

**Title of poem:** Three Queens

**Performer's name:** Paul Scott

**Date of Performance:** 19th September 2009

**Place of Performance:** Arnolfini Bristol

**Length:** 03:13

### Summary of Features

Anthropomorphism					
Blending	■	■	■		
Eyegaze	■	■	■	■	
Handshape	■				
Neologism	■	■	■		
Symmetry	■	■	■	■	
Use of space	■	■	■		

### Notes:

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### Overview

This poem is in three parts – one stanza for each queen. In the first stanza, Queen Elizabeth I is described visually before she sets off on her royal progress, coming across potatoes, tobacco and deaf people signing for the first time. A scribe is ordered to record each of the new discoveries. Queen Victoria is described visually and reference is made to her nine children, one of whom was the ancestor, four generations later, of Prince Philip. In the final stanza, Queen Elizabeth II is shown travelling to Kenya and being up a tree when she is told she is queen (she was staying at the Treetops Lodge when she heard of the death of King George VI and her accession). The second part of this final stanza describes three marches demanding government recognition of BSL. When BSL is recognized, the final signs show the three queens in their three reigns looking up at a flag flying over them all.

The poem acts as a history lesson about BSL recognition, by using the reigns of the three queens to consider three key events in the history of the language. The first written records describing the use of sign language by deaf people in England date from the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. The Conference of Milan, which led to the banning of sign languages in schools, was held in 1880

during the reign of Queen Victoria. Government of BSL was finally accorded in 2003, after several large protest rallies, during the reign of Queen Elizabeth II.

None of the three queens is identified by name, but only by description. This is in keeping with a deaf tradition of visual description of people and a poetic tradition of under-specification of referents. Elizabeth I and Victoria are identified by visual description of their appearance, based on their famous portraits; Elizabeth II is identified by the story of her hearing the news of her accession while on safari in Africa.

As in *Blue Suits*, this poem builds upon the famous images of the characters – in this case, portraits of Elizabeth I and photographs of the older Victoria, Empress of India, while caricaturing them for humorous effect and to clearly identify who they are.

Other versions of this poem have been commented upon in some depth in:

2005: Sutton-Spence, R & Muller de Quadros, R “Sign Language Poetry and Deaf Identity.”  
Journal of Sign Language and Linguistics, 8, 177-212,

And in Chapter 13 of Sutton-Spence R. (2005) *Analysing Sign Language Poetry*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

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### Translation

Red curls piled high and tight

Inside a shell lies a pearl

that is placed in the centre of her extravagant headdress

puffed sleeves and a wide, full skirt

a small ruff at her neck and strings of pearls over her chest

here she stands

She beckons two scribes to follow her as she walks

She sees something of interest

It is peeled, then boiled

She tastes it, it's good

She tells one scribe to take notes. He writes quickly and the queen carries

on, her two scribes behind her

Again she sees something of interest

She takes it inquisitively between her thumb and forefinger

She puts it to her lips and inhales but it makes her cough and goes straight to

her head so she gives it back

She tells the other scribe to make notes and he write quickly, trying to think

how best to describe this new thing

She queen carries on, her two scribes following behind  
The queen sees something of interest. It's signs, people signing. She looks  
on and realises, "Are you Deaf? Oh, you're Deaf!"  
She tells the first scribe to make notes and he writes quickly, trying to think  
the best way to describe what they have seen  
And the queen carries on, her two scribes following behind  
Here is a cross  
It is on a flag, flying high  
Hair pulled back in a bun  
A stern face  
one pregnancy, then two, then three, four, five, pregnancy after pregnancy  
until nine children are born  
The fourth child grew up to have  
four children of her own  
This fourth child one day met someone and they got married and flew together to  
Kenya  
She climbs a tree, peering through binoculars at the scene and feels the tree shaking  
She climbs back down to be greeted "Your Majesty"  
And the flag flies again  
Deaf people are angry. They unite in their demand for BSL rights  
They come together and march  
They make demands to the government, but are ignored  
The next year, they come together again, and march, and march  
But still nothing happens  
The next year, they come together again, and march and march and march  
They campaign and finally, on 18th March 2003, BSL is recognised  
The flag flies again  
And three English Queens look up at the flag as it flies high

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### Theme

The poem's theme is the recognition of British Deaf people through history, exploring national and deaf identities to make members of the British Deaf community both British and Deaf.

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## Poetic Features

### Anthropomorphism

There are no examples of anthropomorphism in this poem but there are clear examples of characterization of the three British queens mentioned, as is also seen in *Blue Suits*.

### Blending

The most notable blend in this poem occurs when the sign *RECOGNISE* (03:01) blends with the sign *FLAG* to show the flag flying over the three queens. It uses the same handshape held at the same rather marked orientation but at a very different location.

At 01:16 the scribe's pencil is held in the same way as a cigarette, so that it puns on whether the scribe is sucking on his pencil or considering sucking on a cigarette. At 01:31 the scribe's paper briefly becomes a signing hand (similar handshapes held at slightly different orientations) before reverting to paper again.

### Eyegaze

The queens' gazes are looking down – as one might expect of a queen, being of high status. The scribe looks up, deferentially. The courtier telling Elizabeth II of her accession looks down but this use of the gaze is deferential (not looking royalty in the eye), showing that gaze direction has a range of symbolic meanings. The Deaf characters look straight ahead. Paul's gaze in the sign *RECOGNISE* is upon the sign itself, highlighting the significance of the language's recognition, and the gaze rises as the hand representing the flag rises. Significantly at the end of the poem the queens' gazes are all directed upward too, showing that the flag unifies queens and commoners (and deaf and hearing). In the final sign, the upward gaze of the middle queen is the most significant feature identifying the role of that entirely non-manually-represented character.

### Handshape

Repetition of handshape is not a notable feature of this poem. The open 5 handshape is repeated in the second section of the final stanza, in opposing orientations. When palm down it represents the many people campaigning for BSL recognition; when palm up it carries the meaning of "Hey, what gives?!"; when the palm faces the signer it means "come on!" The last sign of the first part of this stanza (*DEEP-CEREMONIAL-BOW*) uses two 5 handshapes, creating a transition to this next section of the poem.

### Neologism

The description of Queen Elizabeth's gown and jewels is full of neologisms, using a range of size and shape specifiers to trace the size and shapes of her garments. The characterization of the queen and her two courtiers is also highly productive. Her reactions to the potato and tobacco are also amusing in their exaggeration. Tracing out the Cross of St George for the English flag to

represent the English queen would be unintelligible out of context but in this poetic context its meaning is clear.

The use of numeral handshapes to describe the number of children born to Queen Victoria, while simultaneously signing PREGNANT on the other hand is very productive. Turning the hand orientation sideways for the numbers while signing PREGNANT again is productively used to refer to the number of generations following Victoria.

It would have been straight-forward and simple to have reported using established signs that the Princess Elizabeth was in Africa on safari when she learned of her accession, but instead the story is shown with productive signs (TREE, PERSON-UP-TREE, LOOK-AROUND-THROUGH-BINOCULARS, FEEL-TREE-SWAY, PERSON-DOWN-TREE, DEEP-CEREMONIAL-BOW) that move left and right across space.

Placing the three queens in space in the final signs of the poem breaks (or at least bends) signing expectations by placing one of the classifier signs referring to one of the queens behind the shoulder. This may mean that the queen is literally standing behind the others or that she is located further back in time. The handshape for this sign is unusual. A person is not normally indicated in space using a clawed 5 handshape. As these are queens, however, the 'crown' handshape can locate the queen, while also hinting that these might be groups of people (perhaps Deaf communities) at these locations.

### Symmetry

In the first stanza Queen Elizabeth's dress and pearls are all shown using symmetrical signs. For many signs this is shown with each hand being located ipsilaterally (CURLS 0:26, OPEN-SHELL at 0:31, HIGH-LACE-COLLAR at 0:36 and her large skirts at 0:39), but a marked symmetry device in this stanza involves the hands crossing ipsilaterally to contralaterally (with her puffed sleeves at 0:38 and strings of pearls at 0:42). She summons her scribes so that one is on each side of her, but when she orders them to record what they see, the symmetry is again crossed over as the right hand scribe is ordered by her left hand to record what they see on the left side of signing space (0:59) and the left hand scribe is ordered by her right hand to record what they see on the right side of signing space (1:14). The effect is pleasantly aesthetic.

In the final stanza, there is no attempt at symmetry in the first part, although both left and right sides of signing space are used, and often with simultaneous different one-handed signs on each side. In the second part, however, both hands are far more symmetrical for example, in NEXT-YEAR, COME-ON and WHAT-GIVES?. As the people come together to campaign for BSL recognition, the signs are repeated on either side of signing space, creating a comfortable symmetry and giving a strong impression of a sense of togetherness.

When the language is finally recognised, the signs are again symmetrical, again providing extra communicative suggestion that all is well.

In this last stanza, the phrase COME-ON!, signed both to the left and the right, echoes the use of the same phrase in Dorothy Miles' poem *The Staircase*, when the hero beckons the other deaf people forward to their goal.

The most striking symmetrical signs are in the last two, highly visual, beautifully constructed images, as the three queens are located in space across time, looking up at the flag (03:05-03:07). The left and right hands locate two queens to the left and right, while the body in the centre represents the third queen. As each looks up at the flag, the indicating verb LOOK-UP-AT-(something) is again shown on the left and right hands and the eyes of the signer create a third character in the centre. Their precise symmetry gives a sense of harmony and balance to history.

### Use of Space

The left and right sides of space are balanced throughout the poem to create a sense of balance and harmony in what is essentially a harmonious (ultimately) poem.

Front and back space is used as the marchers surge forward to demand recognition, only to be "knocked back" until the following year when they start again from behind and surge forward again.

The final three-fold sign of the three queens places the queens at three different heights, and at three different points in relation to the front-back plane. For the classifiers the left hand is above and behind the left shoulder, while the right hand is in front of right shoulder and at chest height. (Queen Victoria is probably on the right as she is famous for being short – no more than five foot tall). As we mentioned previously this gives a sense of the queens all being together in some way, while at the same time ranged across history.

### Any Other Comment

Elements of metonymy are widespread through this poem. The potato and tobacco show new things that were part of this age of discovery so that sign language is added as one more wonder of the age. The iconic portraits of the first two queens are used to represent the queens.

Three is a key number in this poem with many of the repetitions being three-fold.