Strategic Imaginations

Defurne, Aude, Gilleir, Anke

Published by Leuven University Press

Defurne, Aude and Anke Gilleir.
Strategic Imaginations: Women and the Gender of Sovereignty in European Culture.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/80817

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2761978
THE SOUND OF SOVEREIGNTY
Royal Vocal Strategies in the Victorian House of Lords

Josephine Hoegaerts

A wondrous balm between her lips she wears,
of sovereign force, so soften cares,
and this through ev’ry ear she can impart,
by tuneful breath diffused to ev’ry heart.¹

In her mid-nineteenth-century poetry anthology Music, the Voice of Harmony in Creation, Mary Jane Estcourt includes a poem by William Congreve that ascribes a ‘sovereign force’ to the voice of singer and musician Arabella Hunt (1662–1705). The ‘tuneful breath’ that is evoked by the poet was in fact issued from ‘her’ lips in the seventeenth century, but the image clearly still worked in the mid-nineteenth century when Estcourt reprinted the poem. The image of women’s sweet sovereignty over ‘ev’ry heart’ expressed in breathy tones is a standard trope that reappears in European literature across times. But at the time of publication, in 1857, the imagination of female sovereignty had a more material foundation. Victoria had been on the throne for two decades in Britain, and the still youthful image of the queen allowed for imaginations of the kind of sweet voice represented in Congreve’s poem. In fact, quite literally so, since Victoria’s voice was described by experts as a naturally well-managed one. Speech therapist James Hunt, for example, who had made something of a name for himself as an expert on stammering, presented the Queen as an example of excellent delivery:
Her Majesty is gifted by Nature with the power of managing her voice properly, and in the delivery of her speeches on the opening or closing the sessions of parliament, speaks in so clear and distinct a manner, that not a syllable is lost throughout the crowded expanse of the House of Lords.  

Atypical though the Queen’s voice was on the nineteenth-century political stage, on which only men’s voices resounded otherwise, the sound of Victoria’s voice was the sound of sovereignty for almost a century, and her ‘feminine’ tones gave shape to a country, an empire and their representations. As I will argue in the text below, the gendered nature of vocal performances of sovereignty were neither immaterial nor innocent. It mattered that the Queen spoke or that she refrained from speaking, and it mattered that she spoke with a particular, gendered sound.

As Wayne Koestenbaum has noted in *The Queen’s Throat*, ‘in Western metaphysics, the spoken or sung word has more authority than the written word. The myth that voice accords presence remains compelling, even though we are supposed to know better’. It is indeed still lingering even today, as is obvious in Isabel Gil’s work on ‘The Sovereign’s Broken Voice’ in current cinema, in which she states at the outset: ‘Voice is taken here as the sign of a wider embodiment of the social, the sexual and the political, where physiology meets metaphor at the crossroads between the invisibility of silence and the visible sensoriality of utterance’. And even though the voice has ‘a mercurial ability to avoid gender’, a quality that allowed it to represent heterosexual and political sovereignty at the same time, it nevertheless always already draws attention to gendered and sensuous imaginations of embodiment. Or, as Koestenbaum notes ‘it is difficult to avoid noticing that the spookily genderless voice box has been clothed with a feminine aura. And it is difficult to know what to do with this information’. In what follows, I will focus on a particular kind of vocal sovereignty: the sounds and silences displayed during the speech delivered at the State Opening of Parliament, ‘the Queen’s Speech’, as it was more commonly known. Victoria would open ‘her’ Parliament in person, with the exception of the years 1862–1866. During her reign, her image changed from that of a young girl to a ‘stout and matronly’ figure, and the image of sovereignty displayed on the occasion would therefore change over time as well. Rather than her image, however, I am more interested in the sonic aspects of Victoria’s representation. How was the separation between women and power that was so central to the
practices of nineteenth-century politics reiterated and challenged in Victoria’s speeches to Parliament? Despite the eeriness of sound itself, the issue is an essentially material one, questioning the practices of a female body in what was considered to be a male space and soundscape. It also draws attention to the sonic elements of sovereignty itself, as the Queen’s Speech guided strategic imaginations of royalty and empire while being performed by a sovereign throat in a space representing democracy and the modern iterations of political representation. As Joanna Marschner’s and Virginia Kendrick’s chapters also explain, in Britain, discourse on the gendered nature of sovereignty interacted with the processes of political modernization the monarchy had to address and, nolens volens, be tailored to.

The event of the Queen’s Speech is a well-documented occasion. It was extensively covered in the press, described in parliamentary diaries and sometimes even satirized, and therefore provides ample material to examine how the sovereign’s voice and its powers were imagined, represented and given meaning throughout Victoria’s reign. Yet reimagining the actual practices of voicing sovereignty on the basis of these documents is less straightforward. As I will show below, representations of the queen’s voice depended on the phonographic imagination of its readers to gain its aural qualities, and understanding the nineteenth-century soundscape on which they were based requires a much wider field of research. Nevertheless, I will attempt in this chapter to pay attention to both the mediatization and the embodied practices of speaking and listening to come to an understanding of the gendered sounds of sovereignty in nineteenth-century Britain. And although this period was known as ‘Victorian’ and very much shaped by Victoria’s particular reign and image, the conclusions we can draw based on her vocal performances and their reception may well tell us more about the gender of public speech and its connections to power beyond the House of Lords, in other public places and in other parliaments.

The Voice of Power

As Mary Beard pointed out in her 2017 Manifesto on women and power, the voice of power and its gendered sounds are the result of a long history, characterized by a surprising continuity. Beard traces what seems like an almost natural connection between men and public speech to Ancient Greece:
classical traditions have provided us with a powerful template for thinking about public speech, and for deciding what counts as good oratory or bad, persuasive or not, and whose speech is to be given space to be heard. And gender is obviously an important part of that mix.8

Little seems to have changed between the Greek ecclesia and the Parliament of modern Britain: ‘classical’ rhetoric continues to be seen as a crucial aspect of the education of anyone with political ambition even today. And even though Parliament is a ‘representative’ space and has opened its doors to a much more diverse population, its practices of representation remain firmly linked to imaginations of public speech rooted in the kind of rhetorical training that is mainly offered through elite education, often in all-male environments. Moreover, while ‘speech’ remains unconsciously perceived as ‘men’s business’, a long history of prizing silence in women remains influential as well. While female silence can, as Beard does, be traced back to ancient Greece, it visibly reappears in Renaissance England9 and, as the chapter on Fanny Burney shows, was adopted by Queen Charlotte. And in the nineteenth century, with its increasingly canonized Latin and Greek curriculum for upper-class boys, followed by more classical education at Oxbridge, the politicized connection between a masculine identity and public speech gained even more traction.10

In fact, preparing for the practices of public speech became a central part of the education of any young man of the (upper) middle class, whether he aimed for a political, a clerical or a legal career. To a large degree, speaking in public is what the modern nineteenth-century man did regularly, professionally and ideally skilfully.11 They did so in largely all-male spaces, in fact, the proper place where genders lived and spoke together was the home, where the image of the ‘nagging wife’ shows how improper women’s speech was considered to be. At university, young men could practise their rhetorical skill in debate clubs that mimicked the conditions of the House of Commons.12 Like the House, these clubs only allowed access to women in the galleries, as a largely silent audience. Although women’s presence in these places was noted, their vocal contributions were invariably categorized as something other than speech. The sounds from the galleries would often be presented as the ‘twittering’ of birds, for example.13 Apart from this ‘twittering’ from the sidelines, the houses of Parliament, like other spaces designed for public speech, were thoroughly masculine soundscapes.
That is not to say that women were absent from or not interested in political life. Despite the very limited access granted to them, British women did attend Union debates as well as those in Parliament. In Paris, women discussed politics in the salons and some were even active as journalists.\(^{14}\) Notably, the event of the opening of Parliament and the Queen’s Speech was attended by large numbers of women, which was something commented on by various reporters, who described the visual impact of the this female presence. In 1840, for example, the *Morning Post* described the sight of the House as follows:

The Stranger’s Gallery began to be occupied by ladies, in all varieties of dress, except mere morning dress. Some were attired in the most elaborate costume which a Birthday Drawing Room could require – others, while more subdued in their splendor, wore one or two feathers or wreaths of flowers in their heads.\(^{15}\)

In 1838, the prolific news editor and commentator James Grant remarked on the ladies’ behaviour as well as on their dress in his *Sketches in London*: ‘Every countenance beamed with joy at the thought that a sovereign of their own sex would in very little time be seated on the splendid throne before them’ and ‘everything was as quiet as the most devoted admirer of the “silent system” could have wished’.\(^{16}\) This had, apparently, been an issue for those opposing female suffrage, who ‘labour under the impression that ladies could not refrain from speaking to one another and thus betray a want of proper respect for the House and its proceedings’.\(^{17}\) Grant’s description of women’s admirable ability to, as least temporarily, shut up, put women in a somewhat ambiguous position: gaining entrance to a space designed for public speech depended, apparently, on their spotless performance of silence.

The role of a female monarch expected to address the chamber was equally ambiguous. In the context of the large amount of cultural work that went into establishing and conserving the House floor as an exclusively masculine space, admitting – and celebrating – a female voice as one carrying political weight and authority was a complex endeavour. Grant remarked extensively on the (perceived) importance of Victoria’s gender and age, as did several newspapers:

The opening of a new parliament by the sovereign in person, is, at any time, a most interesting circumstance, and never fails to attract a large concourse of persons, not only to the vicinity of the parliament-
house, but to every part of the line of procession. The interest of such an occurrence was, on this occasion, the first parliament of the sovereign, but of that sovereign being an amiable female of the tender age of eighteen. Loyalty and gallantry, therefore, both combined to draw out the population of London on the occasion of Victoria’s opening her first parliament in person.18

The presence of a female sovereign was of course nothing new, especially in Britain. The confrontation of a female sovereign with a ‘modern’ society, one with practices of political representation as well as ‘scientifically’ grounded understandings of rigid gender binaries, was. Unlike Elizabeth I, who could be described to have ‘manly’ qualities in the sixteenth century, Victoria needed to exude her female ‘nature’ while performing her role as sovereign.19 She did so, at least according to Grant, to admirable effect in her first opening of Parliament in 1837.

A specimen of more tasteful and effective elocution it has never been my fortune to hear. Her voice is clear, and her enunciation distinct in no ordinary degree. Her utterance is timed with admirable judgment to the ear: it is the happy medium between too slow and too rapid. Nothing could be more accurate than her pronunciation: while the musical intonations of her voice imparted a peculiar charm to all the other attributes of her elocution. […] The most practiced speaker in either house of parliament never rose to deliver his sentiments with more entire composure.20

Phonographic Imaginations

Victoria’s first opening of Parliament ‘in person’ received enormous attention in the press, with several papers remarking on the queen’s youth, her looks, her behaviour and indeed her vocal performance. According to the Leeds Intelligencer, for example, ‘The clear, impressive and dignified manner in which the Speech was delivered by her Majesty was the general theme of admiration. It was, in truth, a finished specimen of beautiful elocution’.21 The Morning Post declared she had read ‘the Speech in a firm but feminine tone, and with a very emphatic pronunciation of the letter R’.22 The ‘novelty’ of the situation, as Grant and numerous others pointed out, played a role in this extensive coverage, but the almost ubiquitous presence of the young queen in
the morning papers would become emblematic for her performance as a sovereign. As John Plunkett points out in *Queen Victoria, First Media Monarch*, Victoria’s reign was tremendously mediatized. Her ascent to the throne coincided with the quick rise of print culture and, as a consequence ‘throughout Victoria’s reign, the royal family enjoyed an exceptional degree of publicity. The royal image was constantly available on a diverse assortment of media, ranging from engravings and magic lantern shows to street ballads and photographs’.23 Plunkett’s analysis of Victoria’s mediatized ‘image’ is largely focused on the visual and textual aspects of the media, but his suggestions regarding a ‘mass media’ monarch are relevant to the sonic aspects of her performances of sovereignty as well. As Plunkett points out, the constant (re) imagination of the Queen across different media influenced the way sovereignty itself could be imagined. ‘There was a crucial osmosis between the making of a media monarchy and the evolving conception of Victoria’s role as a constitutional monarch’.24 The amount of agency that was accorded to the royal family or indeed the Queen herself in this process of mediatization is difficult to establish, but of particular importance when considering Queen Victoria’s voice and her ability to speak in public, ‘to’ her subjects and ‘for’ herself. As Plunkett puts is, ‘Victoria inhabited her subjects’ lives to a remarkable degree – but only through their appropriation and propagation of her presence’.25 In other words, whether the Queen’s voice could be ‘heard’ when she spoke in Parliament and whether reports could in some way echo her voice, depended as much on her audience’s phonographic imagination as on her performance.26

What seems to have been rather unimportant for the Queen’s reputation and her performance of sovereignty was the content of the speech. Even though the opening address to Parliament was debated in the House and commented upon in the press, its contents were generally seen as so tepid as to be irrelevant. The *Essex Standard* reported in 1839 on the Queen’s Speech, remarking that ‘a more empty and vapid collection of sentences could not possibly have been constructed’.27 This did not particularly reflect on the monarch delivering the speech, however, as everyone was highly aware of the fact that its contents were decided on by the government. Another report on the 1839 speech noted that

Had the Speech itself been half so good as the tone and manner of its delivery, the Ministers of the Crown, who prepared the document would have saved themselves from the just animadversion of the
public. [...] indeed the document does not contain the expression of one manly or statesmanlike thought, or the announcement of a single honest and vigorous determination upon any question likely to arise. It is altogether worthy of our imbecile no-principle government. 28

It was therefore not the discourse in the speech that was connected to Victoria, but the moment or the fact of speaking itself. This was reflected in the way the speech travelled as well: reports of how physical copies of the text reached different parts of the world appeared in several newspapers. The 1839 speech may have been thought ‘imbecile’ by some, but it was nevertheless carried to the New World with great haste: ‘The Liverpool brought the President’s message to England and she will be the first to convey the Queen’s Speech on the opening of Parliament across the Atlantic’. 29 Later, the trajectory of the speech by telegram was commented upon at great length as well. In 1847, Scottish readers learned that

We have received the Queen’s Speech on the opening of Parliament this day at Westminster. It was transmitted from the office of Messrs Smith and Son, the enterprising Newsvenders, in the Strand, by Special Engine to Rugby, and thence by Electric Telegraph. The commencement of the Speech was received here at twenty minutes past 4 pm and the close at a quarter before 9. It required to be repeated three times, namely, at Derby, Normanton and York – so that the time occupied in its transmission has been incredibly short. 30

Reporters across Britain went to great efforts to procure complete and reliable transcripts of what the queen had said, while at the same time pointing out that those words were not her own and were in fact barely worth reporting on anyway. In 1857, a particularly exasperated reporter wrote in the Leicester Journal

When Talleyrand said the faculty of speech was given to man to enable him to conceal his thoughts, he must have meant the observation to apply specially to those Royal and official personages of whom, by his long experience, he was so well fitted to judge. Assuredly no obscuring glass could more effectually throw a haze around its objects than does the document technically styled a Queen’s speech, cast into shade the real intentions of Her Majesty’s Government. 31
The ‘osmosis’ between the Queen and the mediatized image of her public performance seems to have been so complete that a transcription of her words (which was effectively a copy of a document written by advisors) was passed around as if it was a physical avatar of the queen herself, reproduced in great quantities and consumed by a mass audience much like photographs of the Royal Family were.

In addition to these reproductions in print and by telegraph, the Queen’s Speech also travelled as a vocal performance. Each year, several newspapers would report on dinner parties during which the address was read to guests. In 1847, for example, ‘The Marquis of Landsdowne, lord President of the Council, gave a grand dinner to a party of Peers […] The Queen’s Speech was read by the noble Marquis to his illustrious guests’.32 The speech was performed in more formal contexts as well, notably in the House of Commons, allowing those who had been unable to attend the actual event to somehow take part in the proceedings. These rereads could initiate political discussion or the exchange of opinion, but it seems unlikely that their main aim was to convey the content of the speech, which indeed everyone could read in the papers. Rather, the more dramatic idea of someone procuring a copy, the visceral performance of closeness and – later – imitation of the practice of the sovereign seem to have been at the heart of these revoicings of the Queen’s Speech. Within one day, the ceremonial ‘unique’ resounding of one woman’s voice would be turned into a thoroughly polyphonic event, in which all citizens could participate in one way or another.

Despite the many and multi-voiced forms the Queen’s Speech could acquire, the intangible and unique moment of the ‘actual’ performance was valued as well. In other words: it mattered whose throat uttered the words, even if others had written them and others yet would repeat them. Aside from the attention to the particular qualities of Victoria’s voice, the importance of her particular vocality became even clearer from 1861 onwards. After not appearing in Parliament since the death of the prince consort for several years, Victoria would open Parliament ‘in person’ again in 1867, but no longer actually read out the Queen’s Speech. Instead, she would hand the vellum document to the Lord Chancellor and quietly witness his performance. This new, silent practice of sovereignty was consistent with Victoria’s self-styling as a mother and grieving widow and, in its silence, was very feminine, but it was lamented in the newspapers. During the first years of her reign, a connection had been established between notions of sovereignty within a constitutional monarchy and the ‘tones of the greatest sweetness’33 of Victoria’s young
female voice. The sounds of the Lord Chancellor would necessarily be presented to the newspaper-reading audience as a disappointment. A journalist of the *Hereford Journal* exclaimed, in his report,

> May I then hear the clear, silvery voice of our beloved Queen uttering the familiar words ‘My Lords and Gentlemen’ instead of the same words in the feebler tones of Lord Chelmsford which, seeing he is 73 years of age, are naturally very different to the clear, sharp, energetic voice of the Sir Fredrich Thesiger of former days.\(^{34}\)

However, in presenting the queen’s silvery tones as exceptional, and particularly suited to the performance of sovereignty, these reports also helped to cement the seemingly natural connection between a manly voice and practices of representation. The physical, sonic reality of the Queen’s voice was of importance in this period of empirical strength and burgeoning democracy, not because it redefined the sound of power for a female sovereign, but because it reiterated how political influence was made audible and ‘real’ in a constitutional democracy. Even more so, the Queen’s vocal performance and its many reproductions underlined to what extent ‘Victoria inhabited her subjects’ lives […] but only through their appropriation and propagation of her presence’\(^{35}\). Because, despite great enthusiasm for the Queen’s Speech and the large audiences in the House, most citizens were in fact unable to hear the sovereign speak, whether she read the speech in person or not. The reports of her speech therefore did not so much reproduce or evoke, but effectively created the sonic reality of a female monarch ‘echoing’ her government’s word throughout her nation and empire.

They could do so because their audience possessed not only the relevant ‘period ear’\(^{36}\) but also the imaginative skill to draw on sonic memories and expectations referred to in these written reports. As Shane Butler has shown, the largely oral culture of ancient Greece boasted a phonographic ambition and skill that far preceded technologies of acoustic recording.\(^{37}\) This is perhaps even more true for the nineteenth century, when the phonographic imagination really took flight.\(^{38}\) As Victor Kreilkamp has shown, the sharp rise of written media did not destroy but rather strengthened the very oral and aural culture of the nineteenth century, with newspapers being read aloud in pubs and homes (rather than being consumed individually and in silence).\(^{39}\) Newspaper reading audiences therefore had very well-developed and well-practised skills, both for listening to vocal performances and for
connecting the written word to spoken realities and representations. For Queen Victoria and her opening speeches in Parliament, these moments of phonographic imagination were an important aspect of the strategic imagination of sovereignty that was constructed by the royal performer and her audience simultaneously.

**Embodied Performances of the Queen’s Voice**

So what, exactly, was being performed on the throne and in the papers? The event of the Queen’s Speech was a highly regulated and formal occasion, with every participant’s role clearly delineated. The ceremony allowed the queen access to the halls of representation, but also made very clear that she was essentially a visitor there; she did not really ‘belong’. Arriving at the throne, the Lord High Chancellor would hand her the speech: her only role was to give a physical, sonic manifestation to an already existing text. In doing so, her performance was not that of an orator, whose skill would be one of composing the style and content of a speech, but that of the perfect elocutionary vessel for an agenda largely set by others. According to Woolmer’s Exeter and Plymouth Gazette, for example, her reading of the speech effectively made it more dignified and more distinct:

> Her Majesty read the Speech very distinctly, and in a style of which it is certainly not too much to say, that in propriety, elegance and dignity it greatly excelled anything of the same kind of which the present generation has had experience. There is, we know, a peculiar charm in the reading of a beautiful and well-bred woman; but the merit of the Queen’s elocution goes greatly beyond what is common, even in this land of beauty and accomplishment.⁴⁰

Nevertheless, the ‘perfection’ of the performance did not just imply technical skill. As a sovereign to ‘her’ people, and indeed as a woman, Victoria’s ability to imbue the performance with emotion and expressions of care was considered central to the delivery of the speech as well. Speaking about the plight of ‘the sister country’ Ireland in 1847, for example, ‘her Majesty’s tone was peculiarly empathic’, according to the Morning Post.⁴¹ The Northampton Mercury noted that her comments on the slave trade were
distinguished by much emphasis and heartfelt sympathy with the words. There was no cold assent to a mere commonplace paragraph, she within the ‘heart joined chorus’. She raised her voice without the least strain, but with much effect, [...] and when she came to the sentence which told of her great pain at finding herself compelled to enforce the law against those who were resisting the laws and her reliance on the good sense of her people, the pathetic and touching manner of the delivery and the modulated but yet earnest tone of the voice, caused a tear to start from more than one eye.42

While the content of the message was clearly ascribed to its authors, its emotional weight and authenticity were connected to Victoria and her embodied delivery of the phrases.

What counted as the ‘perfect’ voice of the sovereign was thus dependent on the sovereign’s physical and socially constructed body. The queen’s ‘true self’ was thought to be audible through her vocal performance. Although reports of the Queen’s Speech, predictably, contain no real criticism of her appearance or performance, they do comment on the particularity of the monarch’s physical and mental health as it was ‘reflected’ in her delivery of the speech – noting moments of nervousness and ‘tremulousness’ for example. Her grief following the death of the prince consort was made sonic in the most obvious of ways: with complete silence. Reports expressed regret for this particular expression of grief, especially in the late 1860s. The Wrexham Advertiser noted that an opening of Parliament by the Queen in person is, of course, better than the ceremony of opening Parliament by Royal Commision, but still it is not what her Majesty’s faithful lieges had hoped, considering the long time which has elapsed since the occurrence of that melancholy event which has been the reason for her protracted retirement.43

What is regretted here seems to be the loss of a very particular vocalization. By not reading out the speech, Victoria expressed her own emotion, but also seemed to refuse to engage in the kind of dialogic affected exchange with her ‘people’ the speech had been imagined to be. Although Victoria would regularly appear again in the House of Lords from 1866 onwards, she would no longer be that perfect vessel that imbued political agendas with human affect.
All in all, for all the reports of her beautiful voice and faultless delivery, and despite the enduring meaning of ‘parliament’ as a place for speaking, the main sound that would actually be produced by Victoria in the House of Lords, was, in fact, silence. This was of course part of a more general retreat from public life in the 1860s, but seems to have led to larger changes. Whereas in the first half of the nineteenth century, the sound of sovereignty was a young woman’s voice (a ‘novelty’ audiences seem to have gotten used to very quickly), in the second half of the century a dignified silence came to characterize the monarch’s role in Parliament. In many ways, this may have made the queen more connected to the political structure of the nation rather than creating a distance. For although the House was supposed to be for debate and impassioned speech, the most common performance of representatives was silence as well, as representatives would spend most of their time not speaking but – at best – listening to their colleagues. In her silence, Victoria sonified a new kind of modern sovereignty, close to the practices of representation of the time and leaning on a changing mass-media press whose reliance on phonographic imagination was changing rapidly as new acoustic recording technology became available at the end of the century.

A perhaps unintended by-product of the silence of the aging, matronly queen was that it allowed the sovereign’s voice to remain young and unblemished. While visual images, despite considerable efforts to remove wrinkles and other imperfections, showed a changing and aging queen, the sonic imagination of Victoria’s voice in Parliament remained rooted in the first years of her reign. If she was held up as a picture of vocal and elocutionary health by vocal specialists, that was due to both the cultural work that went into the (imaginative) production of sound in the first half of the century, and to the relative lack of new sonic information on her in the second half. This, too, of course, was a starkly gendered endeavour: female voices were understood to age differently than male voices, and were particularly understood to lose their gendered characteristics. Older women’s voices would generally be heard to lower in pitch, while elderly men would acquire squeaky, higher tones. Whereas, as vocal expert Theodore Schmauk put it, ‘in old age, the voice again betrays its master. It generally becomes less soft and full, and is sometimes “cracked”’, Victoria’s voice remained forever young and did not risk such an audible loss of control, or indeed of femininity.

It allowed her, to a degree, to hold on to the role that had been bestowed upon her in the early years of her reign: that of the queen of
hearts. In a poem in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, Victoria appears as a ‘blushing rose’ who ‘aims at conquest’ and is ‘Loved soon as seen, she reigns the Queen of Hearts’. Victoria is very much depicted as the woman who exerts a sovereign force over the hearts not just of men, but of the nation. According to John Plunkett, ‘in being turned into the Queen of Hearts, Victoria was actually effaced by the media dynamic surrounding her’. The overly ritualistic and solemnly silent performance at the later openings of Parliament seems to have fulfilled a similar function. They served as ‘an expression of Victoria’s affective connection with her subjects’. This contrasted with the expressions the men surrounding her gave to their connections, their constituencies and the nation. Throughout the nineteenth century, displays of emotion would increasingly give way to performances of ‘rational speech’ in politics, at least in theory. While the constitutional monarch thus quickly positioned herself at the heart of an otherwise ‘democratic’ style of government, she also carved out a unique position for herself that depended on her performance of gender as much as that of sovereignty itself, effectively interweaving both femininity and monarchy.

**The Sound of Sovereignty**

Connecting sovereignty and its sonic realities to femininity, Victoria’s reign presents a particular kind of national and imperial politics. The stark contrast between the sonification and embodiment of monarchy on the one hand, and representation on the other, had consequences for the available strategies of imagining sovereignty, but also, crucially, for those to imagine representation. By creating a sensuous divide between both, the sovereign helped to cement the connection between rational individuality and the right to speak that would become so crucial to modern representative politics. Late-nineteenth-century descriptions of parliamentary practice abound with metaphors of ventriloquism and with anxieties of contamination. Whereas the young, speaking queen may have been the object of similar doubts – looking like a ventriloquist’s dummy on her throne, reading out the government’s words – the older Victoria had carved out a different place for herself and left the precarious balancing act between listening ‘to’ and speaking ‘for’ the nation to the members of the House.

Although this created a space for Victoria in a rapidly changing ‘modern’ political arena, it did not create space for women’s voices
in politics. Quite to the contrary. The ‘novelty’ of a female monarch playing a role in the nation’s parliamentary proceedings may soon have worn off, but the uniqueness of a female body being present and addressing the floor was only strengthened. The ‘queen’s throat’, to come back to Wayne Koestenbaum’s terminology, carried its feminine, somewhat dangerous, aura as proudly as that of the diva on the operatic stage. And like the diva’s voice, the queen’s conveyed affect, drama and ambiguity rather than policy, clarity or decision-making. Cloaking monarchy and its ritual and dramatic trappings in a ‘feminine’ garb, Victoria set herself apart, but also reaffirmed the connection between politics and modern masculinity.

More than in earlier periods – and for earlier British queens – the sonification and embodiment of sovereignty were intertwined processes in Victorian Britain. From the late eighteenth century onwards, the human voice was increasingly imagined as an anatomical rather than a spiritual reality. Whereas early modern natural philosophers had thought of speech as a manifestation of the soul carried on breath, nineteenth-century scientists saw it as a manifestation of thought, articulated in the larynx and pharynx. The queen’s throat was therefore effectively to be seen as a locus of power and its articulation. Moreover, research on multiple larynxes had led to portentous conclusions about the influence of age, gender and class on the voice. The young female voice box had been identified as rounded in shape and flexible, and therefore equally suited to lullaby-singing and fast-paced gossip (a notion that was sometimes attributed to J.J. Rousseau, according to whom women were naturally fluent speakers owing to their propensity to talk incessantly). These qualities were somewhat stretched to accommodate the performance of the young queen in Parliament, whose voice was said to present ‘a happy combination of all the firmness of her family with all the softness of her sex’. It is no wonder, perhaps, that in these circumstances Victoria’s voice appeared as a rare, precious object to be admired, protected and – eventually – largely hidden.

Interest in her voice did not wane in her later years, as is obvious from the attempts to record the Queen once technology for it became available. (Edison reportedly approached her several times hoping to record her voice without success.) As is proper for a somewhat mysterious and highly valued sound, the history of its acoustic recording is extremely unclear. Stories exist about two wax cylinders carrying the sound of Victoria’s voice. One of them was destroyed in the nineteenth century already. A cylinder recording is believed to have been made of her voice
in 1898, at the behest of the British Foreign Office, in order to be played to Menelik II, the Emperor of Ethiopia. Victoria agreed, but only on the condition that the recording be destroyed immediately after playing it to its intended audience of one. While Menelik’s recorded message in response has been preserved, only a transcription of the Queen’s message survives. The other one is currently held at the archives of the Science Museum in London. Attempts to play the sounds and ‘hear’ the queen have been unsuccessful. The cylinder is too damaged to yield much more than crackling and some indistinguishable syllables, even though it was not played very often after Sydney Morse made it at Balmoral in 1888, on a Bell graphophone. It cannot have brought the Bell company the publicity they were seeking by recording the British monarch – although maybe the mere story of its existence was enough – as Morse was apparently told sternly not to play it publicly. Two of his grandchildren reported to have hazy memories of having heard the recording in a domestic setting in the early twentieth century, and Victoria’s biographer Elizabeth Longford mentions the recording in her 1964 biography. However, the recording was effectively ‘lost’ for most of the twentieth century until Paul Tritton discovered correspondence pertaining to the cylinder in the Victoria and Albert Museum – and it is not entirely clear whether the recording currently held at the Science Museum is in fact a recording of Victoria’s voice. Unsatisfactory though these stories may be, they do tell us two things. Firstly, attempts to record the Queen’s voice were certainly made, and we can be almost sure that she agreed to participate in at least one. This tallies with her image as a media-monarch, willing to be part of the modern public sphere in different ways. It also shows that her non-speaking performance at the opening of Parliament was not an attempt to completely retreat from the public eye, or a simple refusal to speak in public: it was a consciously staged version of sovereignty thought to befit her role as a female, maternal and widowed monarch. Secondly, the continued retelling of the stories of Victoria’s recorded voice shows a continued interest in the sonic and material reality of the Queen’s throat. The wax cylinders can be seen, in a way, as the successors of the telegraphed transcripts of her speeches earlier in the century. And much like these travelling transcripts, the acoustic recordings somehow made Victoria’s voice both more material and less tangible. They turned an acoustic performance into an object, which would then facilitate the production of a sound that referred to the queen’s body in visceral ways, but without her actual presence. Whereas, in the early years of her
reign, the Queen’s sounding body was called forth through embodied performances by others, the gramophone allowed – like photography – for disembodied reproductions of physical practices.

Victoria’s long reign has been historicized as a period of many and important changes: during Victoria’s time as queen, Britain saw the rise and expansion of its printed media and a new interpretation of empire, and gave shape to a constitutional monarchy. Although historians have pointed to the ways in which Victoria performed her role within these processes in deeply gendered ways, it has perhaps been underestimated to what extent ‘sovereignty’ itself became a gendered concept under the influence of her performance and those of her audience. The cultural work that both the Queen and her subjects engaged in – strategically imagining sovereignty as intrinsically feminine, and ‘other’ than the masculine world of representative politics – was largely defined by the skills and media available to them. Phonographic imagination, the ability to ‘hear’ transcripts and reports as acoustic reality, was an important part of that for most of the nineteenth century. It was only when phonographic technology became available that the sonification of sovereignty became a matter of exclusively the queen herself and her recorders. Before that, the imagination and making of the Queen’s throat was the collective work of all her subjects.

These phonographic imaginations – like the figure of a female monarch generally – seem to run counter to the sonic separation between women and power that echoes through large parts of history. Here is a young woman who, for a time at least, has a public and politically audible voice. Upon closer scrutiny, however, the potentially rebellious or disruptive qualities of the female sovereign voice are far less obvious than they may have seemed. In fact, the clean separation between a ‘female’ sovereign voice and a ‘male’ representative one did little to upset the power balance within the spaces of representative politics or in the voting booth, which is where political power would increasingly reside. In fact, Victoria’s later attempts to replace vocal performance with dignified silences may have shown a potential path towards female political representation more clearly. With her performances of maternity and domesticity, Victoria was hardly a feminist icon – her role as a monarch effectively supported a very patriarchal political system – but her sheer presence in the House of Lords can be seen to have ‘done’ something to its soundscape, and thus to the soundtrack of nation and empire.
Notes

Research for this paper was funded by the European Research Council (CALLIOPE ERC StG 2017). I would also like to thank Elise Garritzen and Anu Korhonen for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this text.


7. ‘The Queen appeared in good health. Her features are full and her figure stout and matronly’, *Leicester Journal, and Midland Counties General Advertiser* (8 February 1867).


15 *The Morning Post*, 17 January 1840.


17 Grant, *Sketches*, p. 137.

18 Grant, *Sketches*, p. 135.


20 Grant, *Sketches*, p. 140.


22 *The Morning Post*, 21 November 1837.


24 Plunkett, *Queen Victoria*, p. 3.


26 This phonographic imagination was a skill most likely to be employed at a time when the technology for an actual phonograph was still unavailable, but its ambitions (to grasp, preserve and reproduce sound) were very much present. Descriptions of (political) voices in a press at such a time could therefore quite consciously draw upon a well-developed acoustic memory bank and imagination in their audience, and could mobilize a large number of well-established images and metaphors to represent sound on paper. Voices in general, and those of public speakers in particular were remembered well in the nineteenth century because they were considered memorable, and not just some eerie phenomenon that only machines could grasp. And thus the Queen’s Speech and its sounds were memorialized on paper as well.

27 *Essex Standard*, 30 August 1839.

29 The Bradford Observer, 7 February 1839.
30 Elgin Courier, 22 January 1847.
31 Leicester Journal, and Midland Counties General Advertiser, 6 February 1857.
32 Aris’ Birmingham Gazette, 25 January 1847.
33 Northampton Mercury, 31 August 1839.
34 Hereford Journal, 5 January 1867.
35 Plunkett, Queen Victoria, p. 2.
41 The Morning Post, 20 January 1847.
42 Northampton Mercury, 31 August 1839.
43 The Wrexham Advertiser, Denbighshire, Flintshire, Shropshire, Cheshire and North Wales Register, 26 January 1867.
44 Plunkett, Queen Victoria, pp. 144–198.
46 Plunkett, Queen Victoria, p. 123.
47 Plunkett, Queen Victoria, p. 123.
48 Plunkett, Queen Victoria, p. 123.
52 Koestenbaum, The Queen’s Throat, p. 159.
54 Which was reimagined in the nineteenth century through the gendered construction of modern citizenship. See e.g. Stefan Dudink, Karen Hagemann and Anna Clark, eds. Representing Masculinity. Male Citizenship in Modern Western Culture (London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2007).
56 Bloom, *Voice in Motion*, pp. 66–110.
59 *The Morning Post*, 21 November 1837.
63 Her enthusiasm for photography has been described, e.g. in Anne Lyden, *A Royal Passion. Queen Victoria and Photogrpahy* (Los Angeles: Getty Museum, 2014).
64 The subject of a ‘female’ monarch and the issue of gender plays a role in both scholarly and more popular biographical accounts of Victoria’s life. Countless biographies draw attention in one way or another to the fact that Victoria was a rare woman in power, or focus on her particular personal characteristics and family life in gendered ways. For example: Dorothy Thompson, *Queen Victoria, A Woman on the Throne* (New York: Virago Press, 2008), and Julia Baird, *Victoria: The Queen: An Intimate Biography of the Woman Who Ruled an Empire* (New York: Random House, 2016). The issue of gender as a category of analysis to historicize Victoria is addressed perhaps most explicitly in Susan Kingsley Kent, *Queen Victoria. Gender and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
65 The gendering of sovereignty in this sense was, of course, not only ‘Victorian’: Birte Förster, for example, has studied the myth of Queen Louise in Prussia/Germany in the nineteenth century to uncover similar notions of ideal femininity in conjunction with monarchy. Birte Förster, *Der Königin Luise-Mythos. Mediengeschichte des ‚Idealbilds deutscher Weiblichkeit‘, 1860–1960* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011).