3:7). Besides, in Mendoza’s opinion, the English Queen was also a fierce enemy of the Catholic faith. Ultimately, in the Spanish ambassador’s account of the audience with Elizabeth, he – the man and the Catholic – becomes the dominant political character.

In a clear contrast with the Spanish ambassador's rather open and audacious depiction of the Queen, the Portuguese ambassadors' correspondence is characterised by unflinching circumspection – and political correctness – regarding the depiction of the 'Other'. They do not engage in direct observations and clear-cut descriptions, although one may find in their correspondence scattered, mostly implied, remarks about the Queen's qualities and her political conduct.

The Portuguese archives in Torre do Tombo hold a collection of manuscripts containing the letters written by the Portuguese ambassadors to their sovereign. Those manuscripts have been digitalised, thus providing access to the original account to twenty first century readers. This new pathway paved by the digital era also emphasises the idea of 'a bridge between two worlds.' One of those letters is from the Portuguese ambassador Francisco Pereira, who wrote to the Portuguese Public Treasury overseer, on the 4th of April 1559, simply arguing that the Portuguese would be better served by "showing their teeth" to the English (my translation; *Corpo Cronológico* 1.106.61). Clearly, the ambassador was suggesting that the Portuguese crown should act more harshly towards the English, who were then continuously threatening the Portuguese trade on the African coast. But instead of presenting a blunt accusation regarding the Queen's covert support of her subjects' enterprise, the Portuguese ambassador focuses on the Portuguese attitude towards the English, while the representation of the Queen's character is subtly implied.

In another instance, on the 7th of June 1562, the Portuguese ambassador, João Pereira Dantas, addresses the Privy Council on Elizabeth's ambiguous orders:

[The Portuguese king] will never say that [The English Queen] proceeded with such cautel [caution], but as the words are doubtful, he desires her by the express commandment of his master to change them (*CSP Elizabeth* 10:74-90).

Again, the Portuguese ambassador refers to Elizabeth's elusiveness and deception as *caution*, and points out that the Queen must replace "doubtful" words with others, which would result in a clear interpretation, not only by her subjects, but also by the Portuguese government. In fact, the state of affairs between Portugal and England had become so serious that Portugal threatened to break the Alliance with England, thus ending all the commercial trade between the two nations, if the English subjects did not

discontinue their trade in the Portuguese territories. The Queen let the situation drag on as much as possible. Even before such financial loss to the Portuguese crown, the Portuguese ambassadors refrained from openly criticising the Queen. There is, however, one letter written by Francisco Giraldes to the Portuguese King, on the 28th of January 1578, in which he mentions that he did not have an audience with the English Queen because she was not feeling well. He adds: "I know that she feigned this indisposition to me" (*CSP Elizabeth* 12:464-482). Nevertheless, this apparent variation in the Portuguese written image of Elizabeth's character may be explained by the fact that this is a letter written in cipher; thus, this direct remark regarding the Queen's insincerity was not supposed to be known.

As a whole, the Portuguese ambassadors' written depictions of the English Queen focus on her political attitude and on the psychological traits underlying it. This probably constitutes the first reason why the Portuguese ambassadors' accounts are disregarded as sources in early modern studies, for they often wrote between the lines about Elizabeth's political character.

Other reasons may lie in the fact that this correspondence is rare, due to the 1755 Lisbon earthquake and subsequent fire, the nineteenth century Napoleonic invasions, or because it remains forgotten in the private collections of the ambassadors' families.

A final reason may be the condition of these records: the surviving correspondence is dispersed in numerous archives throughout Europe, still waiting to be assembled and catalogued. To sum up, the difficult access to these records, together with the challenging interpretation of their contents, may explain why we rarely find references to the Portuguese ambassadors' written accounts of the Elizabethan court.

Stuart Hall notes that representations are the construction of meaning through language, and that they consequently connect meaning and language to culture (15, 16). Elizabeth's representations by the Venetian, the French, the Spanish and the Portuguese ambassadors provide, in their own and unique approach, significant insights into the way this iconic English Tudor Queen was construed by some of the most powerful sovereigns in Europe. Therefore, as I suggested, these diplomatic written accounts stand as a multi-faceted metaphorical bridge between two metaphorical worlds: past and present, manuscript and digital, writer and reader, sameness and difference.

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