

Queen Elizabeth 1 of England

[Dr Amanda Foreman]

Once in power Elizabeth had to consolidate her position quickly, using language and symbolism to help establish her authority over the church, the court and the country. But language is never neutral and in Elizabethan times, feminine words are loaded with meaning.

So Elizabeth must bend language to fit her situation. She is always referred to as your royal highness, or your majesty - because these are gender neutral terms, and when she has to be a woman, it can only be as a metaphor, the virgin queen..

I am meeting actress Fiona Shaw who is well versed in how the language of 16th century offered the young queen an effective defence against patriarchy.

In particular Elizabeth's famous speech at Tilbury in 1588, when she spoke to rally her troops before the imminent invasion of the Spanish Armada. More words in Shakespeare's time.

How do you think Elizabeth used language to retain power – Elizabeth's speech at Tilbury sounds very Shakespearean.

[Fiona Shaw]

It does. I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king and a king of England too. There is a battle in the language. Vowels hold emotion and constants hold intellect, in general with Shakespeare and Elizabeth too.

You want the intellect to win so when she says I have the body of a weak and feeble woman. Feeble had feebleness in it. And it is quite an emotional thing to say. If you stop there she would have been voted out very quickly, but these small words have a huge power.

“ I may have the body of a feeble woman but I have the heart and stomach of a king”. Woman is a softer word than King, which is just there. I think feeble is the word which sticks out in the Tilbury speech, it's the axis on which she turns the whole thing round . She uses the weakest word, than a 'but' and then the word 'King'. So if you reduce that speech you would go “feeble, but King.”