

Elizabeth's Bedfellows: An Intimate History of Elizabeth's Court

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Elizabeth I (1533–1603) has been the subject of many fictional representations, some as early as the 1680s, speculating about her private life. Theatre plays, novels and later also films explored the allegations made against her during her life-time, such as suggestions that the Queen was infertile, that she was malformed, or in fact, a man or a hermaphrodite (p. 355). Other charges against the Queen regarded her sexuality: suggesting that she had not remained a *regina intacta*, but had consummated her relationship with Robert Dudley, the Master of the Horse; that she was unmarried because of an extreme sexual appetite that could not be satisfied by only one man; and that she had had several illegitimate children. Such allegations have continued to inspire the question: was any of this gossip actually true?

Scholarship on Elizabeth I gradually adopted the study of the Queen's private life alongside her politics. Whitelock's insightful biography of the Virgin Queen is partly informed by a number of such important studies, such as Susan Doran's *Monarchy and Matrimony: the Courtships of Elizabeth I*, Christopher Hibbert's *The Virgin Queen: the Personal History of Elizabeth*, Carole Levin's *Heart and Stomach of a King*, Natalie Mears' *Queenship and Political Discourse in the Elizabethan Realms*, and Anne Somerset's *Elizabeth I*.⁽¹⁾ Not the first to focus on Elizabeth's Ladies of the Bedchamber⁽²⁾, the book under review offers a detailed reading of a vast quantity of primary sources such as letters, ambassadorial accounts and state papers, that bring the Elizabethan court to life. The book is highly accessible and is divided into 62 short chapters with ringing titles, such as 'Froggie Went A-Courtin' and 'In Defence of the Queen's Body'.

Whitelock offers the reader intimate glimpses of a hidden world, revealing the secrets of the Queen's private

body, such as her favourite recipe for 'toilet water' containing majoram (p. 25), the 'sour and noisome' smells coming out of the Queen's satin and velvet-covered 'close stools' in the Bedchamber (p. 92), and the cream of white lead and vinegar that the Queen used as cosmetics to give her face its white complexion and to hide wrinkles and marks left by smallpox (p. 191). The reader obtains insights into the practicalities of dress and bodily inconvenience, and learns that Elizabeth used 'vallopes of fine holland cloth [linen cloth]' and satin girdles with hooks to which to adjust the 'vallopes' for when she was menstruating (p. 26), that John Hemmingway, the royal apothecary prepared salves to remedy the Queen's early loss of hair (p. 25), and that Elizabeth ordered her first pair of high heels at the age of 62, having worn flat shoes all her life (p. 27). Whitelock also draws attention to the Queen's strong demands on those serving her, expecting her welfare to go before their own at all times. For example, when Elizabeth continued to suffer from a painful toothache but refused to have the tooth drawn, John Aylmer, the Bishop of London, 'offered that one of his few remaining teeth might be extracted to reassure the Queen and encourage her to submit to a similar procedure' (p. 170). Another instance is Elizabeth's breaking Lady Mary Talbot's finger with a hairbrush in a fit of rage and later trying to blame the broken finger on an accident with a falling candlestick (p. 153), expecting of course Lady Talbot's complete loyalty in the matter. Furthermore, as Elizabeth lay in bed with smallpox, she was nursed through the height of her sickness by Lady Mary Sidney, whose selfless service was rewarded by her catching the disease herself and it disfiguring and scarring her face. Rather than showing gratitude to her loyal attendant, the Queen expressed distaste at Lady Sidney's disfigurement (p. 71).

It is Whitelock's objective not only to give a behind-the-scenes insight into the Queen's personal life and beauty issues, but rather to emphasise her *political* body, and to investigate how the image of this political body was constructed, guarded, and controlled by the Ladies of the Bedchamber. The book is chronological in structure, and opens with the first moment during which Elizabeth's body – and with that her reputation – was politicised: Lord Seymour's intrusions into the then princess's bedchamber. The reader is introduced to the princess's governess Kat Ashley, who is later to become the First Lady of the Bedchamber during Elizabeth's reign, and one of the most influential women at court. Kat Ashley is shown chasing Lord Seymour out of the bedroom after having reprimanded him that his bare-legged presence was 'such an unseemly sight in a Maiden's Chamber' (p. 2). With this anecdote, Whitelock sketches the importance of the female companion both as a bodyguard and protector of the princess's reputation, but also as a political force. Namely, Whitelock observes that soon after Elizabeth's guardian, the dowager queen Katherine, had died, rumours were spread that Elizabeth bore Lord Seymour's child. Kat Ashley was then taken into the Tower of London to be interrogated, but remained loyal to Elizabeth by taking the blame for these rumours and confessing to her own 'great folly' of ever having spoken of a potential marital union between Seymour and Elizabeth' (p. 4). As a political force, Elizabeth's governess tested whether a match or alliance would have met the approval of the ruling parties – at that time, her brother the King, and the Lord Protector, his guardian. Throughout the chapters of her study, Whitelock portrays and analyses this strategy to be a recurring pattern during Elizabeth's reign: the Ladies of the Bedchamber acted on the Queen's behalf during several courtships, so as to test the 'opinion at home and abroad' for specific matches, 'and then blame her women if it did not meet with a general approval' (p. 64). For example, Dorothy Bradbelt, who was 'oftentimes the Queen's bedfellow', and Kat Ashley wrote to the Swedish King's chancellor, Gyllenstierna, to tell him that it would be a good moment for the King to come to England in pursuit of Elizabeth (p. 62). Elizabeth and King Erik started sending each other gifts of appreciation, but when the correspondence was intercepted by Cecil, Elizabeth blamed her women, calling them 'idle cheats' but giving them unconvincingly low punishments for their 'interferences' (p. 63).

A recurring theme in the book is the Ladies of the Bedchamber's role in controlling the physical representation of the Queen, and their preserving the secrets of her body along with their political implications, both during Elizabeth's life-time and after, to build and preserve the cult of Gloriana, the powerful Virgin Queen. As Elizabeth was aging, her Ladies daily applied the make-up that Whitelock describes as a 'mask of youth' (p. 193). A forever youthful face also featured painted portraits of the Queen. These portraits were controlled by the Sergeant Painter George Gower, to ensure that artists would not represent 'the natural representation of the Queen's person', but rather 'that beautiful and magnanimous Majesty where-with God hath blessed her' (p. 302). As Elizabeth reached the age where child-bearing was

no longer a possibility, she needed to ensure the loyalty and trust of her subjects, and maintain the idea of a stable, never-changing Queen. Therefore, the reality of her appearance must never be seen by any subject aside the Ladies of the Bedchamber. Whitelock observes how unforgiving the Queen was when this rule was overstepped, by describing how Elizabeth's favourite courtier, Essex, accidentally happened upon the Queen in her nightdress, her face wrinkled and free of make-up, and her head bald, but with 'wisps of greying hair hanging about her ears'. He overstepped a line, having seen the Queen's natural appearance as it should only ever been seen by her Ladies (p. 315). Although Elizabeth is recorded to have responded pleasantly enough at first, she changed her mind towards Essex's intrusion later that evening, and Essex was placed under house arrest (p. 316).

The book's last two chapters reflect on the Ladies of the Bedchamber's guarding and protecting the Queen's body after her passing. Although it was a custom for monarchs to have their bodies embalmed after death, Elizabeth had decided that *her* body was not to be opened (p. 345). Whitelock explains that it was believed that the size and shape of a woman's womb would show whether a woman had borne children (p. 344). By not allowing the body to be investigated, and guarding it carefully, the Ladies are likely have acted 'to suppress questions about Elizabeth's virginity' (p. 346).

Especially fascinating is the epilogue to the book. Having observed that the image of Elizabeth's persona was incredibly well-guarded during her life-time, and just after her death before her burial whilst the Queen's effigy was displayed to suggest the presence of her royal body after the death of her physical body, Whitelock's epilogue demonstrates that this protection was lost as soon as James I ascended the throne. Whitelock notes how James erected a monument to the glory of Elizabeth, but that this monument was 'deliberately smaller and less costly' (p. 353) than the monument he had commissioned for his mother, Mary Queen of Scots. The figure on Elizabeth's tomb depicted an elderly woman, an image that had never been tolerated during Elizabeth's reign. Further 'attacks' on the image that Elizabeth so carefully sought to preserve during her lifetime are, as Whitelock reflects, the poems, and pamphlets that were published just after Elizabeth's death. Examples of these are Thomas Newton's *Atropoion Delion* (1603) and his elegiac verses that describe 'greedy worms' as courtiers penetrating Elizabeth's death body (p. 354). Whitelock argues that 'representations of Elizabeth, her body and her memory, now became public property free to be used, and abused, and suit new political realities' (p. 353).

Whitelock's exciting and source-driven biography sometimes feels anecdotal, rather than analytical. However, that is likely to be due to the presentation of the information in such short chapters, with analysis sometimes following in a later chapter. Whitelock *does* indeed analyse the importance of the Ladies of the Bedchamber as guardians of the Queen's physical and political body. She poignantly demonstrates that the Ladies of the Bedchamber's influence ended as soon as their mistress died, by depicting Mary Tudor's deathbed, surrounded by weeping Ladies of the Bedchamber. Whitelock importantly also refers to Jane Dormer's 'last significant act as Mary's bedfellow' in the form of her carrying a message from Mary to Elizabeth in which the former asked her to 'be good to her servants, pay Mary's debts and maintain the Catholic religion in England' (p. 11). Just as Elizabeth chose not to fulfil Mary's request about religion, James I after Elizabeth's death, chose not to maintain Elizabeth's image befitting her motto 'semper eadem'.

Other studies, such as Borman's, provide more detail about the *individual* Ladies of the Bedchamber, but this is not Whitelock's aim; She rather presents the Ladies as collective, prone to changes, as some Ladies die or lose favour, and are replaced by others. The emphasis is on their role as confidantes, bodyguards, and as a political force, not on their private lives. This I believe to be completely in line with the way Elizabeth herself viewed her Bedfellows: as ladies who were always at her disposal, regardless of their own families, pregnancies, and relationships.

Whitelock has risen to the challenge of presenting a stimulating reading of well-known material, both offering gossip which the reader can relish, as well as explaining the political significance behind the creation of such rumours – some of them originating with Elizabeth herself – to suit political aims. Apart from lending itself very well to the purpose of providing an introduction on the Elizabethan court to student readers, this captivating book will appeal to a wide range of readers, from specialist academics, to a non-

specialist public interested in Tudor history.

Notes

1. Susan Doran, *Monarchy and Matrimony: the Courtships of Elizabeth I* (London, 1996); Christopher Hibbert, *The Virgin Queen: the Personal History of Elizabeth* (London, 1990); Carole Levin, *Heart and Stomach of a King* (Philadelphia, PA, 1994); Natalie Mears, *Queenship and Political Discourse in the Elizabethan Realms* (Cambridge, 2005); Anne Somerset, *Elizabeth I* (London, 1991).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Another excellent recent monograph on Elizabeth I and her ladies at court is Tracy Borman, *Elizabeth's Women: the Hidden Story of the Virgin Queen* (London, 2009).[Back to \(2\)](#)

Other reviews:

Times Higher Education

<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/books/elizabeths-bedfellows-an-intimate-history-of-the-queens-court-by-anna-whitelock/2005713.article> [2]

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Telegraph

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