

A Monarchy in Letters: Royal Correspondence and English Diplomacy in the Reign of Elizabeth I

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Rayne Allinson's new book, *A Monarchy in Letters: Royal Correspondence and English Diplomacy in the Reign of Elizabeth I*, highlights some of the gaps missing in the historiography of the queen's own involvement in foreign affairs. The author acknowledges that there is a curious void here; what about the queen's own words? Obviously, the queen's preferences were central to certain aspects of foreign policy. But this is the first full-length monograph paying attention to the utterances of the queen and how they were received by her contemporaries.⁽¹⁾ The author not only sheds a light on Elizabeth's writings, she also analyses the answers that the queen received and thus gives us a detailed account on Elizabeth's relationships with other monarchs. Allinson looks closely at the distinctions to be made between holographs and autographs. Holographs were considered more private and personal than autographs which were written on behalf of a prince. However, both forms of letters represented the monarch's authority, as Allinson explains: 'authority and authorship had become inextricably linked in European court culture by the mid-to-late sixteenth century' (p. 17). Furthermore, Allinson explains the risk of conflict starting when monarchs cease from corresponding with each other at this direct and personal level (see p. 71 regarding the correspondence with Philip II of Spain and p. 89 concerning the correspondence with Mary Queen of Scots).

The primary sources used by Allinson are extensive and well documented: letters sent around Europe and to the Ottoman Empire and to Russia. Allinson analyses them to demonstrate royal rhetoric, royal diplomatic skills and establishment of royal amities. She highlights the importance of both autographs and holographs

and helps the reader to understand what was at stake. She has found letters that were not analysed before or not fully examined, notably some exchanged between Elizabeth and Henry IV of France: 'despite the significance of Anglo-French relations in the 1590s and the large number of their letters available in print, the relationship between Elizabeth and Henry has remained largely unstudied' (p. 152). Readers of *A Monarchy in Letters* have here the opportunity to look at Elizabeth's most complicated, unpredictable and intense international relationships and thus to grasp how alliances were built both in public and in private, as it were (from the personal relationships established by writing and the public political relationships created by that correspondence).

The writing style of the author is engaging, clear and precise. The reader can easily follow the arguments in each chapter. The book is divided into ten chapters. Three of them are introductory. The first describes the evolution of writing and how this skill was developed and became more and more important in royal duties. Allinson explains that during the medieval period 'reading and writing were skills practiced almost exclusively by the clerical elite' (p. 2). She explores in this chapter how these skills were used by monarchs and for what purpose. According to her, humanist learning had an impact on monarchs' education and it fed directly into royal correspondence with foreign courts. She claims that: 'Henry VII's European education also had an indirect effect on the development of the English letter writing' (p. 6). Consequently, his sons were taught how to use 'rhetoric and written expression' (p. 7). In the second chapter, Allinson explores the differences between holograph and autograph letters, especially regarding Elizabeth I's case. She argues that the queen's 'conspicuous involvement in the letter-writing process demonstrated her active participation in affairs of state'. The main goal of this chapter is to prove that Elizabeth I was extremely aware of her letters' impact on foreign policy-making even though she did not write herself all her letters. Finally, to finish with the introductory chapters, Allinson focuses on the first two years of Elizabeth I's reign, and examines letters sent to foreign monarchs to notify them of her accession. These introductory chapters not only allow the reader to know more about the history of the letter-writing process but also explain how letters played an important role in Elizabeth's policy-making. After the three introductory chapters, Allinson moves on to seven case study chapters.

Chapter four focuses on the tumultuous relationship between Elizabeth I and Philip II. Through the medium of their letters, Allinson looks at the development of their friendship/rivalry during their reigns. She also explains and determines the importance of ambassadors and how they played the role of 'verbal extensions of the letters' (p. 54). From 1559 to 1584, Allinson analyses their evolving relationship and the 'crucial role in keeping the channels of communication open, despite the mutual expulsion of ambassadors in 1568 and 1572' (pp. 54–5). What is crucial here is how the continued exchange of letters served to stop the constant difficulties, and perhaps the more hawkish tendencies of their counsellors, from moving further into outright hostility. As Allinson states, 'it was only when their correspondence ceased that the real war began' (p. 71).

Chapter five looks at the correspondence of Elizabeth with her 'closest relative and sister queen, Mary Stuart' (p. 73). Their relationship, over the years, was tense, courteous, silent and deadly. Many works have focused on their relation but few have looked specifically and only to their correspondence. Allinson explains how, from a private correspondence, their letters became a public matter (p. 89). Elizabeth refused for years to reply to her cousin. She wanted to distance herself from her and to isolate her. We can see here that silence represents not only distrust but was also used as a powerful political device to punish Mary. As Allinson demonstrates, by refusing to reply to Mary, the English queen no longer recognised her as 'an independent, diplomatic equal' (p. 88). Furthermore, as royal correspondence allowed monarchs to maintain a certain level of amity, breaking royal correspondence 'could have significant consequences for how diplomatic relations were enacted and perceived' (p. 91).

Chapter six is, in my opinion, somewhat controversial. It focuses on the correspondence exchanged between Catherine de Médici and Elizabeth. Legitimately, Allinson examines this correspondence during Francis II's and Charles IX's reigns, as Catherine de Médicis was queen regent of France. Therefore, Elizabeth needed to secure a bond of amity with her. However, when in 1574, Henry III came to the throne, the role of Catherine needed to be redefined. Everyone could agree that she continued to play a major role in French policy making but she was no longer the queen regent and had lost her regency powers. For that reason, it would

have been interesting to have a chapter looking at the correspondence between Henry III of France and Elizabeth from 1574 to 1589 and see what kind of bond the English queen could secure with the French king and then to compare this bond with the one established with Catherine. Catherine was certainly seen and used (even by Henry III) as a powerful counsellor who had great experience in politics but she was not a royal equal. Allinson argues that 'Elizabeth considered Catherine as an equal. Sometimes, however, Catherine pushed the bounds of her assumed equality with Elizabeth too far and received a stern reminder of her honorary nature of her position from the English queen' (p. 94). In this chapter, Allinson highlights this complicated relationship between two women who dealt with religious turmoil and tried to avoid civil strife at home (p. 104) as well as to establish their own authority. Allinson demonstrates that through their correspondence Elizabeth and Catherine built a strong diplomatic relationship which enabled them to face a common enemy, Philip II of Spain. Beyond religious belief, it seems that a feminine solidarity prevailed.

Chapter seven is a very intriguing case study. Allinson sheds light on the mysterious and secret correspondence between Elizabeth and the Tsar of Russia, Ivan IV. The real asset of this study is to understand how each country perceived governance and how it differed from each other. These differences in writing style and diplomatic structure demonstrate that culture played also an important role in foreign policy making. Ivan had specific expectations from Elizabeth and wanted her to follow his lead: 'Ivan insisted that Elizabeth's written responses to these "secret" proposals should replicate the exact wording, format, and language of his own letters and be validated by a variety of epistolary rituals prescribed by him, such as the "kissing of the cross" in the presence of ambassadors – an act likely to be distasteful to the Protestant queen' (p. 112). This case study highlights the importance of commerce in royal correspondence and how Elizabeth and the Tsar of Russia established a political alliance despite their cultural differences.

Chapter eight is, in my opinion, the most original. It looks at the correspondence between Sultan Murad III of the Ottoman Empire and Elizabeth I. Again, their interests were mainly commercial as they signed in 1580 'the charter of trade' (p. 132). Allinson explains how the English queen and the Ottoman Sultan managed to build an amity despite their different faith. They, however, seemed to agree on certain grounds: 'by asserting her contempt for idolatry, Elizabeth underscored a shared concern of Islam and Protestantism – the primacy of the written word over images – in implicit contrast to their common Catholic enemy, the Habsburgs' (p. 138). Therefore, Allinson explains that this 'rejection of idolatry' played a strategic role in the establishments of good relations between England and the Ottoman Empire. Despite the difficulties linked to the translations of their languages, Elizabeth managed to build a stable relation with Sultan Murad III and to 'rearticulate her authority as a Christian monarch, in order to protect her merchants' trade, reinforce her ambassador's authority, and secure Murad's military support' (p. 149). This chapter emphasises the unique relationship shared by a Christian ruler and her non-western counterpart.

Chapters nine and ten look at two more known streams of foreign correspondence. Allinson examines the ‘unstudied’ (p. 152) correspondence of Henry IV of France and Elizabeth I. She explains the importance of a good amity between the two monarchs to preserve peace between England and France. The turning point in their relationship is certainly Henry IV’s conversion to Catholicism, a conversion which might have been seen as a betrayal for the English queen who counted on him to help her defend the Protestant faith; on the other hand, Henry’s confessional change of heart was not going to be allowed to disrupt the essentially secular logic of the Anglo-French stand against Philip II. According to Allinson, Henry valued his friendship with the English queen and was devoted to ‘her leadership’ (p. 155). Allinson also explores the role of the ambassadors to keep this good amity between the two princes even after the conversion of the French king (p. 159). Their perpetual friendship and its importance for the balance of powers in Europe are underscored. In chapter ten, another close and crucial friendship for the English queen is examined, her relation with her godson James VI of Scotland. Their correspondence is one of the most prolific exchanges between monarchs. Furthermore, many holographs were exchanged between them reinforcing the importance of their good and intimate relation on the political stage. At first, Elizabeth tried to impose her authority over her godson but soon enough, by asserting his own authority, ‘he inevitably began to test the limits of Elizabeth’s presumed authority over him’ (p. 173). This enabled him to assert his own legitimacy as king of Scotland as well as the rightful English heir (though he was never proclaimed as such by his godmother).

In *A Monarchy in Letters*, Allinson shows the importance of royal correspondence in foreign policy making and how good relations between monarchs helped to preserve peace between realms. Elizabeth I wrote or dictated many letters through her life enabling her to become a powerful monarch on the international political scene. By looking closely to her words and those of her counterparts, the reader can better understand all the issues at stake during this period. Through well-documented and also through less well studied primary sources, Rayne Allinson shrewdly enhances our understanding of early modern royal epistolary relationships. We cannot always determine exactly the balance of opinions within the council and court which led to letters of this kind going out in the format that they took; but the queen’s signature was in the end the crucial issue, the thing that meant she could not be a cipher.

Notes

1. See Ilona Bell, *Elizabeth I : The Voice of a Monarch* (New York, 2010).[Back to \(1\)](#)

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