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Dressed to the Nines:
Queen Elizabeth I and the Power of Her Clothing

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Dressed to the Nines: Queen Elizabeth I and the Power of her Clothing

*Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy,
But not express'd in fancy; rich, not gaudy:
For the apparel oft proclaims the man...*

-Polonius to Laertes, *Hamlet, Act I, scene iii*

Elizabeth I is known for her iconic image as the Virgin Queen during her forty-five year reign from 1558 to 1603. Since then, historians have extensively studied Elizabeth and the motivation and reasoning behind her actions. For me, the most fascinating aspect of Elizabeth is the image she created for herself and the identity that others assigned to her. Specifically, I wanted to find out how the Queen and her court used clothes to establish these representations. To do this, I will first introduce the logistics of sixteenth century clothing and fashion and the daily routines Elizabeth used to get ready, then describe the purposes and effects of her clothing, and finally discuss the ways she and others in her court interacted and furthered their political agendas through clothing and image.

For Elizabeth, getting dressed in the morning took over two hours.¹ Dressing first consisted of a *shift* or *smock*, a washable, T-shaped layer that often was seen above the neckline of the outer garments.² Similar to the modern nightgown, it usually reached past the knees and protected the outer layer from damaging perspiration. On top of the shift came the *bodies*, a stiff piece meant to give shape to the torso, and the *kirtle*, the first underskirt.³ At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the bodies and kirtle were attached to each other, but later were

¹ Alison Weir, *The Life of Elizabeth I* (New York: The Ballentine Publishing Group, 1998), 235.

² Anna Reynolds, *In Fine Style: The Art of Tudor and Stuart Fashion* (London: Royal Collection Trust, 2013), 34.

³ Reynolds, *In Fine Style*, 39.

separated into two distinct pieces.

Next came the *farthingale*, a piece that brought shape and structure to the outer skirts and created the body's silhouette. It had rings of stiffened fabric or some other material to create the desired shape of the skirt. The farthingale varied widely according to each individual country's fashion. Spanish farthingales were full skirts and created a cone shape starting at the waist. Elizabeth wears this style in *Elizabeth I when a Princess, c. 1546* attributed to William Scots.⁴ French farthingales, on the other hand, were wide rolls that women would tie around their waist to create a drum or wheel-shaped skirt that went out horizontally and then fell to the ground. Elizabeth is depicted wearing an elaborate French farthingale in *The Ditchley Portrait of Queen Elizabeth I c. 1592-94* by Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger.⁵

Elizabeth next would have put on petticoats, with the outer one sometimes having embroidery or other decoration. Then her ladies would have helped her into a gown or a separate bodice and skirt, depending on the decade and current fashion. According to the cut of the bodice or gown, Elizabeth might also have worn an *overgown*, a floor-length, usually fitted piece over her bodice and skirt combination, often lined with fur to keep warm in the winter.⁶ To connect the sides of the bodice if they did not already, a *stomacher* could be added and to connect the edges of the gown or skirt, a *forepart* could be inserted.⁷ These individual pieces took a long time to assemble together and made outfits more complicated. It was also easier to

⁴ Reynolds, *In Fine Style*, 41.

⁵ Janet Arnold, *Queen Elizabeth's Wardrobe Unlock'd* (Leeds: W. S. Maney & Son Ltd, 1988), 43.

⁶ Reynolds, *In Fine Style*, 50.

⁷ *Ibid*, 48.

adapt clothing over time or update an outfit without replacing every piece. For, example, a different stomacher could make the entire ensemble seem new.

Sleeves in Elizabethan England were detachable and so allowed the wearer to create even more combinations of pieces within a wardrobe. Sleeves were pinned or tied on to the bodice and often were decorated with techniques including *slashing*, where the fabric underneath was allowed to show through, *foresleeves*, decorative pieces that were worn underneath the outer gown's sleeves, and *oversleeves*, where very thin material was embroidered all over, creating a second decorative layer.⁸ Because they were so changeable, sleeves were often updated or altered according to the wearer's desires.

Underneath all the skirts, women wore *stockings* or *hose*. Elizabeth initially wore cloth stockings like all of the Tudors before her, but was given some silk stockings for a New Year's gift in 1561. She loved them so much that she declared, "I like silk stockings well; they are pleasant, fine and delicate. Henceforth I will wear no more cloth stockings."⁹

For unmarried women, necklines were quite low and often exposed a large part of the chest. Elizabeth took full advantage of these styles and kept up her image as a Virgin by wearing low-cut necklines.¹⁰ Regardless of what else she wore, Elizabeth could immediately be identified as a virgin simply based on her necklines. Elizabeth even applied to her chest the same whitening make-up that she used for her face in order for it to appear smoother and whiter than it naturally was, especially as she got older.

⁸ Reynolds, *In Fine Style*, 48.

⁹ John Nichols, ed. *The Progresses and Public Processions of Queen Elizabeth*, (London, printed by and for J. Nichols, 1823) vol. 2, p. xlii.

¹⁰ Weir, *Life of Elizabeth I*, 234-235.

As her reign progressed, Elizabeth wore more and more makeup to distract the court from her aging body. The sixteenth century beauty ideal was white, flawless skin. Therefore, every morning she would apply a whitening paste made with egg whites, powdered egg-shell, alum, borax, poppy seeds, and mill water to her face, neck, chest, and even hands- any skin that would be showing.¹¹ The Queen took great pains to cover up scars, pockmarks, and other defects and appear younger than she was. She also added vibrant wigs to cover her thinning and graying hair. These wigs allowed her to keep her iconic red hair well past the time of its natural color to appear as if she was not aging. She created an image of eternal youth, based on beauty that defied her age.

In 1597, when Elizabeth was in her sixties, the French ambassador observed that she had:

“...innumerable jewels, not only on her head, but also within her collar, about her arms and on her hands, with a very great quantity of pearls round her neck and on her bracelets. She had two bands, one on each arm, which were worth a great price.”¹²

This amount of jewelry was not uncommon for Elizabeth and was a deliberate strategy of hers to distract from her aging body. She knew that her subjects would be awed by her magnificence so she played it up as much as possible and openly dazzled them through quality and quantity.¹³ Borman reports that someone at least caught on to Elizabeth’s strategy:

[The Queen is] most royally furnished, both for her persone and for her trayne, knowing right well that in pompous ceremonies a secret of government doth much consist, for that the people are naturally both taken

¹¹ Weir, *Life of Elizabeth I*, 236.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

and held with exterior shewes.¹⁴

As this citizen wisely describes, most people got caught up in the sparkle and majesty of what Elizabeth was wearing and paid less attention than possibly otherwise to the human body underneath all the glitz and glamour. One could very easily not realize how old the Queen actually was as she walked by if they were distracted by her magnificence. This was exactly what Elizabeth wanted.

Also, as another nod toward her Virgin Queen identity, Elizabeth always wore a lot of pearls, the symbol of virginity. She had ropes of them and often wore multiple strands at once. She wore pearls in her hair, on her dress, and around her wrists, as the French Ambassador previously pointed out. Throughout her life, pearls were a constant and necessary accessory.

In one specific instance, jewelry symbolized more than sparkle or chastity. At her coronation before she was crowned, the bishop put the coronation ring on the fourth finger of her right hand and “symbolically wedded her to her people.”¹⁵ This single piece of jewelry embodied her entire relationship with her kingdom. It represented her dedication to her people and her people’s loyalty to her. Every day, she wore a constant reminder of her choice to not get married herself because she had already married her kingdom. It was physically there on her hand for all to see.

A few weeks before she died, William Camden recorded the moment when the ring finally had to be removed:

She then commanded that ring wherewith she had been as it were joined in marriage to her Kingdom at her Inauguration, and had never since taken off, to be filed off from her finger, because it was so grown into the flesh that it could not be drawn off. Which was taken as a sad omen, as if it portended

¹⁴ Tracy Borman, *Elizabeth’s Women: Friends, Rivals, and Foes Who Shaped the Virgin Queen* (New York: Bantam Books, 2009), 390.

¹⁵ Weir, *Life of Elizabeth I*, 39.

that her marriage with the Kingdom, contracted by that ring, would now be dissolved.¹⁶

Camden picks up on the significance the ring had to Elizabeth and her people. He noticed a difference and felt that the Queen and her people would not be the same as they were before. The coronation ring was much more than just a piece of jewelry from the ceremony.

Because dressing consisted of so many individual pieces, they all had to be pinned together. Pinning required the help of several people, so Elizabeth was literally unable to get dressed or undressed by herself. In 1565, Robert Careles, the man who made the Queen's pins, supplied Elizabeth with "xviiij thousand great verthingale pynnes, xx thowsand myddle verthingale Pynnes, xxv thowsand great Velvet Pynnes, xxx and nyne thowsande smale Velvet Pynnes, and xix thowsand Small hed Pynnes."¹⁷ Careles delivered an order like this to Elizabeth every six months. The sheer quantity of pins needed and used each day reveals how important the ladies-in-waiting were to Elizabeth.

There was a clear structure to the Privy Chamber and those women who served Elizabeth. Anna Whitelock, in her book *Elizabeth's Bedfellows* describes the positions: four women in the Bedchamber and seven women in the Privy Chamber who were responsible for the Queen's hygiene, wardrobe, jewels, hair, make-up, and helped serve her meals, three women as Chamberers doing menial tasks such as cleaning rooms and emptying washbowls, and six young, unmarried girls to

¹⁶ William Camden, *The History of Queen Elizabeth* (London, private printing, 1675) 659 in Roger Pringle, editor, *A Portrait of Elizabeth I in the Words of the Queen and Her Contemporaries* (Totawa: Barnes and Noble Books, 1980) 116.

¹⁷ Arnold, *Wardrobe Unlock'd*, 218.

entertain the Queen and waited on her in public.¹⁸ These twenty women were always with the Queen and had plenty of opportunities for conversation and counsel.¹⁹

Having a position so close to the Queen naturally was quite competitive and required a vast amount of trust. Duties including serving food and grinding cosmetics were ways that one could try to poison the Queen.²⁰ Also, those that worked in the Privy Chamber had the most intimate interactions with Elizabeth and saw her when she was most vulnerable. They had to be discreet about what they shared with others and consciously protect the Queen from rumor or embarrassment.

In sixteenth century England, clothing was a direct indication of how wealthy the wearer was. Most of the cost of clothing came from the fabric itself. If someone wore velvet, for instance, anyone could immediately tell that they were rich enough to buy velvet, and could also afford to have someone make it into something wearable, though the cost of the materials far outweighed the cost of tailoring. Anna Reynolds, describes how in 1588, the Earl of Leicester owned seven doublets and two cloaks that were collectively worth £582. According to her calculations, each garment's average price is "more than the price Shakespeare paid for a house."²¹ Regardless of her inflation rates or benchmark of house prices at the time, clothes were expensive and everyone knew it.

Clothing was so valuable that it became a form of currency in and of itself.

¹⁸ Anna Whitelock, *Elizabeth's Bedfellows: An Intimate History of the Queen's Court* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), 18, 21.

¹⁹ Whitelock, *Elizabeth's Bedfellows*, 26.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 25.

²¹ Reynolds, *In Fine Style*, 28.

Individual pieces could be used in place of money to pay for services, settle debts, or simply become a worker's wages. Servants got clothes that were handed down from their employers when they were worn or no longer suitable.²² Clothes were even passed down in wills in the same way that property or money was distributed because it was so valuable.²³ There was even a black market for clothing, as pieces could be easily altered or remade, or reprocessed into some other substance. For example, metal threads in fabric could be melted down and resold and linen rags from shirts could be recycled into paper, which was also an expensive commodity.²⁴

Except for gift giving, Elizabeth never gave away any of her clothes. During the Stowe and Folger inventories in 1600, it was recorded that she had over 2000 gowns in her possession. Keeping so many clothes in storage served multiple purposes. It provided employment because so many clothes required care and upkeep, maintained her social status as someone who could afford so many items and had them available to wear, and were regarded as state treasure. The fabric itself was costly, but the gold and silver thread and all the stones or jewels sewn onto the garment had significant economic value also. Elizabeth would have wanted to save these clothes as an indicator of how wealthy she was, and also how economically prosperous England was during her reign, whether or not she wore them anymore.

Within her court, Elizabeth was very conscious of color and its meanings and used them to her advantage throughout her entire reign. As part of the various editions of the Sumptuary Laws throughout the Tudor dynasty, only people of a

²² Reynolds, *In Fine Style*, 28.

²³ Arnold, *Wardrobe Unlock'd*, xiv.

²⁴ Reynolds, *In Fine Style*, 28.

specific social status could wear certain colors.²⁵ For instance, the privilege of wearing purple was reserved for the very highest echelons of society. When Elizabeth wore a purple velvet gown to her coronation feast, it very clearly indicated that she was now Queen.²⁶ Simply the range of colors in her wardrobe indicated that Elizabeth only came from the highest social rank; no one else would have been legally allowed to own clothes in so many colors.

Colors were also important in gift giving. Records of New Year's gifts to the Queen and the inventories of her wardrobe indicate that although she had the most gowns in black and white, Elizabeth had gowns in many colors including crimson, orange, purple, brown, silver, and gold.²⁷ Each color had a meaning associated with it that people at court and foreign visitors would have been aware of. When a courtier gave a gift to the Queen in a certain color, they were essentially pairing the Queen with the matching characteristic. This could be either favorable or harmful to one's status and favor in court, depending on whether the implication was positive or negative.

For example, in one explanation of color, turquoise denoted jealousy.²⁸ In this case, it would probably not be a good idea to present the Queen with turquoise sleeves or a turquoise partlet, implying that she herself was jealous. There were exceptions however, if the color was particularly in style or if the Queen liked the color anyway. In both cases, the meaning was disregarded. Reynolds tells how Countess Shrewsbury consulted Lady Sussex regarding her New Year's gift to the Queen in 1575-76. Lady Sussex suggested the color watchet (a pale blue) rather

²⁵ Ibid, 17.

²⁶ Weir, *Life of Elizabeth I*, 39.

²⁷ Arnold, *Wardrobe Unlock'd*, 90.

²⁸ Ibid.

than ash because although watchet stood for a deceiving disposition, the Queen did not have any garments in that color and Lady Sussex knew Elizabeth well enough that she could predict that the Queen would be pleased. Elizabeth happily received the gift.²⁹

Fairly early on in her reign, she adopted white and black as her colors, which continually sent non-verbal messages to those around her. White was the color of purity and virginity, but also the color of innocence and youth.³⁰ When Elizabeth wore white, she identified herself as a virgin, who was young and energetic, despite her age. By evoking the purity of virgins, she built up her identity as a chaste woman. Her six ladies-in-waiting who attended her in public and entertained her often were all dressed in white also.³¹ By wearing the same color as her young and chaste handmaidens, Elizabeth identified with them and proudly proclaimed to the entire world that she was a virgin.

Elizabeth's other favorite color, black, represented wisdom, constancy, and gravity. Wearing black firmly indicated she had power, responsibility and should be taken seriously.³² Although black was typically worn only in mourning Elizabeth allowed herself to wear it and was, of course, unchallenged. In black, she became the matronly mother and protector of her people. Additionally, the rich, dark fabrics created a lovely contrast with her fair skin and emphasized her bright red hair. As Arnold points out, wearing black created the perfect background to showcase the

²⁹ Arnold, *Wardrobe Unlock'd*, 91.

³⁰ Elizabeth W. Pomeroy, *Reading the Portraits of Queen Elizabeth I* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1989), 57.

³¹ William Rye, *England as Seen by Foreigners* (London: J.R. Smith, 1865), 104-105.

³² Pomeroy, *Reading the Portraits*, 58.

many jewels, pearls, and other jewelry that Elizabeth consistently wore.³³

Elizabeth used black and white and their respective meanings together to exhibit the balance between youth and responsibility. She promoted herself as active and energetic, but also serious and capable of running a country on her own. She walked the fine line of work and play, business and leisure. Dressed in white, the dedicated ruler seemed forever young.

Even before she was queen, Elizabeth was aware of the general power of her clothing and appearance. When her sister Mary became queen, Elizabeth promptly wrote to congratulate her and had the decency to ask whether she should wear something appropriate for mourning the loss of her beloved brother Edward or for celebrating her sister's success in ascending to the throne.³⁴ She understood that thoughtlessly picking one option or the other might hurt her favor with her sister and the country in general. She wanted to present the best public image possible, especially while holding such a precarious position in Mary's court.

During Mary's reign, Elizabeth dressed modestly and conservatively. Despite having jewels and some access to current fashions from the continent,³⁵ Elizabeth did not wear them in order to present a submissive and loyal position to her sister who did eventually imprison her and could have her killed at any time. John Aylmer recalled, "there came never gold nor stone upon her head tyl her sister enforced her to lay her former sobreness and bear her company in her glistering gayness."³⁶

Elizabeth did not want to seem ostentatious or appear as if she was trying to usurp

³³ Arnold, *Wardrobe Unlock'd*, 1.

³⁴ Susan Watkins, *Elizabeth I and Her World* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1998), 32-33.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 33.

³⁶ Watkins, *Elizabeth and Her World*, 31.

Mary's throne. Because of their religious differences, English Protestants naturally gravitated toward Elizabeth, rather than toward Catholic Mary. This possible alliance and threat to Mary's crown was obviously alarming and so Elizabeth did all she could to downplay the danger and show her allegiance to her sister, including being very conscious of what she wore.

Once she was queen, Elizabeth wore expensive clothing not just to satisfy her vanity; extravagance served a more political purpose:

Elizabeth had insisted that her coronation and its attendant celebrations be as magnificent as possible, so as to make an indelible impression upon those who had cast doubts on her legitimacy and her title to the throne. The appearance of splendor and majesty meant a great deal in an age that equated greatness with lavish outward show, and so the Queen meant to use her coronation to make a political statement.³⁷

Elizabeth knew exactly what threats she was facing when she ascended to the throne. She realized that she had to do something to show that she was the legitimate ruler and was rightfully descended from Kings. She asserted her right through what she wore and what she did; only the most lavish affair would do because that is what a legitimate King or Queen did.

Elizabeth had a number of jewels in her possession that had belonged to previous Tudor monarchs that she wore purposefully, especially towards the beginning of her reign.³⁸ Only the legitimate offspring of the Tudor monarchs would have even possessed those jewels, let alone wear them in public. By wearing these family jewels, Elizabeth showed her legitimacy as a monarch and right to reign as the daughter and sister of the previous kings. Elizabeth also emphasized her Tudor

³⁷ Weir, *Life of Elizabeth I*, 33.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 236.

Elizabeth owned Anne Boleyn's famous initial pendants and Henry VIII's sapphire surrounded by rubies. She also owned jewelry that had belonged to her brother Edward VI and sister Mary I.

features-red hair, fair skin, and dark eyes-through her clothing choices to prove her legitimacy and rightful authority as a monarch.

Elizabeth also used foreign fashion and trends as a non-verbal form of international diplomacy. She wore other nations' styles as a form of language that she used to communicate with visitors to England.³⁹ By wearing, for example, French and Italian fashions, she demonstrated her openness and hospitality to other nations and welcomed their ambassadors and visitors. She promoted England as willing to interact and negotiate with other countries and be a team player. When she was working out some political alliance with another country, she would often wear that country's particular style.⁴⁰ Elizabeth established England as a country that was in tune with the current trends and receptive to the affairs on the continent.

Every year at New Year's, the Court would give gifts to Elizabeth. This tradition was an opportunity to show loyalty to the monarch, and gain favor through money and trinkets. At first, these gifts were mostly monetary. The occasion was very orderly and followed precise rules. Courtiers gave according to their rank: an archbishop gave more than a steward. The entire process was public and became a form of publicity.⁴¹ Anyone could come and see the Queen as she was presented with gifts on New Year's each year.

Later on in her reign, however, there began to be more clothing and accessories as gifts instead of money. These gifts were much more personal and Elizabeth loved them. While she appreciated money in her vaults, she loved clothes

³⁹ Elizabeth Pomeroy, *Reading the Portraits*, 72.

⁴⁰ Whitelock, *Elizabeth's Bedfellows*, 26.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 71.

and jewels and anything she could wear. Fashionable gifts also required the giver to think harder and be more creative with their gifts, since there was now the possibility that Elizabeth might not like the gift. As has already been discussed, colors were not insignificant. Such a gift would reflect both on the Queen and the giver. He or she would need to think carefully about what they would give the Queen. The gift would say a lot through style, color, and materials. One did not want to lose favor if a gift was less than satisfactory.

As material and fashion oriented gifts became more and more popular, courtiers looked to Elizabeth's ladies-in-waiting and the women of the Privy Chamber for advice on what gift to give the Queen. Because of their close proximity to Elizabeth on a daily basis, they knew her preferences and sizes. They could be more creative in choosing a gift that might be too risky for someone else who did not know Elizabeth as well.⁴² The example above of Countess Shrewsbury asking Lady Sussex for help with choosing her gift demonstrates the role that Elizabeth's women played.

While there are numerous records of sleeves, gloves, jewels, skirts, brooches, gowns, and other items given to Elizabeth, there are no records of any cosmetics.⁴³ This is puzzling, given that cosmetics were a significant component in the creation of Elizabeth's public image. Perhaps there was an unspoken rule that cosmetics were not acceptable gifts because that would acknowledge that the Queen used such products. This would then disprove the idea that she was trying to establish of her as forever young.

Because so many courtiers consulted the women closest to Elizabeth about

⁴² Whitelock, *Elizabeth's Bedfellows*, 72

⁴³ *Ibid*, 192.

their gifts, these women had significant political power that is often undermined.⁴⁴ Essentially, they chose gifts that either pleased or displeased the Queen, therefore influencing how she favored her courtiers. By choosing her outfits, and literally creating her public image each day, these women shaped a nation. Without the preparation every morning, Elizabeth could not have faced the world and ruled her country effectively as she did. She needed to create her image in order to be successful politically. As much as her council and male advisors participated in this construct, it was the women attending her that laid the foundation for all of her other successes. These women were her trusted friends and closest confidantes and stayed with her through every storm. As Whitelock eloquently concludes, “The friendships and intimacies between Elizabeth and her women underpinned her reign.”⁴⁵ Elizabeth could not have been the Queen she was without the women around her and the image they created each morning.

⁴⁴ Catherine L. Howey, “Dressing A Virgin Queen: Court Women, Dress, and Fashioning the Image of England’s Queen Elizabeth I” *Early Modern Women: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 4 (2009): 201-202.

⁴⁵ Whitelock, *Elizabeth’s Bedfellows*, 18-19.

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