During the late Tudor period, a new definition of ‘statecraft’ as a practice distinct from theological concerns emerged within political discourse. One of the major causes for this development was the English Reformation, for after severing ties with the Roman Catholic Church, the State was forced to redefine and justify its exercise of power in relation to God and the body politic. The English monarchy’s response to this challenge was influenced by cultural developments taking place on the continent, in particular the circulation of the seminal treatise on politics and power, *Il Principe* (*The Prince*), by the Florentine diplomat, historian and military theorist, Niccolò Machiavelli.1 Machiavelli sought to provide rulers with more ‘practical’ advice than other humanists had by discussing things ‘as they are in real truth, rather than as they are imagined’.2 While some Englishmen were shocked by his cynical approach to statecraft, others tried to adapt his advice to English circumstances. Either way, Machiavelli’s ideas profoundly affected the way people thought about and practised politics in the Tudor era.

Over forty years ago, Felix Raab charted the reception and influence of Machiavelli’s ideas on English politics (otherwise termed ‘Machiavellism’), which he argued reached its peak during the early- to mid-Stuart period. Writing on the reception of Machiavelli in Tudor England, Raab posed a question which he himself was reluctant to answer:

What … did the practical men of affairs make of [Machiavelli], the men of affairs who were active in politics but rarely theorised aloud? This is probably the most interesting question, and certainly the most frustrating, for we can do little more than conjecture.3

Although Raab’s frustration was justified on the basis of inadequate primary material, this unanswered question cast a long shadow of doubt over his otherwise convincing argument. This study seeks a tentative answer to Raab’s query by rephrasing the terms he used to define it. By limiting the scope

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1 *The Prince* was written between July and December 1513, and was first printed posthumously in Europe in 1532, although manuscript copies circulated earlier. The first English editions of *The Prince* were printed by John Wolfe in the 1580s. Napoleon Orsini, ‘Elizabethan Manuscript Translations of Machiavelli’s “Prince”,’ *Journal of Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* (1937-8), 166-169; Hardin Craig, *Machiavelli’s *The Prince*: An Elizabethan Translation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944).


of his analysis to the men at the perimeters of power, Raab precluded the individual at the very centre of political decision making in late Tudor England: the Queen herself.

Earlier generations of historians such as W. Alison Phillips, John L. Lievsay and Mario Praz assumed that Elizabeth adhered to a ‘Machiavellian’ paradigm of rule, though none fully examined the historical implications of such a claim. Phillips, the most adamant of the three, argued that if Elizabeth ‘did not derive her principles and method of government directly from Machiavelli’, it was ‘more than probable’ that she had been introduced to his ideas via her Machiavellian ministers. Phillips’ contention that Machiavelli ‘directly influenced’ Elizabeth’s religious policy was, however, fatally flawed by the lack of what Raab termed ‘direct impact’: concrete evidence of the subject’s immediate contact with Machiavelli’s writings. Nevertheless, Raab ultimately admitted the limitations of his empirical definition of Machiavellism, conceding that it was useful to look beyond textual evidence in assessing Machiavelli’s pervasive influence on English political thought. A broader cultural approach to the study of English Machiavellism has been explored more recently by J. G. A. Pocock and Victoria Kahn, who argue respectively that Machiavelli’s influence is reflected in the ‘secular’ and ‘rhetorical’ self-consciousness of sixteenth-century writers and politicians. Like Raab, however, Pocock and Kahn make little or no mention of Elizabeth.

This apparent oversight – for neither Raab, Pocock or Kahn offer any methodological reason for excluding Elizabeth from their analyses – is strange in light of the Queen’s active involvement in political culture, her prolific output as a writer and her contemporary reputation as a shrewd political strategist. Like many of the ‘practical men of affairs’ who filled her court, Elizabeth rarely ‘theorised aloud’. Yet alongside the literary works of her courtiers and councillors, Elizabeth’s speeches, letters, and other personal writings show not only that she thought carefully about statecraft, but above all, that her thinking had a significant influence on the making of policy. The fact that Machiavelli does not appear in any of her extant writings should not exclude her from analyses of English Machiavellism: both Raab and Kahn have suggested that prominent Elizabethans such as Sir Christopher Hatton betrayed an ‘unmistakable’ familiarity with The Prince, despite the lack of any reference to Machiavelli in their written works. According to Kahn, Hatton’s approval of...

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6 Raab, English Face of Machiavelli, 54.


8 Raab does not exclude Elizabeth from his analysis simply on the basis of her monarchical status, since he sees no contradiction in discussing the possible influence of Machiavelli’s ideas on the hypothetical adult reign of Edward VI. English Face of Machiavelli, 42, 55.
Machiavelli is confirmed by his possession of a copy of *The Prince*.9 Yet on this basis, a similar case can be made for the Queen: in 1560 Peter Whitehorne dedicated his highly popular translation of Machiavelli’s *Arte of Warre* to Elizabeth, and although it cannot be proved that she read this work, the repeated inclusion of the dedication in later editions indicates Elizabeth’s willingness to be associated with the name of Machiavelli.10 Like Sir Francis Walsingham, Sir Nicholas Bacon, Lord Burghley and many others who are believed to have read, marked and inwardly digested Machiavelli’s works, Elizabeth would have avoided direct association with the Florentine because of his subversive reputation in England. Yet given her extensive humanist education, her fluency in Italian, and her life-long interest in philosophy, it is highly probable that she was (like most of her councillors) familiar with Machiavelli’s ideas.

The possibility that Elizabeth engaged with intellectual debates inspired by Machiavelli’s writings has been consistently overlooked by Elizabethan historians, primarily because most tend to focus on the people around the Queen, rather than on the Queen herself, when discussing the political culture of her reign. As Patrick Collinson has recently noted, Elizabeth’s reputation in modern historical scholarship is as a ‘do-nothing queen’, a ruler best known for chronic indecision than for political sagacity.11 Despite recent innovations in our historical understanding of the structure and mechanics of sixteenth-century government, there remains a prevalent (and largely unchallenged) assumption that the Queen’s councillors were, in the words of Wallace MacCaffrey, necessarily ‘more open to the currents of social and political thought flowing vigorously about them’ than Elizabeth, ostensibly because she was ‘constrained’ by her status as a female monarch.12 It is generally known, however, that Elizabeth read and translated several philosophical and political works, including Boethius’ *Consolations of Philosophy* and extracts from Desiderius Erasmus, demonstrating her continual interest in political philosophy. MacCaffrey’s assumption of Elizabeth’s intellectual passivity has been perpetuated by some feminist historians such as Anne McLaren, who over-emphasises the so-called ‘acephalous’ nature of Elizabeth’s reign and the aggressively masculine character of Tudor political culture.13 Following Leah S. Marcus’ argument that Elizabeth’s sex did not prevent her from engaging in literary pursuits, this article proposes that Elizabeth engaged just as freely in the political culture of her court, and that the influence of this

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engagement is reflected in her writings. In taking this approach, I hope to build on the work of Allison Heisch and Mary Beth Rose in exploring Elizabeth’s intricate (and sometimes ambivalent) use of rhetoric in her public speeches.

The aim of the present study is not to prove conclusively that Elizabeth read *The Prince*, but rather to demonstrate that she, like her councillors, was aware of the debates surrounding the ethics of political action inspired by Machiavelli. Drawing on Kahn’s assertion that the influence of *The Prince* can be traced in the rhetorical anxieties of sixteenth-century English writers, this study proposes that Elizabeth was aware of, and engaged in, contemporary debates on statecraft. Although principles of political expediency and moral flexibility had been advocated by numerous writers for centuries before Machiavelli (the most notable examples being Cicero, Quintilian, Desiderius Erasmus and Thomas More), the publication of *The Prince* generated a new level of self-consciousness amongst those at the centre of power concerning the ethics of political rhetoric, the justification of ruthless means for expedient ends, as well as the very nature and legitimacy of monarchical power. As Kahn notes, a study of the impact of Machiavellian rhetoric need ‘not presuppose the direct influence of Machiavelli’, since the debates inspired by his work reverberated throughout English culture (most visibly in the ubiquitous figure of ‘Machiavel’ on the stage).

This study will attempt to trace the intellectual influence of Machiavelli’s ideas on Elizabeth through close analysis of her replies to parliament on 12 and 24 November 1586 concerning the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots. Confronted with the ‘most greuous and yrksom burdon’ of authorising the death of ‘one not different in sex, of like estate, and my neare kinne’, Elizabeth was forced to articulate her philosophy of statecraft more clearly than at any other time during her reign. Her carefully constructed replies to parliament reflect a sensitivity to her audience’s scepticism of artful rhetoric, which for decades had carried Machiavellian connotations of trickery and deceit. Elizabeth’s attempts to reinforce her sovereign authority over her frustrated councillors also demonstrate her familiarity with contemporary debates on the nature and limitations of royal power. Lastly, her concern with maintaining appearances reveals a Machiavellian alertness to the link between a ruler’s reputation and power. Even if Elizabeth never read a word of *The Prince*, her self-conscious and deliberate use of rhetoric in her speeches to parliament in

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1586 reveals her engagement with the broader theoretical debates taking place in sixteenth-century Europe.

During Elizabeth’s reign, leading councillors and courtiers such as Ralegh and Bacon drew extensively on Machiavelli’s rhetorical method in their commonplace books and other political manuals. For these Englishmen, Machiavelli’s advice on maintaining power was radical in showing how authority could be constructed by rhetorical argument. Unlike most of his humanist contemporaries, Machiavelli argued that princes should not only be familiar with the ethical mode of rhetoric Cicero had defined as ‘natural to man’, but also know ‘how to make nice use of the beast’; that is, how to practice duplicity, dissimulation and deceit as necessity required:

contemporary experience shows that princes who have achieved great things have been those who have given their word lightly, who have known how to trick men with their cunning, and who, in the end, have overcome those abiding by honest principles.

Under the tutelage of the English humanist Roger Ascham, Elizabeth was trained extensively in the art of rhetoric, translating *inter alia* the orations of Isocrates, most of Cicero and Livy. Although Ascham was an outspoken critic of Machiavelli and his alleged principles, David Starkey has suggested that Elizabeth’s early education gave her an appreciation for language as a means of concealing: ‘Elizabeth was a born actress. And art had perfected nature’. While Ascham followed in the Erasmian tradition of educating a Christian prince in the moral principles of good governance, Elizabeth entered herself into the ‘scole of experience’, refining the performing instincts which would later earn her a reputation for Machiavellian duplicity.

For pious Cambridge men such as Ascham who upheld the Ciceronian ideal of rhetoric as a harmonious conjunction of *honestum* and *utile* (the ‘good’ and the ‘useful’), plain-speaking reflected transparency of purpose and an inherently moral impulse towards the truth. Although Machiavelli himself wrote with unambiguous clarity, his assertion that ‘one must know how to colour one’s actions and to be a good liar and deceiver’ led both Protestants and Catholics such as Cardinal Pole to associate him with Satan himself. Machiavelli rebutted the Ciceronian argument that it was always rational to be

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23 Queen Elizabeth’s Second Reply to the Parliamentary Petitions Urging the Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots, 24 November 1586 [hereafter Second Reply], ACFLO, 76.
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moral by asserting that successful statecraft depended on recognising the force of circumstance in human affairs and adapting oneself to necessity, which in turn required a degree of moral flexibility.

From an early age, Elizabeth had mastered with precocious skill what Machiavelli termed ‘the way of the fox’: the ability to dissemble, deceive and seduce with eloquence according to circumstance.26 This skill was key to Elizabeth’s political and personal survival, as she later admitted in a letter to James VI of Scotland in 1585 after upbraiding him for putting ‘two strings to one bow’ (i.e. not being ‘straight’ with her):

if you suppose that princes Causes be Vailed so couVertly that no intelligence may bewraye [i.e. reveal] them, deceave not yourself we old foxes can find shiftes to saue our selves by others malice and come by knowelege of greatest secret spatiaelye if it touche our freholde.27

By 1586, Elizabeth had gained a wide reputation for strategic equivocation. In a secret letter written to Mary Stuart in 1570, William Maitland advised his mistress ‘in your heart never trust a true word [Elizabeth] speaks, for you will find all plain craft without true dealing’.28 In the Treatise of Treasons John Leslie more explicitly compared Elizabeth’s regime to a ‘Machiavellian State’, as one corrupted by ‘the impudencie of lying without limite or meausre both in writing and woorde, [and the] forging and faining of friendship by fairest woordes, when worst was meant’.29 Even Elizabeth’s chief advisor, Lord Burghley, unsatisfied with her ‘answer answerless’ to parliamentary demands for Mary’s execution on 12 November 1586, wrote with exasperation that ‘the realm may call this a vain parliament or otherwise nickname it a parliament of words’.30

Elizabeth was aware that her opaque replies to parliament would encourage persons ‘Wicked of nature to suppose that I prolonged this tyme only pro forma, to the intent to make a shewe of clemencie’. In her second reply to parliament on 24 November 1586 she drew her audience’s attention to the compromising doubleness of rhetoric and the incriminating implications of silence: ‘If I speake and not complaine I shall dissemble, If I hold my peace your labor taken weare ful vaine’. She concluded by appealing to her audience’s sympathy for her rhetorical double-bind: ‘if I shold say it shold not be done, (by my faith) weare moore than I ment, If I shold say it shall be done, it weare

26 P, XVIII, 55.
27 Elizabeth to James, c.June-July 1585, BL MS Additional 23240, art.5, fols.15r (my emphasis).
29 ‘The Preface to the Reader’, in ‘A Treatise of Treasons against Q. Elizabeth and the Croune of England’ [1572], attributed to John Leslie; printed in A.C. Southern, Elizabethan Recusant Prose, 1559-1582 (London and Glasgow: Sanda and Co., 1950), 310-19. The main targets of Leslie’s attack were Cecil and his brother-in-law, Nicholas Bacon, whom Leslie and other pro-Marians believed had usurped Elizabeth’s monarchy. Although it is supposedly their ‘rule’ which Leslie identifies as Machiavellian, the passage may be read as deliberately ambiguous.
more than I cold now assure or were conuenient here to be declared’. In the context of such a sensitive diplomatic issue as the execution of a female, Catholic sovereign and heir apparent to the English throne, Elizabeth’s anxiety over misrepresentation led her to choose her words with more than usual care.\footnote{Second Reply, ACFLO, 73, 77.}

Perhaps in recognition of the negative moral connotations that artful rhetoric carried at this time, Elizabeth tried to play down her reputation for eloquence. With reference to the princely virtues of magnanimity and judgement in her second reply, Elizabeth emphasised her humility and feminine modesty: ‘As for the two latter, I will not boast: my sex doth not permit it’.\footnote{Robert Cecil, The Copy of a Letter to the Earl of Leicester… with a Report of Certain Petitions and Declarations Made to the Queen’s Majesty at Two Several Times… and Her Majesty’s Answers Thereunto by Herself Delivered [London: C. Barker, 1586]; printed in Elizabeth I: Collected Works [hereafter CW], eds. Leah S. Marcus, Janel Mueller and Mary Beth Rose (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2000), 190.} Elizabeth’s self-deprecating talk was part of a larger rhetorical strategy of deception, surprise and intimidation – an effective way of keeping her male councillors on their toes. James VI, however, was not convinced by Elizabeth’s dumb show, and in a letter dated only a few weeks before his mother’s execution he reminded her ‘how small difference Cicero concludes to be betwixt \textit{utile} and \textit{honestum} in his discourse thereof, and which of them ought to be framed to the other’.\footnote{James to Elizabeth, 26 January 1587, BL MS Cotton Caligula C.IX, art.72, fols.192r-93r; printed in CW, 292.} In the eyes of foreign rulers such as James, Elizabeth appeared to be departing from Cicero’s ethical approach by using the ‘good’ art of rhetoric to purely ‘useful’ and expedient ends, apparently without care for the moral consequences.

Just as Elizabeth used evasive rhetoric to shield her intent, she also used a rhetoric of motherly love to reinforce her subjects’ loyalty during this time of national crisis. It is clear that Elizabeth had no illusions about the true extent of her subjects’ devotion, for as she confided to the French ambassador in 1597, ‘she had to deal with nobles of divers humours, and peoples who, although they made great demonstration of love towards her, nevertheless were fickle and inconstant, and she had to fear everything’.\footnote{A. H. de Maisse, cited in Christopher Haigh, Elizabeth I [1988] (London and New York: Longman, 2001), 179.} ‘The populace is by nature fickle’, Machiavelli had warned in \textit{The Prince}: ‘It is easy to persuade them of something, but difficult to confirm them in that persuasion’.\footnote{P, VI, 19.} Elizabeth’s experiences during her sister Mary’s reign had taught her ‘the inconstancy of the people of England’, and the consequent importance of maintaining their support.\footnote{Queen Elizabeth’s Conversations with the Scottish Ambassador, William Maitland, c.September-October 1561, BL MS Royal 18.B.VI; printed in CW, 66.}

By using the language of love to tighten the bonds of loyalty with her subjects, Elizabeth was in keeping with Machiavelli’s advice that ‘a prince who
builds his power on the people … will be found to have established his power securely.\(^{37}\) Machiavelli’s observation that the ‘bond of love is one which men, wretched creatures that they are, break when it is to their advantage to do so’ was not entirely new in the context of English political writing, yet it departed significantly from the wider Christian humanist tradition represented by figures such as More, Erasmus and Juan Luis Vives.\(^{38}\) Although Machiavelli advised that ‘some men love as they please but fear when the prince pleases’, his conclusion that it is better to be feared than loved was contingent on circumstance and the virtù of the prince. The main objective, Machiavelli stated, was to keep one’s subjects united and loyal, which would not only ensure civic harmony but protect the prince from conspiracy:

on the side of the prince there is majesty of government, there are laws, the resources of his friends and of the state to protect him. Add to all these the goodwill of the people, and it is unthinkable that anyone should be so rash as to conspire.\(^{39}\)

With the exposure of numerous plots against her life in the years leading up to Mary’s execution, Elizabeth ostentatiously courted the goodwill of her people to reinforce their loyalty. In a letter to the lord mayor and citizens of London on 18 August 1586 (four days after the arrest of the conspirator Babington), Elizabeth used the word ‘love’ nine times, not including several references to ‘affection’, ‘hearts’, and ‘goodwill’:

Right trusty and well beloved, we greet you well. Being given to understand how greatly our good and most loving subjects of that City did rejoice at the apprehension of certain devilish and wicked-minded subjects of ours [i.e. Babington et al] … we are to our great comfort informed [of] … the inward love and dutiful affection [our subjects] bear toward us …\(^{40}\)

On the basis that familial love is given willingly and with a sense of natural duty, Elizabeth’s emphasis on her maternal love for her subjects proved to be a politically shrewd rhetorical strategy. According to John Guy, Elizabeth’s rhetoric of love became her ‘most effective tool of policy’, providing her with ‘weapons of political manipulation and manoeuvre’ which allowed her to work within the constraints of her gender to achieve her political ends.\(^{41}\) As Catherine Bates has pointed out, however, the rhetoric of courtship was also semantically problematic, since contemporary definitions of ‘courtship’ in both senses of ‘wooing’ and ‘being at court’ carried negative connotations of flattery,

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\(^{38}\) P, XVII, 53.

\(^{39}\) Ibid, XIX, 58.

\(^{40}\) MS Petyt 538, vol. 10, fol. 6; printed in *CW*, 285.

dissimulation and deceit.\textsc{ii} Perhaps for this reason Elizabeth, having played the part of both wooer and wooed in the political courtship ritual, always remained sceptical about her subjects’ unconditional devotion to her: ‘albeit my subjects, I think, love me as becomes me; yet is where so great perfection that all are content?’\textsc{iv}

Despite her best efforts, Elizabeth could not talk her way out of the rhetorical corner into which Mary Stuart and parliament had placed her. ‘There must be deeds and not words which must satisfie your demand’, Elizabeth acknowledged in her second reply.\textsc{iv} Since 1570 Elizabeth’s councillors had become increasingly frustrated by her unwillingness to take action against Mary, and drew on humanist principles of government to assert parliament’s right to counsel the Queen ‘by bill or speech’, whether she requested their advice or not.\textsc{v} As the debate over Mary’s execution developed into a constitutional crisis over the limits of monarchical authority, Elizabeth drew on a Machiavellian paradigm of counsel in her speeches to reassert her sovereign authority.

According to Erasmus, the key to good governance lay not only in the outstanding personal virtues of the ruler, but also (and often to a greater extent) in the moral wisdom and experience of his Council.\textsc{vi} Machiavelli, himself an exponent of the humanist tradition of classical republicanism, inherited a firm belief in the importance of good counsel, declaring that there ‘could be no better or more sensible institution [than parliament], nor one so effective in ensuring the security of the king and the kingdom’.\textsc{vii} However, Machiavelli departed from his contemporaries by pointing out that relations between rulers and councillors were not always ideally harmonious, but in reality often degenerated into a contest over authority and the exercise of power.

During the Tudor period, most councillors understood the relationship between imperium and consilium in terms of conjugal harmony, an idea that was implicitly gendered to emphasise the natural bond between male (dominant) rule and female (subordinate) counsel.\textsc{viii} This idea inherently complicated the balance of power during Elizabeth’s reign, for when the concept of monarchy became feminised the perceived authority of her male advisers increased. Even John Aylmer, whose \emph{Harborowe for Faithful and Trewe Subjects} (1559) was intended to be a refutation of John Knox’s infamous blast, justified female rule on the basis that the role of the Queen’s council would be enhanced.\textsc{ix} Although Machiavelli encouraged a degree of mutuality and co-operation between the prince and his ministers, he stated that the latter’s role was to provide the

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43 Elizabeth’s Conversations with Maitland, \textit{CWF}, 66.
44 Second Reply, Syndics of Cambridge University Library, MS Gg.II.34, pp.312-16; printed in \textit{CWF}, 200.
49 John Aylmer, \textit{An Harborowe for Faithful and Trewe Subjects} (Strasburg: 1559).
prince with advice ‘only concerning matters on which he asks their opinion, and nothing else’, while the prince’s prerogative was to ‘make up his own mind, by himself’. In accordance (consciously or not) with Machiavelli’s paradigm, Elizabeth asserted her unbridled authority as monarch and never recognised any diminution of her imperium because of her sex. She assured her council of her respect for their opinions, but emphasised her own learning, judgement and divine right as monarch to take counsel directly from God. She even threatened her counsellors that if they persisted in meddling in matters ‘above their capacity, not appertaining unto them’, she would quickly ‘uncouncil’ them.

For Elizabeth, the idea that subjects should dictate matters of policy to a sovereign (of whatever sex) was not only a ‘very great presumption’ on their part, but an act which threatened to disrupt the natural and divinely ordained order of society itself. Yet despite her protestations, her authority was conceived differently than her father’s had been. Elizabeth’s status as a female ruler required her to defend her sovereign authority in stronger and more uncompromising terms than any of her predecessors. Nevertheless, Elizabeth’s sex was not in itself the cause of the conflict with her councillors in 1586-7. Rather, they were frustrated by her refusal to conform to the Erasmian paradigm of a good Christian prince by leaving matters of state ‘to them that can best judge of them, as other princes do’.

Two distinct perspectives on the role of counsel are apparent in Elizabeth’s editorial changes to her first reply, drafted for publication by Sir Robert Cecil (then Royal Secretary) after the speech was delivered at Richmond on 12 November 1586. Towards the end of her manuscript, Elizabeth refers to the Bond of Association, acknowledging her subjects’ ‘great goodwilles and affections’ and their ‘great zeale to my saftie’. In Cecil’s original draft, this sentence continues: ‘for which I thincke my selfe bounde carefully to consider of it, and respect you therein’. This line was struck through by Elizabeth and replaced with: ‘so shal my bonde be strongar tied to greater care for all good’. While retaining the original meaning of the sentence – that Elizabeth intends to fulfil her monarchical obligation to ensure the security of the realm – the second version makes a significant shift in voice and emphasis. Rather than being a passive recipient of her councillors’ advice to which she, in the language of feudal-baronial contract theory, was ‘bounde’ to ‘consider’ and ‘respect’, Elizabeth makes herself the agent of the sentence, asserting her prerogative to take action and to participate in a mutual bond of loyalty. This co-drafted speech is therefore highly significant in revealing two competing views of the

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50 P, XXIII, 75.
51 First Reply, ACFLO, 72.
52 Queen Elizabeth’s Speech to Bishops and other Clergy at Somerset Place, 27 November, 1585; printed in CIF, 178.
53 Queen Elizabeth’s First Speech Before Parliament, 10 February 1559, BL MS Lansdowne 94, art.14, fol.29; printed in CIF, 57.
54 Walsingham to Burghley, 6 October 1586, CSPDom, 2/194/14.
55 First Reply, ACFLO, 72.
relationship between councillor and monarch, and of the balance of power between them.

Collinson and others have asserted that the conflict between Elizabeth and Burghley over the execution of Mary Stuart arose out of fundamentally different perceptions of the Elizabethan polity.\(^56\) It may also be argued that these different perceptions of polity reflect two distinct paradigms of counsel: one which asserted the right of councillors to direct and advise the Queen irrespective of her wishes (Erasmian), the other used by the Queen herself to reinforce her royal prerogative and protect her exercise of power (Machiavellian).\(^57\) Although Elizabeth’s status as a female monarch significantly influenced her relationship with council, when viewed in this light the Queen’s sex may simply have been used as a convenient fuel to rekindle a perennial debate about monarchical power. For the purposes of this study, it is enough to say that Elizabeth was evidently not prevented from engaging in the patriarchal language of counsel, or even turning it against itself.\(^58\)

If the emphatic way in which Elizabeth asserted authority over her Erasmian councillors in 1586 is one example of her Machiavellian style of rule, another is her willingness to explore more ‘indirect’ or, as Burghley and Sir Amias Paulet held, illegal and morally suspect solutions to the problem of Mary. According to Heisch, ‘short of speaking the unspeakable’, Elizabeth came ‘as close to advocating assassination of her cousin as seems possible’ in these speeches.\(^59\) Like Machiavelli, Elizabeth recognised that a good prince must ‘know how to do evil’ if necessity requires it, but also that it is preferable to ‘delegate to others the enactment of unpopular measures’ in order to avoid the hatred of the people.\(^60\) While Elizabeth needed to maintain at least an outward show of authority over her council, she refused to accept full responsibility for Mary’s death. Instead, she asked her council to find ‘some other meanes’ for Mary’s death, ‘wherin I shold haue taken more comfort then in anie other thinge vnder the sonne’.\(^61\)

Machiavelli described the potential complications surrounding capital punishment, and advised that execution should be used as a last resort and ‘only when there is proper justification and manifest reason for it’.\(^62\) Despite her councillors’ persuasions, Elizabeth remained unconvinced that there could be any justification for executing a divinely ordained sovereign like herself. She was even less willing to become, in the eyes of foreign princes, the instrument

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\(^{57}\) Although this distinction may be considered reductionist, I use the term ‘Erasmian’ loosely to designate those who, like Erasmus, wrote about and understood counsel in this way.


\(^{60}\) P, XVIII, 56; P XIX, 59.


\(^{62}\) P, XVII, 53.
of her ‘own sacred diadems’ profaning’. Thus, when her ‘greedy desire and hungry will’ for an alternative to public execution was not satisfied, Elizabeth remarked somewhat suggestively that ‘manie a man wold put his life in danger, for the safegard of a kinge, I doe not say that so wil I but I praie youe thinke that I haue thought vpon it’. As the drama of Mary Stuart’s trial and execution reached its climax, Elizabeth’s Machiavellian reputation became in itself a Machiavellian problem, which in turn required a Machiavellian solution. In a strongly-worded letter to Elizabeth on 26 January 1587, James VI warned his ‘very dear sister and cousin’ that if she proceeded against his mother the Queen of Scots, her ‘general reputation and the universal (almost) misliking of you may dangerously peril both in honour and utility your person and estate’. The link between a prince’s ‘honour’ and ‘estate’ was fragile at the best of times; Elizabeth had already been declared illegitimate by Pope Pius V in 1570, and her enemies in France, Spain and Scotland were ready to use Mary’s execution as an excuse to challenge her ‘pretended right’ to the English throne. Elizabeth’s virtuous reputation not only served to legitimise her as a sole female ruler, but broadcast her moral authority as a Protestant empress ordained by God. The international scandal of Mary’s execution threatened to destabilise Elizabeth’s power by forcing her into a role she did not wish to accept: namely, that of a parricidal, regicidal tyrant.

In chapters XV and XVI of The Prince, Machiavelli emphasised the importance of reputation as the key to political survival. He argued that it was not necessary for a prince to possess the moral qualities he displayed, since the ‘common people are always impressed by appearances and results’ and ‘everyone sees what you appear to be, [but] few experience what you really are’. Instead, Machiavelli emphasised the virtues of critical thinking, discretion and moral flexibility:

[I]t would be most laudable if a prince possessed all the qualities deemed to be good ... But, because of the conditions of the world ... some of the things that appear to be virtues will, if he practices them, ruin him, and some of the things that appear to be vices will bring him security and prosperity.

By following her political instincts, Elizabeth recognised that the virtue of mercy, if stretched too far towards Mary, would inevitably lead to her ruin, while the vice of executing an anointed prince would ensure both her own

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63 James to Elizabeth, 26 January 1587, BL MS Cotton Caligula C.IX, art.72, fols.192r-93r; printed in CW, 291.
64 Second Reply, ACFLO, 74.
65 James to Elizabeth, 26 January 1587, CW, 292.
68 P, XVIII, 56.
69 Ibid, XV, 49.
personal safety and the security of the realm. As she conceded in her second reply, ‘nowe it is resolued, that my sureties cannot be established, without a Princess [sic] head’. Like Machiavelli, Elizabeth’s experience of political realities had taught her that virtue in itself was no protection against the many who are not virtuous: ‘I haue found treason in trust; seele great benefitts little regard, in stede of gratefulnes, courses of purpose to crosse’. Nevertheless, Elizabeth understood the power of appearances, and in her speeches to parliament she took pains to present herself as an exemplar of Christian forbearance and mercy.

In her first reply, Elizabeth claimed that despite Mary’s various attempts on her life she was ‘cleare frome malice’ towards her:

[If] we were but as two milke maides, with pailes vpon oure armes, or that there were no dependency vpon vs, but myne owne life were onlie in danger and not the whole estate of youre religion and well doings, I protest … I wolde most willinglie pardon and remitt this offence.

Later in her second reply, Elizabeth again drew attention to the many acts of mercy she had shown Mary, and expressed her own sense of injustice that after having ‘pardoned so manie rebells’ and ‘winked at so manie treasons’, she was now being accused of cruelty:

I maie therefore full well complaine, that anie man shold thinke me giuen to creweltie, whereof I am so guiltless and Innocent … Yea I protest I am so farre from it, that for myne owne life, I wold not touche her … which I am right sorie is made so hard, yea so impossible.

Like a good Christian prince, Elizabeth was willing to turn the other cheek for her kinswoman and sister-queen. Yet she made it clear that, despite her own natural desire for clemency, Mary had forced her into a ‘hard’ and ‘impossible’ position.

Elizabeth devoted a significant part of her second reply to rebutting the ‘manie opprobrious bookes and pamphlets against me, my realme, and state, accusing me to be a tyrant’. One such work (albeit published five years after Mary’s death) by the exiled English recusant Richard Verstegan claimed to chronicle ‘the English inquisition and the cruel and Machiavellian acts perpetrated by Calvinist Protestants in England and Ireland under Elizabeth, still queen’. Elizabeth responded to similar accusations by emphasising her

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70 First Reply, 74, 70.
71 Ibid, 69.
72 Ibid, 74.
73 Elizabeth’s Second Reply, ACFLO, 74
devotion to Justice, declaring ‘among my subiects I neuer knew a difference of person wheare right was one’. In doing so, she reinforced her long identification with the biblical prophetess Deborah, one of the judges of Israel, and thus affirmed her legitimacy as a divinely ordained Christian ruler. Yet Elizabeth also recognised the political truth of Machiavelli’s advice that princes are ‘often forced to act in defiance of good faith, of charity, of kindness, of religion’ in order to maintain their states. Thus, having assured her international audience of her virtuous character, she conceded: ‘I am not so void of judgment as not to see myne owne perill, nor yet so ignorant as not to know it were a foolish course, to cherish a sword to cut myne own throat’.

Despite her best efforts at self-promotion, Elizabeth evidently realised that a catalogue of her virtues would not be enough to win over powerful foreign princes such as Henri III of France and Philip II of Spain, who were already prejudiced against her. ‘What will theie not now say’, Elizabeth asked parliament in her second reply, ‘when it shall be spread, that for the safetie of her life a maiden Quene could be content, to spill the blood euen of her owne kinswoman?’ In order to avoid the Machiavellian reputation of one who would willingly sacrifice her closest female relative for the sake of political expediency, Elizabeth sought to shift the burden of guilt onto her rival.

In contrast with the endless stream of patriotic Protestant polemic being hurled against Mary in parliament, Elizabeth’s subtle editorial changes to her replies suggest that she wished to avoid aggressive condemnation of Mary. She deleted with diplomatic delicacy references to the Scottish Queen as ‘uoide of grace’ or ‘false in faith’, and declared her desire to protect her from ‘so publike question’. However, while her councillors, clergyman and lawyers presented an array of historical, biblical and legal precedents to justify regicide, Elizabeth recognised that the execution of a guilty traitor would be more easily justifiable to the world than that of a sovereign queen. Elizabeth’s attempts to discredit Mary were subtle but effective, and arguably all the more Machiavellian because they were veiled with false protestations of friendship.

In her first reply, Elizabeth accused Mary of putting on a false show of virtue and remorse, wishing that ‘shee trulie wold repent (as perhapps she wolde easely appeare in outward sheowe to do)’. Having thus indirectly (and ironically) labeled Mary a Machiavellian, Elizabeth went on to emphasise the serious moral and spiritual consequences of her treasons: ‘in seeking my destruction, they [Mary and her co-conspirators] mighte haue spoiled their owne sowles’. Thus, Elizabeth was able to condemn Mary with subtle insinuations while preserving her own virtuous image as a just and merciful ruler. Elizabeth had described Mary earlier in her first reply as ‘one not different in sex, of like estate and … neare kinne’, but she went on to distance

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75 Second Reply, ACFLO, 76.
76 Judges 4:4.
77 P, XVIII, 56.
78 Elizabeth’s Second Reply, ACFLO, 74.
79 Ibid, 74.
81 See Neale, Elizabeth I and her Parliament, 1584-1601, 107ff; First Reply, ACFLO, 69.
herself from the Scottish Queen by labeling her a ‘contriver’ of conspiracies.\(^82\) Elizabeth denounced Mary in even stronger terms in a letter to Paulet earlier that August (which was later copied and widely circulated), calling her ‘dangerous and crafty’, ‘wicked’, ‘vile’ and ‘treacherous’.\(^83\) This language strongly contradicted Elizabeth’s public declarations of affection and respect for Mary, especially her claim to be ‘cleare frome malice’ towards her.\(^84\)

Elizabeth’s attempts to criminalise Mary were entirely consonant with Machiavelli’s advice in *The Prince*. Machiavelli argued that if certain individuals threatened the stability of the community, it was always more compassionate to ‘remove a few individuals’ than to allow civil discord to spread.\(^85\) Thus, Elizabeth represented Mary as the source of civil discord and a threat to ‘the whole estate of yourre religion and well doings’. She assured her subjects that her first priority was to ensure their safety: ‘I wold I assure you not desire to liue, but gladlie give my life to th’end my death might procure you a better prince’.\(^86\) Elizabeth never publicly condoned Mary’s execution, but she justified the immoral act of executing Mary by emphasising her moral end: the safety of her subjects and the security of her realm.

Machiavelli also argued that a prince ‘must not flinch from being blamed for vices which are necessary for safeguarding the state’.\(^87\) Likewise, Elizabeth held her ground in response to threats and criticisms from foreign princes. In reply to Henri III’s warnings that ‘the death of the Queen of Scotland befalling thus as some counsel you, would be infinitely more prejudicial to you than her life can inconvenience you’, Elizabeth warned him in turn to ‘beware the House of Guise’.\(^88\) In a more conciliatory reply to James’ accusations that his mother’s execution was state-sanctioned murder, Elizabeth asked him to ‘transfigure’ himself into her position, and invoked the Machiavellian language of necessity.\(^89\) While she continued to assert her innocence in the events leading up to Mary’s death, she firmly reminded James that ‘I am not so base minded that fear of any living creature or prince should make me afraid to do what were just or, done, to deny the same’.\(^90\) This firm stance evidently paid off, for neither Henri nor James joined Spain’s attack on England in 1588. In effect, Elizabeth had used Machiavellian rhetoric to solve the problem of a Machiavellian reputation, by persuading others that it was Mary, and not herself, who was the instrument of her ‘own sacred diadems’ profaning’.\(^91\)

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82 First Reply, *ACFLO*, 69, 70-1, 69, 70-1.
83 Elizabeth to Sir Amias Paulet, August 1586, BL MS Landsdowne 1236, art.28, fol.44; printed in *CW*, 284.
84 First Reply, *ACFLO*, 69.
85 *P*, XVII, 52.
86 First Reply, *ACFLO*, 69.
87 *P*, XV, 49.
89 Elizabeth to James, 1 February 1587, BL MS Additional 23240, art.18, fol.58r.
90 Elizabeth to James, 14 February 1587, BL MS Cotton Caligula C.IX, fol. 212r; printed in *CW*, 296.
91 James to Elizabeth, January 26 1587, *CW*, 291.
By examining Elizabeth’s speeches relating to Mary’s execution in light of Machiavelli’s *Prince*, it is easier to see the logic behind Elizabeth’s attempts to reinforce her authority as a female monarch and to justify her exercise of power in 1586-7. The many ways in which Elizabeth’s rhetorical strategies conformed to Machiavelli’s advice (intentionally or not) testify to her sophistication as a politician, and challenge the generally accepted view of Elizabeth as a chronically indecisive and merely fortunate ruler. Although it may be presumed that Machiavelli’s advice on effective statecraft merely voiced what successful rulers had already been doing for centuries, his influence on English political thought is reflected in Elizabeth’s deliberate and self-conscious use of rhetoric to reinforce her sovereign authority, preserve her reputation and justify the execution of a sister Queen. In light of contemporary debates on the ethics of rhetoric and the limitations of royal authority, Machiavelli’s intellectual influence on Elizabeth is clearly visible, and carries significant implications not only for our understanding of her political philosophy, but Elizabethan politics in general.

Firstly, it undermines the assumption that Elizabeth was prevented from engaging in contemporary discourses of statecraft because of her sex: arguably, Elizabeth’s status as a female monarch only made her more Machiavellian, since she was forced to use more indirect and subtle methods to achieve her ends. Elizabeth’s adoption of artful speech also reflects her unique position in European history as the only adult, unmarried regnant ruler of either sex: as a woman, Elizabeth could feign ignorance and plead silence, but as a female king, she could wield rhetoric with masculine skill and force. It would be profitable to extrapolate this study to other European contexts or even to other politically active women in England, in order to determine whether Elizabeth’s self-conscious and ambivalent attitude to rhetoric was simply an individual response to circumstances, or whether it expressed a more general curiosity and suspicion with the Machiavellian ‘linguistic turn’.

Secondly, Elizabeth’s awareness of (and, arguably, her implementation of) the ideas expounded in *The Prince* indicates that previous historians may have failed to give an adequate account of the development of English Machiavellism in the sixteenth century. This article has shown that the intellectual impact of Machiavelli’s ideas was not confined to the perimeters of the court, but penetrated to the very centre of political power. Consequently, Machiavelli’s influence on the development of English politics may have been more pervasive and, in the context of Mary’s execution, more historically significant than has been hitherto acknowledged.

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