Dressing a Virgin Queen:
Court Women, Dress, and Fashioning the Image of England’s Queen Elizabeth I

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lthough no scholar has yet to determine whether or not Queen Elizabeth I, who ruled England from 1558 until 1603, lived and died a virgin, we do know she dressed like one. Elizabeth had to present herself as a chaste, virginal woman to prove that she was morally worthy of holding the traditionally masculine office of monarch. One of the ways Elizabeth defended herself against charges of inferiority and unfitness to rule because of her sex was to build a chaste reputation and to project an image of sexual virtue. By presenting herself as a virgin and controlling her sexuality (something women were considered incapable of doing), she could demonstrate her ability and right to control her realm. However, this image of virginity was not a static one, and it changed throughout Elizabeth’s reign.

Until recently, however, most scholars have only tried to ascertain whether Elizabeth I or her male courtiers and government officials controlled the Queen’s image and reputation. Few scholars have seriously examined whether or not Elizabeth’s female courtiers, particularly the women who worked in the privy chamber—the two to three small rooms used by the monarch for private repose—participated in constructing and spreading the Cult of Elizabeth which was established in the mid-1580s to celebrate her choice to remain a single, virgin woman. However, as I will argue in this essay, female courtiers, especially the Elizabethan privy chamber women, helped to construct the Queen’s virginal image by contributing
to the royal wardrobe, which enabled Elizabeth to dress the part of the Virgin Queen. Moreover, the women at court were in a unique position to help the Queen in this way because of their knowledge about the Queen’s body and the royal wardrobe.

The role of the privy chamber women at court has not been well understood by most historians. Until relatively recently scholars depicted the Elizabethan female privy chamber staff as serving a purely apolitical function. The subsequent scholarship that countered that view created a debate that centered mostly upon measuring court women’s agency in terms of their ability or inability to be effective patrons or to participate in defining and influencing the official political policies of the reign. For the most part, the primary services the Queen’s women provided Elizabeth, taking care of her bodily needs and offering her companionship, have still been accepted as domestic, and thereby, apolitical tasks. To the contrary, it is precisely these domestic activities that are the primary source of the privy chamber women’s political agency. The time these women spent with Elizabeth, dressing her and undressing her, gave these women knowledge about and authority over the Queen’s body and wardrobe. They could exercise that knowledge and authority by choosing gifts for Elizabeth and advising others on gifts they could give the Queen that would help Elizabeth project her image as a virgin.

The celebration of Elizabeth’s virginity did not start until the mid-1580s when it became clear that she would not marry or bear an heir, and the cult of her virginity hoped to calm fears over the issue of succession and to maintain support for the aging Queen. Until then, Elizabeth’s Privy Council and perhaps even Elizabeth herself never really considered that she would remain permanently single. Although her face and body could be painted to erase signs of age, Elizabeth had to use clothes, jewels, and cosmetics to create her image as a virgin queen/goddess. Dress and dress accessories were important tools for Elizabeth. In the early modern period, a person’s dress was supposed to reveal an individual’s social position and even their inward character. Colors often held symbolic meaning, such as white, which represented virginity, and black, which symbolized constancy. Symbols of virginity could also take the form of jewelry or embroidery—for example, the crescent moon, which invoked the chaste
Many of the garments and jewels that Elizabeth wore to fashion her virginal image were gifts given to her by her female courtiers, especially the privy chamber women.

The most institutionalized form of gift-giving took place on New Year’s Day when the monarch and her subjects exchanged gifts with each other, and these gifts were routinely recorded on a roll that divided up the gift-givers and recipients by social class and gender. The Elizabethan gift roll first listed royal relatives and high-ranking royal household officers, although the types of people recorded in this first section were inconsistent. For example, in 1562 and 1563, only one royal relative was listed in this first section, but in 1575 the gift roll only listed the lord keeper and the lord high treasurer. Next recorded were dukes and earls, followed by duchesses and countesses, then bishops, lords, baronesses, knights, ladies, gentlewomen, and finally, gentlemen. Interestingly, according to the New Year’s gift rolls, the category of “Gentlewoman,” many of whom worked in the privy chamber, consistently gave sartorial gifts throughout Elizabeth’s reign. As her reign progressed, more and more women in the social ranks of countesses, baronesses, and ladies, some of whom served in the privy chamber or attended court, also gave more dress-related gifts than they did cash. Male courtiers also gave more sartorial gifts in the second half of her reign, but still not as frequently as their female counterparts. For example, Frances Cobham, who served Elizabeth in the privy chamber from the time of Elizabeth’s coronation until Lady Cobham’s death in 1592, gave Elizabeth a clothing-related gift twelve times (out of the fourteen times that she was listed in twenty rolls), and six of these garments were made out of white material, such as her 1585 gift to the Queen of a white satin doublet. Her husband, who did not show up on the gift rolls as frequently and tended to give gold, also gave the Queen a sartorial gift in 1585, a white satin skirt. It is very conceivable that these two pieces would have worked well together as an outfit. Spouses often gave sartorial gifts, sometimes presenting a joint gift of a garment or jewelry. For example, in 1589, Lady Elizabeth Leighton and her husband, Sir Thomas Leighton, gave the Queen a white satin waistcoat that was decorated with embroidered flowers. In many of these cases, both husband and wife attended court, or only the wife held a position at court. Lord Cobham and Sir Thomas
Leighton were often absent from court due to their government positions, and therefore, probably depended upon their wives for help in choosing a New Year’s gift.

Female courtiers, and especially the privy chamber women, may have given Elizabeth sartorial gifts more frequently because their duties involved caring for the Queen’s clothes and her body. The hundreds of warrants that ordered clothes for the Queen often specifically named which women were placed in charge of certain garments. For example, Blanche Parry, chief gentlewoman of the privy chamber from 1565 until 1587, was often placed in charge of the deliveries of linen. Parry also recorded, on the epitaph on her tomb monument at St. Margaret’s Church, Westminster, London, that she was “keeper of her Majesties jewels.” In addition to taking care of the Queen’s jewels, she often contributed to Elizabeth’s wardrobe and virginal regalia, such as her 1585 New Year’s gift of a black velvet waist girdle trimmed with pearl encrusted buttons. The privy chamber women, by dressing the Queen and taking care of her clothes and jewels, had an intimate knowledge concerning the Queen’s preferences—what she lacked or wanted, and her size—knowledge they could use themselves and share with family, friends, and clients to choose the perfect New Year’s gift for the Queen.

Therefore, although Elizabeth may have chosen to present herself as a virgin queen, she required the assistance of her serving women to maintain and project that image. In many ways, Elizabeth’s image as a virgin queen depended less on the state of her hymen and more on the pearls and clothes that covered her purportedly virginal body. The Queen’s virginity was, in a sense, materially fashioned in layers of black and white cloth and swathes of pearls and diamonds. Moreover, Elizabeth’s image as a virgin queen was not solely dependent on her male councilors and courtiers who commissioned portraits of her, but also on the court women who aided Elizabeth in presenting herself as a virgin queen in both cloth and reputation.

Notes

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2. John N. King, “Queen Elizabeth I: Representations of the Virgin Queen,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 43, no. 1 (1990): 30–74. In this article King argues that, although Elizabeth was always portrayed as a virgin, she was not portrayed as a woman who had decided upon a permanent state of celibacy and chastity until after the Anjou marriage negotiations fell through.


5. I am not arguing that male courtiers and officials were excluded from fashioning Elizabeth’s image as the Virgin Queen through gifts of dress and dress accessories;
indeed, many did. However, as I will explain later in the article, female courtiers tended to
give sartorial gifts to the Queen more frequently than their male counterparts. Moreover,
examining who helped Elizabeth dress the part of a virgin queen shows us the ways
women could participate in the construction of Elizabeth's image instead of exclusively
focusing on the commissioning of portraits, sculpture, or poetry, where women were
less frequently and directly involved. I have written elsewhere on a different aspect of
Elizabethan female courtiers' involvement in sartorial gift-giving at court; see “Fashioning
Monarchy: Women, Dress and Power at the Court of Elizabeth I, 1558–1603,” in The
Rule of Women in Early Modern Europe, 1400–1700, ed. Anne J. Cruz and Mihoko

6. Scholarship focusing on the Elizabethan female privy chamber includes
Elizabeth A. Brown, “‘Companion Me With My Mistress’: Cleopatra, Elizabeth I, and
Their Waiting Women,” in Maids and Mistresses, Cousins and Queens: Women’s Alliances
University Press, 1999), 131–45; Barbara J. Harris, “Women in Politics in Early Tudor
England,” in The Historical Journal 33 (1990), 259–81, English Aristocratic Women,
1450–1550: Marriage and Family, Property and Careers (New York: Oxford University
Press, 2002), and “Sisterhood, Friendship and the Power of English Aristocratic
Daybell (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), 21–50; Natalie Mears, “Politics in the
Elizabethan Privy Chamber: Lady Mary Sidney and Kat Ashley,” in Women and Politics
in Early Modern England, ed. James Daybell (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), 6–82,
and Queenship and Political Discourse in the Elizabethan Realms (New York: Cambridge
University Press, 2005); Charlotte Merton, “The Women Who Served Queen Mary and
Queen Elizabeth: Ladies, Gentlewomen and Maids of the Privy Chamber, 1553–1603,”
(PhD diss., Cambridge University, 1992); and Pam Wright, “A Change in Direction: the
Ramifications of a Female Household, 1558–1603,” in The English Court: From the War
my dissertation I attempted to move past this debate and identify other areas in which
politics was practiced, such as courtly gift-giving; see “Busy Bodies: Women, Power and
Politics at the Court of Elizabeth I, 1558–1603,” (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2007).


8. Susan Doran, Monarchy and Matrimony: The Courtships of Elizabeth I (New

108; and Susan Vincent, Dressing the Elite: Clothes in Early Modern England (New York:
Berg, 2003), 79–91. Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, in Renaissance Clothing
and the Materials of Memory (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 3, make
the additional argument that clothing did not merely reflect social status or identity, but
actively fashioned the individual’s subjectivity.

10. Ashelford, Dress in the Age of Elizabeth, 102, explains many of the associa-
tions attached to different colors, including white and black. The pearl symbolized virgin-
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ity because it was white, a color denoting chastity (see Strong, Gloriana, 21), and pearls were often associated with the Virgin Mary (see Hacket, Virgin Mother, 9).

11. See the New Year's Gift Roll (1585), in the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington D.C., MS Z.d.16, which lists the widow Baroness Talbot's 1585 New Year's gift of a mantle or veil of lawn that was decorated with half moons. To understand the importance of symbolism in jewels and dress, see respectively, Diana Scarisbrick, Tudor and Jacobean Jewelry (London: Tate Publishing, 1995), 55–69; and Ashelford, Dress in the Age of Elizabeth, 90–107.


cers were listed in this first section as in the New Year’s Gift Roll (1585), in the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, D.C., MS Z.d.16. This last example was discussed in Donawerth, “Women’s Poetry,” 6, n. 10.


15. New Year’s Gift Roll (1585), in the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington DC, MS Z.d.16. The gift roll did not use the word skirt, but “kirtle,” which was a type of skirt, usually worn with an overskirt; see the glossaries in Janet Arnold, Queen Elizabeth’s Wardrobe Unlock’d (Leeds: W.S. Maney & Son, 1988), 366; and Jane Ashelford, A Visual History of Costume: The Sixteenth Century (1983; repr. London: B.T. Batsford 1993), 143.


17. In the Wardrobe of the Robe Account books for Elizabeth’s reign, The Lord Chamberlain’s Department, in the National Archive, Kew, UK, MS LC 5/31–LC 5/37, Parry is recorded numerous times as being put in charge of deliveries of linen. For example, a warrant dated May 1569 states “that ye deliver . . . vnto our welbeloved woman Blaunche Apparry . . . one pece of fine Holland clothe for ruffs and parteletts . . . and 107 ells of fine Holland clothe for diverse other necessaries for oure vse,” Wardrobe of the Robe Accounts, Lord Chamberlain’s Department, in the National Archive, Kew, UK, MS LC 5/31, 188. The dates of Parry’s service are slightly unclear. She was still at court until her death in 1590, but by then she had gone completely blind and had turned over the jewels she had in her charge in 1587 as recorded in an account book, in the British Library, London, MS Royal Appendix 68. The last record in the Wardrobe account books indicating that she received a delivery into the privy chamber was in September 1587 in the Wardrobe of the Robe accounts, Lord Chamberlain’s Department, in the National Archive, Kew, UK, MS LC 5/36, 52–54.

18. I have personally examined this tomb monument and have modernized the spelling. For a printed version of the epitaph’s full text, see Richardson, 136.

19. New Year’s Gift Roll (1585), in the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington DC, MS Z.d.16.