

Kings' Stomachs and Concrete Elephants: Gendering Elizabeth I through the Tilbury Speech

Aidan Norrie

The speech to the troops at Tilbury is arguably Elizabeth's most famous. The well-known line—"I know I have the body of a weak, feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king"—is fairly ubiquitous, and it is routinely included in cinematic and televisual depictions of Elizabeth and her reign. While the historicity of the content of the speech is debated, extant—and nearly contemporary—accounts of the speech do survive. However, and rather curiously, the speech is seldom reproduced as it survives. This paper argues that the depiction of the Tilbury Speech speaks to the gendered depiction of Elizabeth in the relevant adaptation. To the best of my knowledge, no adaptation of the speech completely reproduces the surviving text in the letter from Leonel Sharp to the Duke of Buckingham. The reasons for this deviation are (likely) varying, but I argue that the vast majority of the changes reflect the way Elizabeth's gender has been depicted, and comment on the way writers and directors grapple with Elizabeth's incongruous position as a female king. This paper will analyse the depiction of the Tilbury Speech in four different adaptations in the past century: in the films *Fire Over England* (1937) and *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (2007), and in the television series *Blackadder II* (1986) and *Mapp and Lucia* (2014). These four adaptations all depict the Tilbury Speech in different ways; ways, I argue, that reflect the characterisation of Elizabeth and her gender. In analysing these four adaptations, I conclude that while writers and directors seem to have little issue with Elizabeth declaring that she has "the body of a weak, feeble woman," they seem to stumble on her follow up declaration that she has "the heart and stomach of a king."