

Sir Henry Unton, Elizabeth I and Chivalric Diplomacy

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Introduction

Chivalry was engrained in Tudor political culture. As Steven Gunn has suggested “Tudor chivalry was turned to the service of the state, of the dynasty, and of individual rulers”¹. Through the Order of the Garter and their use of jousts, tournaments, and other militaristic enterprises, successive Tudor monarchs bound their subjects to them, emphasising the chivalric idea of loyalty to the monarch and promoting vertical and horizontal bonds of knighthood.² Concurrently, the state increasingly sought to locate honour within monarchically-sanctioned events, positions, and institutions.³ As Roy Strong and others have shown, chivalric discourses became a powerful aspect of Elizabethan political culture, as Elizabeth I (1533–1603) and her subjects styled the virgin queen as the object of their courtly devotion whom they sought to protect from her foes.⁴ The importance of chivalric ideas and practices was not, however, limited to the domestic sphere. Male Renaissance monarchs mediated their masculinity, in part, through chivalric notions, meaning that such ideas became important to inter-princely relations. Chivalry was certainly an important motivating factor in the foreign policy of Henry VIII (1491–1547).⁵ But what was the relationship between chivalry and diplomacy when a woman, not a man, sat on the English throne?

To go some way towards answering that question, this essay will explore some of the ways in which discourses of chivalry were used in Elizabethan diplomacy, for it was in the reign of England’s second queen regnant that the full implications of female rule for international relations became apparent. Much of the discussion will concentrate on the so-called “second reign” of Elizabeth I, the period in the later 1580s and 1590s during which Elizabeth was engaged in wars in the Netherlands, France, and Ireland, for it was during periods of warfare that chivalric ideas crystallised most clearly in Elizabethan diplomatic discourse.⁶

Sir Henry Unton (c.1558–1596) provides a useful and somewhat unusual case study through which to examine Elizabethan chivalric diplomacy. Unton twice served Elizabeth as ambassador to the French king Henry IV (1553–1610) in the 1590s. His first embassy took place between August 1591 and June 1592. He was appointed ambassador again in December 1595, but this second embassy was cut short by his death on 23 March 1596. This essay will first explore the diplomatic context of Elizabethan chivalry before focussing on Unton’s first mission. Through an analysis of Unton’s letters and his behaviour at Henry’s court it will

¹ Steven J. Gunn: “Chivalry and the Politics of the Early Tudor Court”, in: *Chivalry in the Renaissance*, ed. S. Anglo Woodbridge: Boydell, 1990, pp. 107–28, here p. 107.

² *Ibid.* – Richard McCoy: *The Rites of Knighthood: The Literature and Politics of Elizabethan Chivalry*. London: University of California Press, 1989. – Richard Cust: “Chivalry and the Elizabethan Gentleman”, in: Malcolm Smuts (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of the Age of Shakespeare*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 458–76.

³ Mervyn James: *Society, Politics and Culture: Studies in Early Modern England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978, pp. 332–74.

⁴ Roy Strong: *The Cult of Elizabeth: Elizabethan Portraiture and Pageantry*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1977.

⁵ Steven J. Gunn: “Henry VIII’s Foreign Policy and the Tudor Cult of Chivalry”, in: *Francois Ier et Henri VIII*, ed. Charles Giry-Deloison Lille: Centre d'histoire de la région du Nord et de l'Europe du Nord-Ouest, 1995, pp. 25–35.

⁶ For an overview of these campaigns see Paul Hammer: *Elizabeth’s Wars: War Government and Society in England, 1544–1604*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, chs. 4–6. For the idea of the ‘second reign’ see John Guy (ed.): *The Reign of Elizabeth I: Court and Culture in the Last Decade*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

examine the interaction between chivalry and diplomatic representation. The potential tensions inherent between the two will come into sharp relief in the final section of the essay which explores a unique incident in which Unton was involved: he challenged a leading French nobleman to a duel. In this instance, the misfiring of a chivalric impulse is revealing of both the embeddedness of chivalric culture within the Elizabethan diplomatic ranks and how, in some circumstances, notions of masculinity might mean that the personal and official honour of the diplomat did not always cohere.

Diplomatic Conventions and the Utility of Chivalry

At the accession of Mary I (1516–1558), existing English diplomatic conventions were based on the assumption of male monarchy. It was also widely believed that a close relationship with the monarch was a qualification for diplomatic service. Hence Nicholas Carew (d. 1539) was deemed a suitable ambassador for Henry VIII because he was one of the greatest intimates of the king.⁷ More generally there was a politics of intimacy in Henrician England that meant that figures such as the gentlemen of Henry's Privy Chamber (the department responsible for the innermost apartments in his palaces) were considered appropriate to represent his person abroad.⁸ The accession of a female monarch removed this potential source of diplomats. Under Mary and Elizabeth the Privy Chamber was primarily staffed with women, not men,⁹ as it was inappropriate for a queen to be surrounded by male intimates in her private apartments. A variety of women including the wives of ambassadors and important councillors may have taken on informal diplomatic roles, acting as important intermediaries in many courtly contexts, including diplomatic ones as recent scholarship, including several of the essays in this volume testifies,¹⁰ but in this period, women were not deemed suitable ambassadors.¹¹ The enduring prestige of the Privy Chamber remained, however, for some of Elizabeth's diplomats, such as Sir Nicholas Throckmorton (1515/16–1571) and Thomas Randolph (1525/6–1590), were appointed to the now largely honorific position of gentleman of her Privy Chamber.¹²

In such circumstances, the rhetoric of chivalry took on new utility. It provided a means by which the queen could demonstrate political intimacy with her putative ambassadors without the suggestion that she was transgressing traditional boundaries. This was particularly important for Elizabeth, whose mother had fallen from favour and been executed for adultery,

⁷ Rawdon Brown (ed.): *Calendar of state papers and manuscripts relating to English affairs, existing in the archives and collections of Venice and in other libraries in northern Italy*, 38 vols. London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1864–1947, vol. 3, no. 146.

⁸ David R. Starkey: "Representation through Intimacy: A Study in the Symbolism of Monarchy and Court Office in Early Modern England", in: *Tudor Monarchy*, ed. John Guy (London: Arnold, 1997), pp. 42–78. – *idem.*: "Intimacy and Innovation: The Rise of the Privy Chamber 1485–1547", in: *The English Court from the Wars of the Roses to the Civil War*, ed. David R. Starkey (Harlow: Longman, 1996), pp. 71–118.

⁹ See Pamela Wright: "A Change in Direction: The Ramifications of a Female Household, 1558–1603", in: *The English Court from the Wars of the Roses to the Civil War*, ed. David R. Starkey (Harlow: Longman, 1996), pp. 147–82.

¹⁰ See also Corinna Bastian et al (eds.): *Das Geschlecht der Diplomatie: Geschlechterrollen in den Außenbeziehungen vom Spätmittelalter bis zum 20. Jahrhundert*. Cologne: Böhlau, 2014. – Glenda Sluga and Carolyn James (eds.), *Women, Diplomacy and International Politics since 1500*. London: Routledge, 2016.

¹¹ For rare examples of women exercising defined diplomatic roles see Lucien Bély: *L'art de la paix en Europe: Naissance de la diplomatie moderne XVI^e–XVIII^e*. Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2007, pp. 213–24. – Nadine Akkerman: "The Postmistress, The Diplomat, and a Black Chamber? Alexandrine of Taxis, Sir Balthazar Gerbier and the Power of Postal Control", in: *Diplomacy and Early Modern Culture*, ed. Robyn Adams and Rosy Cox Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, pp. 172–88.

¹² The National Archives, London (TNA) SP 70/9, fos. 39v–40r; George Tolstoy (ed.): *The First Forty Years of Intercourse between England and Russia 1553–1593*. St Petersburg: A. Transhel'ia, 1875, p. 50.

something which several of her opponents were keen to use against her. Even more pertinently, Elizabeth faced numerous accusations that she was herself sexually promiscuous, engaging in relations with favourites such as Robert Dudley, earl of Leicester (1532/3–1588).¹³ As a result, the queen had to be especially careful to police the line between proper and improper intimacy at court.

The conventions of courtly love provided a mode of discourse through which courtiers could be politically intimate with Elizabeth despite her gender. Crucially, it permitted Elizabeth's subjects to express their loyalty and devotion to the queen without the suggestion of sexual impropriety. Elizabeth's reign appears to have brought something of a revival of chivalry. The poetry of courtiers such as Walter Raleigh drew upon the traditional chivalric language of courtly love to express their devotion.¹⁴ Equally the elaborate performances that developed around Elizabeth's Accession Day celebrations provided a locus for professions of loyalty with pageant sequences and *impreses* suffused with chivalric rhetoric. Even the household entertainments offered to the queen as she went on progress during the summer drew upon chivalric tropes in order to articulate love and honour for, and closeness to, the monarch.¹⁵

The utility of chivalric rhetoric went further than simply establishing political intimacy, however, as in many respects it complemented the impulses at play in ambassadorial representation. Most notably, the chivalric emphasis on service to the monarch, loyalty to her person, and the defence of her honour mirrored expectations of ambassadorial behaviour. Many aspects of the chivalric ethos that have been espied in domestic politics also manifested in Elizabethan diplomatic culture. Across her reign her ambassadors increasingly wore her portrait, for instance.¹⁶ This included Unton, who discussed the miniature of Elizabeth that he wore with Henry IV during his second embassy.¹⁷

Moreover, chivalric ideas had long been embedded in English diplomatic practice. They had suffused the entertainments which were held to entertain delegations from foreign princes and to celebrate the conclusion of important international treaties.¹⁸ Perhaps most famously, Henry VIII's meeting with Francis I (1494–1547) at the Field of the Cloth of Gold was dominated by chivalric notions.¹⁹ Tournaments continued to be used for diplomatic purposes in Elizabeth's reign; even the tilts that came to mark the celebrations of Elizabeth's Accession Day became important moments for diplomatic entertainment.²⁰ Alongside this there was a regular exchange of honour among princes through the bestowal of membership of the national chivalric orders on foreign rulers. As head of the Order of the Garter,

¹³ See for example TNA SP 15/11, fo. 15r; SP 70/19, fo. 39r; SP 70/30 fos. 34r–v, 53r; British Library, London (BL) Cotton MS Caligula E x, fo. 94v. – David Cressy: *Dangerous Talk: Scandalous, Seditious and Treasonable Speech in Pre-modern England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, pp. 69–77.

¹⁴ On courtly literature and chivalry see Steven W. May: *The Elizabethan Courtier Poets: The Poems and Their Contexts*. London: University of Missouri Press, 1991. – Alex Davis: *Chivalry and Romance in the English Renaissance*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003.

¹⁵ See for example Frances Yates: *Astraea: The Imperial Theme in the Sixteenth Century*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975, pp. 88–120. – McCoy, *Rites of Knighthood*; Sue Simpson, *Sir Henry Lee (1533–1611): Elizabethan Courtier*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2014.

¹⁶ See Tracey A. Sowerby: “‘A memorial and a pledge of faith’: Portraiture and Early Modern Diplomatic Culture”, in: *English Historical Review* 129 (2014), pp. 296–331. On portraiture and Elizabethan chivalry see Strong: *Cult of Elizabeth*.

¹⁷ Hatfield House Cecil Papers 171/72, fos. 2v–3r.

¹⁸ See for example Sydney Anglo: *Spectacle, Pageantry and Early Tudor Policy*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969, pp. 56–103.

¹⁹ Glenn Richardson: *The Field of Cloth of Gold*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 2013.

²⁰ See for example Victoria Musvik: “‘And the King of Barbary's envoy had to stand in the yard’: the perception of Elizabethan court festivals in Russia at the beginning of the seventeenth century”, in: *Court Festivals of the European Renaissance: Art, Politics and Performance*, ed. J. Ronnie Mulryne and Elizabeth Goldring Aldershot: Ashgate 2002, 225–40.

Elizabeth admitted foreign princes as stranger knights, notably several who commanded armies in her name (or secretly in her causes) on the continent.²¹

Sir Henry Unton and the Chivalric Impulse

Unton is a particularly revealing case study through which to examine the relationship between chivalry and Elizabethan diplomacy, not least because he has been characterised as typifying a certain type of Elizabethan political culture that was intensely associated with the ‘Cult of Elizabeth’ that Roy Strong and others believed pervaded later Elizabethan politics.²² At his death, Unton received commendations on his service from the French king and from numerous scholars and soldiers.²³ Before being appointed Elizabeth’s ambassador to Henry IV in 1591, Unton had acquired a range of overseas experience. He had travelled in France and Italy and, after being sent to the English army in the Low Countries as a messenger, he remained to serve under the earl of Leicester, earning a knighthood from Leicester for his military endeavours at the battle of Zutphen (1586) and serving as one of the mourners at the funeral of Sir Philip Sidney (1554–1586). He subsequently served as a deputy lieutenant in Oxfordshire between 1587 and 1593.²⁴ Unton was therefore heavily immersed in the militaristic ethos of the Elizabethan political elite and had direct experience of the chivalric culture that suffused the gentle and noble ranks of Elizabeth’s armies.²⁵

Unton’s activities while ambassador to France during his first embassy reveal how keenly some of Elizabeth’s ambassadors imbibed chivalric ideals and how these suffused their diplomatic practice. His letters demonstrate that he understood his overseas service to the queen in chivalric terms. They are saturated with profession of service and devotion and convey an exalted view of Elizabeth’s queenship. For instance, in several letters Unton addressed Elizabeth’s “sacred majesty”.²⁶ He also regularly professed his devotion to Elizabeth, effusing on different occasions that he had “wedded my self not for yeares but for life” to her service, would “pray for her [Highness] and sacrifice my life to her service”, and that “if I had many lives, I would not only hazard them, but loose them, to witnesse to the world my serviceable mynde” towards his mistress.²⁷ Unton claimed that he was “most happy when I receive her commandimentes and may doe her service”,²⁸ and that the queen’s “most princely regard of my poor self and so gracious acceptance of my dutiful mind doth mightily incourage me”, her favour and her letters were “the swetest sauce for these sower miseries,

²¹ Raymond B. Waddington: “Elizabeth I and the Order of the Garter”, in: *Sixteenth Century Journal* 24 (1993), pp. 97–113. – Edmund H. Fellowes: *The Knights of the Garter 1348–1939* 2 vols. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1939, vol. 2, pp. 1, 5, 33, 80, I, 130.

²² See for example Strong: *Cult of Elizabeth*, pp. 84–112.

²³ Jules Berger de Xivrey (ed.): *Recueil des lettres missives de Henri IV* 9 vols. Paris: Impr. Royale, 1843–76, vol. 4, p. 555. – Robert Wright: *Funebria nobilissimi ac praestantissimi equitis, D. Henrici Vntoni, ad Gallos bis legati Regij*. Oxford: Excudebat Iosephus Barnesius, 1596.

²⁴ On Unton’s background see *ibid.* – Mark Greengrass: “Unton [Umpton], Sir Henry (c.1558–1596)”, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*: <http://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2167/view/article/28001>. – Angela Cox: *Sir Henry Unton, Elizabethan Gentleman*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982. For an excellent study of the composition of surviving copies of Unton’s embassy letterbook see E. Williamson: “Diplomatic Letters as Political Literature: Copying Sir Henry Unton’s Letters” (forthcoming).

²⁵ On this culture see Rory Rapple: *Martial Power and Elizabethan Political Culture: Military Men in England and Ireland, 1558-1594*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. – Cust: ‘Chivalry’.

²⁶ See for example FSL MS Vb 354, fo. 55r; TNA SP 78/26, fo. 311r, 78/27, fo. 166r

²⁷ BL Cotton MS Caligula E viii, fos. 260r, 366r. Henry Unton: *Correspondence of Sir Henry Unton, knt. Ambassador from Queen Elizabeth to Henry IV of France, in the Years mdxci and mdxcii*, ed. Joseph Stevenson London: W. Nichol, 1847, p. 412.

²⁸ TNA SP 78/26, fo. 303v.

her pleasure [...] and honourable penninge thereof bringe me more comfort [than anything] else can bring discomfort”²⁹.

Unton’s most profuse declarations were reserved for the queen herself. In February 1592, for instance, he informed Elizabeth of “the trew and only comfort I receave of yo^r Highenes most gracious acceptance, of my poore endevores, and rawe dealing in matters of so greate weight commitede to my chardge”. He went on to explain his joy at serving

so rare and perfect a souveraigine; whose favor shyneth as well uppone the unworthy as the worthy; whose eares admytt noe malicious reports against yo^r poore servants; and whose mynde is absolute and free to grace and disgrace wth trew Judgement, according to mens demerytes, this is the only happynes of yo^r highenes subiectes and servants; whoe neade no mediation but may sufficiently depende upon yo^r selfe; and this doe I fynde and Feele to my nev^r endinge comfort.

This “doth not only Incouradge me, but bynd me to sacryfize a 1000 lyfes yf I had them for yo^r service”, he concluded.³⁰ When temporarily in disgrace in November 1591, he lamented that Elizabeth’s “onely favor is able to geve lyfe to our actions and comforte to my soule” and that being out of her favour had “bred in my soul many greifs and a never ending death to my mind”³¹. Upon learning that the queen had forgiven him, he gushed that the “comfort I lately receavede by her maties right gracious letters is very greate and hath revyvede mi as yt weare from death to lyfe”.³² Unton was far from the only late Elizabethan diplomat to use such language. A wide range of Elizabethan diplomats praised the queen’s sacred majesty, including William Harborne (c.1542–1617), Thomas Wilkes (c.1545–1598), and Edward Wotton (1548–1628).³³ Yet others professed their loyalty effusively.³⁴ Thomas Edmondes (d.1639), Unton’s embassy secretary, and sometime English charge d’affaires in France, begged Elizabeth “to withdrawe from me the cloude of *your* heavie displeasure, and to be pleased to be enformed of my reverent affection & desire to do *your* majestie all humble service to my uttermost possibillitie” when out of favour in July 1596.³⁵

Devotion to one’s monarch was just one strand of chivalric thought. Elizabethan chivalry was also closely linked to martial culture, with the honourable performance of military services being closely linked to notions of masculinity.³⁶ This took on particular resonance at the court of Henry IV, which was also suffused with a highly martial culture in the early 1590s. A posting to Henry IV’s court at this time essentially meant following the king as he campaigned across the country trying to gain control of his kingdom and recognition from Catholics of his right to the crown. Despite the difficulties caused by his military campaigns, Henry nonetheless maintained a court throughout the civil war and from at least 1593 was able to host lavish entertainments. Compared to his predecessors’ courts or even his own peacetime court this was somewhat depleted, however, for many nobles did not attend either

²⁹ BL Cotton MS Caligula E viii, fo. 366r. See also TNA SP 78/27, fo. 162r.

³⁰ TNA SP 78/27, fo. 166v.

³¹ Folger Shakespeare Library (FSL) MS Vb354, fo. 21r. Other Elizabethan courtiers used similar language see for example Robert Dudley’s effusions at TNA SP 84/8, fos. 189r–v, 252r. Even William Cecil, a career bureaucrat professed himself “woundid in my heart” and “in great anguish of hart” at Elizabeth’s displeasure: BL Lansdowne MS 102, fo. 10r.

³² TNA SP 78/26, fo. 182r.

³³ See for example TNA SP 97/1, fos. 36r, 41r; SP 52/38, fo. 85r; SP 105/91 fo. 54r.

³⁴ See for example BL Cotton Galba D x fo. 35r–v; TNA SP 52/3, fo. 96r; SP 52/47, pp. 211–12; SP 52/50, fo. 13r; SP 84/23 fo. 360r.

³⁵ Hatfield House, Cecil Papers 43/21.

³⁶ Cust: ‘Chivalry’.

for religious reasons or because they had responsibilities defending Protestant areas of the country.³⁷

In such circumstances, Unton's military experience, however brief, may well have commended him as an ambassador to the embattled French king. One of his primary duties, in addition to the usual negotiations, was to coordinate between the French king and the leaders of the English troops that Elizabeth had sent to support him. Moreover it was a dangerous posting. During his first embassy the threat of military engagement while attending court was so strong that Unton was forced to hire soldiers to protect his embassy and he attended upon the French king in armour, despite the queen's orders to the contrary. Unton insisted that his military precautions were necessary as ambassadorial immunity was scarcely respected by the king's enemies, writing in October 1591 that had he "trusted more to the privilege of an Amb^r then to the weapo[ns and] armes of a souldier I had ben taken prisoner"³⁸. Whether he stayed with the king or in a nearby town, Unton believed himself in danger due to the wars and was convinced that no other English ambassador had faced such perils; but in his assessment "the safest place to bee [is] wth the K in the campe"³⁹. Nonetheless, the king's camp was sufficiently insecure that Unton had his belongings stolen while he slept in January 1591, though he came to no physical harm.⁴⁰ The ambassador also insisted that it was necessary for him to attend upon the king while on campaign because it gave him better access to current military intelligence and because the king desired he do so.⁴¹

Henry's martial court provided fertile ground for the chivalric ethos of Elizabethan diplomacy to take on new resonance, especially for a relatively inexperienced diplomat, such as Unton, who had a predilection for militaristic exploits. Circumstances, he claimed, obliged him not only to follow the king, but to fight alongside him, for "this tyme, this place and these persons force me rather to become a soldier than a discreat Ambassador"⁴². There is certainly ample evidence that Unton actively participated in several of Henry IV's campaigns during his embassy. Although it was not unusual for ambassadors to accompany the monarch to whom they had been posted should he go on campaign, Unton was rare in joining in the military action and fighting alongside the king.⁴³ For instance, Unton took up arms during Henry's attack on Bures on 7 February 1592, writing in his reports of how "we sett the village on fire", "had the spoile of there baggage", and "chased the enemy 3 myles upon the spurre"; such was the exertion that his horse died immediately afterwards.⁴⁴ Just a few weeks earlier, Unton had been close by when the king had been shot during a skirmish at Aumale.⁴⁵ Other references in Unton's letters suggest that he was commonly at Henry's side during battles and he claimed that the French king requested his presence: "yt pleaseth him to call

³⁷ For an excellent study of Henry IV's court see Marc Jaffre: "The Court of Henry IV". M.Phil. thesis, University of Oxford, 2010. Here pp. 9–28

³⁸ BL Cotton MS Caligula EVIII, fos 203r, 209v.

³⁹ TNA SP 78/27, fo. 133r–v

⁴⁰ Unton: *Correspondence*, pp. 243–4, 256.

⁴¹ FSL MS Vb 364, fo. 40r.

⁴² BL Cotton MS Caligula E viii, fo. 359v.

⁴³ Sir Richard Morison, for instance, often followed the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V as Charles campaigned, but remained aloof from the military action. See Tracey A. Sowerby: *Renaissance and Reform in Tudor England: The Careers of Sir Richard Morison, c. 1513–1556*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, ch. 6. Admittedly, England and the Emperor did not enjoy a military alliance during these years, but there is no evidence that earlier ambassadors to the imperial court fought alongside the Emperor during Henry VIII's wars.

⁴⁴ TNA SP 78/27, fo. 133r–v. BL Cotton MS Caligula E viii, fo. 349r.

⁴⁵ TNA SP 78/27, fos. 81r–2r; Unton, *Correspondence*, p. 291.

me wth him”.⁴⁶ As the king often led charges personally, this would place Unton in the heart of the action. Unton himself squarely placed the blame for his military exploits on the French king, who, he claimed, often summoned him to be in the field with him “wherby I may see his derrections”. To refuse to join him “were to render me unacceptable to him, and unprofitable to my selfe and to her ma^{tes} service, wherfore when I adventure it is wth the K. him selfe”. And he claimed that as long as he was at Henry’s side, he was sometimes able to “remember him of his safety” and restrain the king from doing anything too dangerous, no mean claim for Elizabeth was also at this time chiding the French king for taking risks like a normal soldier and not having enough respect for his position and responsibilities as king.⁴⁷

While Unton clearly felt that it was contingent upon him to fight alongside the French king if he were to represent Elizabeth effectively, the queen and her councillors took a very different view and saw it as a derogation of his duties. In February 1592 Unton received reprimands from Burghley and from the queen. Elizabeth personally wrote that

we doe require that you have suche regard of ventring your selfe as shall become a man of your place and stand wth your safety of w^{ch} we dayly heare you are less respectfull then wee would in any wise wish you should, for the good opinion we hold of your desire to do us service.⁴⁸

So why did Elizabeth believe that Unton’s active involvement in military engagements was unbecoming behaviour for her representative?

As an ambassador, Unton possessed representative character. Elizabeth’s instructions had articulated that he was “in a certaine manner representing *our* person”.⁴⁹ In other words Unton was the symbolic stand-in of the queen. When he spoke as ambassador it was ‘as if’ Elizabeth did and when he was accorded ceremonial treatment, it was by virtue of his role as the queen’s representative. As a contemporary writer on diplomacy, Jean Hotman (1552–1636), explained an ambassador “representeth the greatnes of his prince in a forraine Countrie, and in the view of the worlde, and [...] the faultes which he committeth are many times cause of the contempt of his Maister, or of some worsere consequence”⁵⁰. Consequently, how Unton behaved and was treated while ambassador had tangible consequences for Elizabeth’s reputation and her status within the society of princes.⁵¹ No wonder, then, that she expected him to “order all yo^r Actions” with “wisidome, gravitie and temperance” in order to preserve her royal dignity.⁵²

It was precisely because he possessed representative character that the queen was eager for Unton to avoid any personal involvement in military engagements or other ventures that might expose him to physical harm. The Queen’s leading councillor, William Cecil, Lord Burghley (1520/1–1598), warned Unton that Elizabeth was asking the French king to command Unton “not to hazard yo^r self [abroad] in any adventurous service, whearebie you might be either [taken as] prisoner, or yor person endangred”. The queen believed that “it might towche her in estimacon in the worlde” if Unton, “being hir Ambassador [were] to be taken a prisoner” or otherwise hurt and she would “take yt malum omen to her s[elf]

⁴⁶ See for example TNA SP 78/27, fos. 81r, 133v.

⁴⁷ BL Cotton MS Caligula E viii, fo. 359v; TNA SP 78/27, fo. 133r–v.

⁴⁸ BL Cotton MS Caligula E viii, fos. 152v, 148r.

⁴⁹ TNA SP 78/25, fo. 81r.

⁵⁰ Jean Hotman: *The ambassador*. London: by Valentine Simmes for Iames Shawe, 1603, sig. C4r–v. For a brief discussion of the evolution of representative character in the late middle ages see Donald Queller: *The Office of Ambassador in the Middle Ages*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967, pp. 99–101.

⁵¹ For the idea of the ‘society of princes’ see Lucian Bély, *La Société des princes XVIe–XVIIIe siècle*. Paris: Fayard, 1999.

⁵² TNA SP 78/25, fo. 81r.

considering yowe doe theare represent hir person”⁵³. Because he possessed representative character, any injury that Unton sustained would be as if a blow had been struck to the queen herself. By placing himself in a position where he might come to physical harm and suffer dishonourable treatment, he endangered the queen’s status and reputation. Elizabethan manuals on honour enumerated a graduated hierarchy of injuries sustained in a battle, which were directly linked to a loss of a portion of one’s honour.⁵⁴ No wonder, then, that the queen personally reprimanded Unton for his escapades. For Elizabeth, ambassadorial representation and military action were mutually exclusive.⁵⁵ But Unton did not take the queen’s warning too much to heart, for he continued to travel with the king’s campaign and occasionally lend his services until his recall. Indeed he openly admitted to Burghley that while he would follow his grave advice to “keepe my selfe from adventures” in so far “as this place and tyme will suffer me”, he would not do so indiscriminately and would use his discretion.⁵⁶

The militaristic ethos at Henry’s court caused further moments of friction between the queen and her representative. These also stemmed from the tension between exigent circumstances, the personal identity of the ambassador, and his representative character. One source of such tension stemmed from the fact that Unton and several Englishmen in his retinue had been knighted by the French king for their military service.⁵⁷ Unton was at a loss to understand the queen’s displeasure at this, for other Englishmen fighting alongside Henry had earlier received knighthoods from the French king without comment from Elizabeth and he later claimed that they had been forced into it to please the king.⁵⁸ Once again, Unton failed to appreciate that there was a substantive difference between how an ordinary English soldier might behave and what the queen’s princely proxy might do. An ordinary Englishman accepting a knighthood from a foreign prince might well be receiving an honour, which he could do as a private individual.⁵⁹ But the ambassador’s possession of representative character placed him in a different position. Because knighthoods were conferred from superiors to inferiors as a reward for service, Unton, as Elizabeth’s ambassador, could not accept a knighthood from the king without it having repercussions for her place within the international honour society. Whereas it might be acceptable for ambassadors representing non-monarchical polities to receive knighthoods from kings, a monarch’s ambassador doing so was far more complex and problematic. Unton’s acceptance of a knighthood from Henry might be interpreted as akin to Elizabeth receiving a knighthood from a foreign ruler and thus accepting a lower status than the ruler who conferred the knighthood. Elizabeth may have found the implications of Unton’s actions particularly galling when it was her armies and money that were helping Henry fight for his crown.

Unton’s Challenge

While Unton’s rhetoric may have been fairly conventional, his chivalric impulses also manifested in what was a fairly exceptional manner for a diplomat: he repeatedly challenged

⁵³ BL Cotton MS Caligula E viii, fo. 148r. See also Unton: *Correspondence*, p. 319. Elizabeth’s mention of an ill omen may well be a reference to the widespread belief that the outcomes of battles were a sign of God’s providence. On these attitudes see Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

⁵⁴ See for example, William Segar: *Honour military and ciuill contained in foure bookes*. London: Robert Barker, 1602, pp. 130–1

⁵⁵ BL Cotton MS Caligula E viii, fo. 152v.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, fo. 359v.

⁵⁷ FSL MS Vb, fo. 36r; TNA SP78/26, fo. 166r; BL Cotton MS Caligula E viii, fos. 114r, 258v, 260r; The other knights included Christopher Lytcott, Thomas Challoner, and Deurax Pole.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, fo. 258v; FSL MS Vb 364, fo. 36r.

⁵⁹ Elizabeth was, however, increasingly unhappy with the French king bestowing knighthoods on any of her subjects. See Unton: *Correspondence*, pp. 192–3.

Charles, Duke of Guise (1571–1640) to a duel in the spring of 1592.⁶⁰ In doing so, Unton was appropriating an emerging mode of honour politics that was primarily located within aristocratic culture. Having initially been reserved to the lower ranks of the French aristocracy, duelling was becoming increasingly endemic among all levels of the French nobility as it became more acceptable for aristocrats to defend their individual honour with recourse to violence.⁶¹ Indeed duels were not uncommon at Henry IV's court, which was marked by a martial mentality. However, the French king took a negative view of them and made efforts to reconcile the parties concerned.⁶² Elizabeth, too, took a dim view of duelling and often urged mediation over violence. Nonetheless, several Englishmen serving in Elizabeth's armies on the continent and others travelling overseas viewed the duel as "the ultimate means by which an individual in a foreign land could show his loyalty to his prince".⁶³ Unton was not an ordinary courtier, traveller, or soldier and by resorting to what Stuart Carroll has termed 'vindicatory violence' he was surpassing the bounds of his office, as shall be seen.

Unton claimed to have issued his challenge because Guise had been publically insulting Elizabeth's honour. As a key member of the Catholic League Guise was adamantly opposed to the support the English queen was giving the "Bearnais" claimant and, at this point at least, was lending his support to the candidature of the Spanish Infanta Isabella (1566–1633).⁶⁴ Unton alleged that "Impudently, Indiscreetly, and over boldly you spoke badly of my Sovereign," and "wickedly lied" as Unton claimed Guise always must if he dared to "tax her honour". Consequently, he asserted that he would give Guise the lie "with whatever manner of arms as you shall choose, be it either on foot or on horseback".⁶⁵

The language used in Unton's challenge reveals how deeply chivalric ideals had penetrated broader diplomatic discourses of honour and provides further insights into how he understood his relationship with Elizabeth "whose Person, here in this County I represent".⁶⁶ As Elizabeth's representative, Unton believed he had a duty to "maintain both by word and sword her honour". For most ambassadors, this usually took the form of trying to suppress salacious print and have the offenders punished, or upholding their monarch's place in the ceremonial system of their host court. Naturally it also included refuting any verbal dishonouring of their ruler and demanding restitution. The text of his challenge certainly defended Elizabeth's name, asserting that she was "one of the most virtuous and accomplished princes that lives in the world" whose reputation would not be questioned by anyone of "honesty and virtue" and should certainly not be besmirched by "such a perfidious

⁶⁰ He issued at least three challenges: BL Cotton MS Caligula E viii, fo. 232r. Although it is not possible to determine precisely when these challenges were issued, one had apparently reached Guise by 23 April: TNA SP 78/27, fo. 355r.

⁶¹ Stuart Carroll: *Blood and Violence in Early Modern France*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

⁶² Jaffre: "Court of Henry IV", esp. pp. 29–46.

⁶³ Rapple: *Martial Power*, pp. 87–8. On attitudes to duelling in England more broadly see Jennifer Low: *Manhood and the Duel: Masculinity in Early Modern Drama and Culture*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. – Markku Peltonen: *The Duel in Early Modern England: Civility, Politeness, and Honour*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

⁶⁴ Unton: *Correspondence*, p. 369.

⁶⁵ BL Cotton MS Caligula E viii, fo. 231r. This is a damaged, but contemporary, copy of the French text. I have supplemented this with a transcription taken when the manuscript was less damaged, published in Thomas Rymer: *Foedera conventiones, literæ, et cujuscunque generis acta publica, inter reges Angliæ*, 17 vols. London: per J. Tonson, 1726–35, vol. 16, p. 118. All quotations are my translation, made with sensitivity to the near contemporary English version published in Thomas Fuller: *The History of the Worthies of England*. London: J.G.W.L. and W.G. for Thomas Williams, 1662, p. 94, unless otherwise stated.

⁶⁶ The seventeenth-century English version reads "sacred person". While "sacred" is missing from the French text in the Cotton MS, this amplified translation would find support from several of Unton's letters, where uses similar phraseology.

traitor to his king and country” as Guise.⁶⁷ Unton appears to have taken the notion of defending the queen much further than most other Elizabethan ambassadors, however, in challenging Guise to a duel.

Should Guise refuse to accept Unton’s challenge, the ambassador assured him that he would make sure he was taken for the greatest coward in France. Yet the Duke was in an almost impossible situation. Guise could not fight Unton without breaking the law—Henry III had issued an edict against duelling in 1578, even if his successor may have been a little more sympathetic.⁶⁸ Should Guise accept Unton’s challenge and harm the ambassador in any way, it would have been a breach of Unton’s diplomatic immunity, regardless of the fact that the duel would have been initiated by the diplomat. Moreover, Guise probably felt that fighting Elizabeth’s armies was a higher priority in any case.⁶⁹

By issuing the challenge, Unton fashioned himself not just as Elizabeth’s ambassador, but also as her chivalric champion, defending his mistress’s virtue with his sword. He may have believed that by issuing the challenge he was simply following Elizabeth’s instructions that he “preserve the estimacion of us and our royal dignitie”.⁷⁰ If this were the case, Elizabeth and Cecil’s letters of February, discussed above, should have disabused him of this notion long before he issued the challenge for a third time at the end of May.⁷¹ In reality, the very fact that he possessed the “character” of an ambassador and acted as Elizabeth’s proxy meant that challenging anyone to a duel was inappropriate on at least three levels. First, the queen would not personally challenge anyone to single combat due to her sex. Secondly, her status as monarch set her above a mere duke, meaning she would not condescend to challenge her inferior even if gendered notions had permitted it. And thirdly, as a ruler, more would be at stake in any such engagement than there would between private persons. By issuing a challenge an ambassador did not really defend his ruler’s honour, but rather he endangered it. Indeed, whether ambassadors could engage in duels was far from clear. Contemporaries certainly felt that diplomats were not obliged to respond to a challenge by virtue of their public office. As the English herald William Segar (c.1554–1633) put it “in regard of the place they hold”, ambassadors “may (during their commission) repulse the challenge of any Gentleman or other subiect whatsoever”. He also implied, that, like generals, they should not issue challenges because their public office overrode any personal considerations.⁷² He did not however, anticipate a scenario in which it was the monarch’s honour, rather than the diplomat’s, that was being defended. In contrast, a century later Abraham de Wicquefort (1606–1682) did anticipate that ambassadors might be tempted to turn to duels to defend their master’s honour. He took a dim view of such behaviour, asserting that “The Ambassador ought never to fight in a Duel, on any Account whatever. He is paid to serve his Master with his Wit and Tongue, and not with his Sword”⁷³.

Once again, Unton’s behaviour reveals a disjuncture between his conception of the appropriate means to represent the queen and the understanding of the ambassadorial role held by the queen and members of the diplomatic community. It was precisely because he

⁶⁷ BL Cotton MS Caligula E viii, fo. 231r.

⁶⁸ Caroll: *Blood and Violence*, pp. 16, 280. – François Billacois, Trista Selous: *The Duel: Its Rise and Fall in Early Modern France*. London: Yale University Press, 1990.

⁶⁹ Although Edmund Yorke claimed that Guise planned to reply, I have found no evidence that the duke did so: TNA SP 78/27, fo. 355r.

⁷⁰ TNA SP 78/25, fo. 81r.

⁷¹ The text of the challenge preserved in Dupuy MS 33 apparently dates the third challenge to 31 May. See Frederick von Raumer (ed.): *Briefe aus Paris zur Erläuterung der Geschichte des sechzehnten und siebzehnten Jahrhunderts* 2 vols. Leipzig: Brodhhaus, 1831, vol. 2, p. 221, which does, however, place the challenge in the wrong year. The earliest Unton could have issued the challenge is 21 April: TNA SP 78/27, fo. 355r.

⁷² Segar: *Honour military*, p. 123.

⁷³ Abraham Wicquefort: *The ambassador and his functions*. London: printed for Bernard Lintott, 1716, p. 281.

wished to defend the queen's honour that Unton issued his challenge. But his eagerness to turn to duelling in order to do so probably had more to do with his military experience than his position as ambassador: duelling was an option that affirmed Unton's personal militaristic and aristocratic identities in a way that merely asking the king to provide restitution—which the king would struggle to do given that Guise was openly rebelling against him—did not. There are also indications that it may have been linked to Unton's desire to assert his credentials as someone of sufficient aristocratic rank to represent the queen abroad, for he insisted that he was "issued from as great a race and noble house" as Guise.

This claim was a little disingenuous. Guise was the leading member of the pre-eminent French aristocratic family. Unton, in contrast, descended from a more recent English noble family, for his mother had been a daughter of Edward Seymour, Duke of Somerset (c.1500–1552), who had only been raised to the peerage in 1537. By virtue of his appointment as ambassador, Unton was entitled to style himself one social rank above his actual one, meaning that he could present himself as a baron, rather than a knight. Unton's insistence on his noble lineage may also have been motivated by a desire to prove that he could duel with Guise: there was sufficient anxiety about whether a man could challenge his social superior that books written about honour dealt with the topic.⁷⁴ Equally, should the Duke condescend to a duel, this could be seen as providing affirmation of Unton's personal status within the aristocracy.

In the martial atmosphere of Henry IV's court, duelling may have seemed a suitable means to deal with one of the queen's detractors. This impression may have been furthered by Henry IV's own relationship with Elizabeth. Both before and in the years immediately after his accession, Henry styled himself as Elizabeth's champion fighting for their common, godly cause, both in their correspondence and in his interactions with her representatives. The English queen's letters to Henry, at least before his conversion to Catholicism, emphasised their shared enterprise in God's cause against the Catholic threat and Henry responded with similar rhetoric.⁷⁵ Henry emphasised his "service and devotion", his "perpetual devotion" to Elizabeth and wish to serve her and thanked her for giving him the strength in his heart to continue his efforts against his enemies.⁷⁶ While this rhetoric began while Henry was the heir to the French throne, it continued in the years following his accession. In 1591, for instance, Henry assured Unton that he "will ever use all love and few ceremonies towards my deare sister [...] all I can offer is to fight for her and become her captain, hoping that she wilbe my best counsellor"⁷⁷. Such rhetoric was a means by which the two rulers asserted their continued commitment to their shared military endeavours and common goal: in this case, Henry's establishing of control over his realm and defeat of the Catholic League. But it may have had the unintended consequence of encouraging Elizabeth's ambassador to take up the mantle of Elizabeth's champion too.

Conclusion

Although we do not know exactly how the Queen responded to Unton's challenge, it is highly likely that she disapproved: she personally intervened to stop members of her court from duelling on several occasions and, as we have seen, she took a dim view of Unton's military exploits.⁷⁸ While chivalric rhetoric held considerable utility for the queen's diplomacy, there

⁷⁴ Segar: *Honor military*, pp. 118–9.

⁷⁵ For an overview see Rayne Allinson: *A Monarchy of Letters: Royal Correspondence and English Diplomacy in the Reign of Elizabeth I*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp. 151–66.

⁷⁶ de Xivrey: *Recueil des lettres*, vol. 3, p. 50.

⁷⁷ Unton: *Correspondence*, p. 121.

⁷⁸ Victor G. Kiernan: *The Duel in European History: Honour and the Reign of the Aristocracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 80

was an inherent tension within Tudor chivalry between the affirmation it gave to Tudor sovereignty and the fact that ‘at the same time it glorified militaristic militarism and traditional notions of honour and autonomy’⁷⁹. Precisely because chivalric notions were integral to the self-fashioning of many Elizabethan courtiers chivalric tournaments, pageants, and literature became a means by which they expressed not just loyalty, but also concerns and criticisms; they were a means of balancing the assertive power of the queen on the one hand and the continuing claims of the nobility on the other.⁸⁰ Unton’s case suggests that in diplomacy too chivalry was both a force for loyalty and a source of tension between ruler and ruled. The language he used towards the queen, for instance praising her ability to see through rumours and dedication to judging everyone on their merits could be to force her into a particular position, may have been an attempt to flatter her into ignoring his critics.

One incident more than any other reveals that the convenience that chivalric language held for Elizabethan diplomacy was accompanied by dangers that those deploying it might embrace other aspects of chivalric culture too fully: Unton’s challenge to Guise. Unton’s recourse to the more militaristic of chivalric tropes should not come as a great surprise given the martial atmosphere of the French king’s court. But this particular manifestation of the chivalric impulse speaks to another tension in early modern diplomatic culture: it reveals that ambassadorial notions of what behaviour might best to represent one’s monarch were not always consonant with the monarch’s own. Unton understood that, by virtue of his position, his actions redounded to the queen’s honour. He, for example, was greatly concerned to entertain fellow courtiers appropriately and maintain his household at a suitable level of luxury.⁸¹ Yet the way that he took up arms (or attempted to) to advance the queen’s military causes and defend her honour were incompatible with widely held notions of appropriate ambassadorial representation. In fact, by resorting to violence, Unton jeopardised Elizabeth’s international reputation.

Ambassadors had to balance their personal identity and beliefs with the identity they possessed by virtue of their ‘representative character’. Some diplomats were not beyond trying to exploit diplomatic protocol for affirmation of or a gain in personal status.⁸² More generally, the personal or family interests of an ambassador were not always fully compatible with those of his principal. Unton presents a different scenario: here it was his manner of representing the queen that caused problems. In particular, his militaristic background led him to defend the queen in a manner that was compatible with an assertion of a chivalric aristocratic personal identity. This raises a bigger question: how did ambassadors balance the assertion of their own masculinity and honour with successful and appropriate diplomatic service? Finding the right balance could be particularly fraught as the performance of aspects of manhood meant different things in different geopolitical contexts.⁸³ In other words, what was appropriate for a soldier at Zutphen might not be suitable behaviour for a princely proxy, even one posted to a court on campaign. While Unton was simply acting in a manner that was consonant with the masculine notions of defending his monarch’s honour, learned in other contexts and, perhaps, encouraged by the martial tone of the court at which he served, these notions did not translate seamlessly to a diplomatic context.

⁷⁹ McCoy: *Rites of Knighthood*, p. 3.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*. See also Paul E. J. Hammer: “Upstaging the Queen: The Earl of Essex, Francis Bacon and the Accession Day Celebrations of 1595”, in: *The Politics of the Stuart Court Masque*, ed. David Bevington and Paul Houlbrook. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 41–66.

⁸¹ Unton: *Correspondence*, p. 159.

⁸² See for example Niels F. May: “Staged Sovereignty or Aristocratic Values? Diplomatic Ceremonial at the Westphalian Peace Negotiations (1643-1648)”, in: *Practices of Diplomacy in the Early Modern World c.1410-1800*, ed. Tracey A. Sowerby and Jan Hennings London: Routledge 2017, pp. 80–93.

⁸³ Brendan Kane: “Masculinity and Political Geographies in England, Ireland and North America”, in: *Review of European History –Revue européenne d’histoire*, 22 (2015), pp. 595–619

Unton's case suggests that we need to pay greater attention to how manhood manifested in diplomacy. While there has been an increasing amount of scholarship on gender and diplomacy, the primary focus of this work has been uncovering the diplomatic agency of women, particularly queens consort, royal mistresses, and court ladies, in international affairs.⁸⁴ Only very recently have the activities of ambassadors' wives begun to receive the attention they deserve.⁸⁵ This valuable research is doing much to uncover the influence of women in inter-princely politics and the agency open to women in the international arena. We should, however, match it with detailed considerations of diplomatic femininities and masculinities and an appreciation of how gendered notions may not only have defined the scope of action available to male and female informal agents,⁸⁶ but also how performances of gender impacted upon the every day performance of ambassadors at court.

⁸⁴ See note 10 above.

⁸⁵ Notably Laura Oliván Santaliestra: "Lady Anne Fanshawe, Ambaadress of England at the Court of Madrid (1664-1666)", in: *Women, Diplomacy and International Politics*, ed. Sluga and James, pp. 68–85. – Florian Florian: "'Minister-like Cleverness, Understanding and Influence on Affairs': Ambaadresses in Everyday Business and Courtly Ceremonies at the Turn of the Eighteenth Century", in: *Practices of Diplomacy in the Early Modern World c.1410-1800*, ed. Tracey A. Sowerby and Jan Hennings London: Routledge, 2017, pp. 130–54. – Gemma Allen: "The Rise of the Ambaadress". Article under review. I am grateful to Dr Allen for the opportunity to read her work.

⁸⁶ For pioneering work in this field see Dorothea Nolde: "Was ist Diplomatie und wenn ja, wie viele? Herausforderungen und Perspektiven einer Geschlechtergeschichte der frühneuzeitlichen Diplomatie", in: *Historische Anthropologie* 21, 2013, pp. 179–98.

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