Elizabeth 1

Speech to the Troops at Tilbury

Portrait of Elizabeth made to commemorate the defeat of the Spanish Armada (1588), depicted in the background. Elizabeth's international power is symbolised by the hand resting on the globe.

The Speech to the Troops at Tilbury was delivered on 9 August Old Style, 19 August New Style 1588 by Queen Elizabeth I of England to the land forces earlier assembled at Tilbury in Essex in preparation for repelling the expected invasion by the Spanish Armada.

Prior to the speech the Armada had been driven from the Strait of Dover in the Battle of Gravelines eleven days earlier, and had by then rounded Scotland on its way home, but troops were still held at ready in case the Spanish army of Alexander Farnese, the Duke of Parma, might yet attempt to invade from Dunkirk; two days later they were discharged. On the day of the speech, the Queen left her bodyguard before the fort at Tilbury and went among her subjects with an escort of six men. Lord Ormonde walked ahead with the Sword of State; he was followed by a page leading the Queen's charger and another bearing her silver helmet on a cushion; then came the Queen herself, in white with a silver cuirass and mounted on a grey gelding. She was flanked on horseback by her Lieutenant General the Earl of Leicester on the right, and on the left by the Earl of Essex, her Master of the Horse. Sir John Norreys brought up the rear.

Contents

[hide]

- 1 Content of the speech
  - 1.1 Historiography
- 2 Second Version
- 3 Third Version
- 4 Summary
Content of the speech

The text was found in a letter from Leonel Sharp sometime after 1624 to the duke of Buckingham.

My loving people
We have been persuaded by some that are careful of our safety, to take heed how we commit our selves to armed multitudes, for fear of treachery; but I assure you I do not desire to live to distrust my faithful and loving people. Let tyrants fear. I have always so behaved myself that, under God, I have placed my chiefest strength and safeguard in the loyal hearts and good-will of my subjects; and therefore I am come amongst you, as you see, at this time, not for my recreation and disport, but being resolved, in the midst and heat of the battle, to live and die amongst you all; to lay down for my God, and for my kingdom, and my people, my honour and my blood, even in the dust.

I know I have the body of a weak, feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too, and think foul scorn that Parma or Spain, or any prince of Europe, should dare to invade the borders of my realm; to which rather than any dishonour shall grow by me, I myself will take up arms, I myself will be your general, judge, and rewarder of every one of your virtues in the field.

I know already, for your forwardness you have deserved rewards and crowns; and We do assure you on a word of a prince, they shall be duly paid. In the mean time, my lieutenant general shall be in my stead, than whom never prince commanded a more noble or worthy subject; not doubting but by your obedience to my general, by your concord in the camp, and your valour in the field, we shall shortly have a famous victory over these enemies of my God, of my kingdom, and of my people.

Historiography

There is no direct evidence of the speech, but its circumstances have been accepted by historian J. E. Neale in an article on 'The Sayings of Queen Elizabeth': "I see no serious reason for rejecting the speech...some of the phrases have every appearance of being the Queen's, and the whole tone of the speech is surely very much in keeping even with the few Elizabethan quotations that I have had room for in this article...I have little doubt that Sharp's version is a copy, at two or three removes, of a speech actually written by Elizabeth herself". This speech has been accepted as genuine by the historians Mandell Creighton, Garrett Mattingly, Patrick Collinson ("...there is no reason to doubt its authenticity"), Lady Anne Somerset, Antonia Fraser, Alison Weir, Christopher Haigh, Simon Schama, David Starkey and Robert Hutchinson.

Janet M. Green of Kent State University in an article for the Sixteenth Century Journal in 1997 states: "...substantial evidence exists for believing the Tilbury oration is genuine, which falls into three categories: First, internal rhetorical characteristics link this oration very strongly to Elizabeth's others. Second, there is considerable contemporary evidence that she delivered a speech at Tilbury whose phrases, often remarked, were like those of the speech we have...The internal evidence of the Tilbury oration provides the best argument for Elizabeth's authorship".
David Loades has written: "Whether she used these words, we do not know, although they have an authentic, theatrical ring".\(^{[12]}\)

However there are some historians who do not believe this speech is genuine. Miller Christy doubted the veracity of this version of the speech in 1919.\(^{[14]}\) Also sceptical were Felix Barker\(^{[15]}\) and Susan Frye.\(^{[16]}\)

**Second Version**

Another version of the speech was recorded in 1612 by William Leigh. His version reads:

Come on now, my companions at arms, and fellow soldiers, in the field, now for the Lord, for your Queen, and for the Kingdom. For what are these proud Philistines, that they should revile the host of the living God? I have been your Prince in peace, so will I be in war; neither will I bid you go and fight, but come and let us fight the battle of the Lord. The enemy perhaps may challenge my sex for that I am a woman, so may I likewise charge their mould for that they are but men, whose breath is in their nostrils, and if God do not charge England with the sins of England, little do I fear their force… Si deus nobiscum quis contra nos? (if God is with us, who can be against us?)

**Third Version**

In *Elizabetha Triumphans*, published in 1588, James Aske provides a version of the speech, reworked in verse:

Their loyal hearts to us their lawful Queen.  
For sure we are that none beneath the heavens 
Have readier subjects to defend their right: 
Which happiness we count to us as chief. 
And though of love their duties crave no less 
Yet say to them that we in like regard 
And estimate of this their dearest zeal  
(In time of need shall ever call them forth 
To dare in field their fierce and cruel foes) 
Will be ourself their noted General 
Ne dear at all to us shall be our life, 
Ne palaces or Castles huge of stone 
Shall hold as then our presence from their view: 
But in the midst and very heart of them 
Bellona-like we mean as them to march; 
On common lot of gain or loss to both  
They well shall see we recke shall then betide. 
And as for honour with most large rewards, 
Let them not care they common there shall be: 
The meanest man who shall deserve a might, 
A mountain shall for his desert receive. 
And this our speech and this our solemn vow 
In fervent love to those our subjects dear, 
Say, sargeant-major, tell them from our self,
On kingly faith we will perform it there…

Summary

A summary of the speech appears in Lewes Lewkenor's *The Estate of English Fugitives* written in 1595, which mentions the Spanish Armada.

Lewkenor says,

“I cannot here omit to speak a word or two, as well of the worthiness; and loyalty of those honourable gentlemen of her majesties court, who upon the approach of the Spanish fleet, presented, not only their persons and lives for the defence of her majesty, but also a great portion and yearly revenue of their lands; as also of her majesties great benignity and gracious answer, telling them, that she accounted herself rich enough in that she possessed such subjects, assuring them, that for her part, she would spend the last penny of her treasures for their defence, rather than she would be burthenous unto them. O happy people in such a princess, and happy princess in such a people!”

Notes[edit]


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- A letter from Dr. Leonel Sharp to the Duke of Buckingham after 1623, recalling Elizabeth's speech