

WOMEN IN LOVE HISTORIES

Kathleen Di Francesco

**Famous Women
Who Redefined
the Power of Love**

feat. Elizabeth I, Robert Dudley, Robert Devereux, François Duke of Anjou, Sisi, Gyula Andrassy, Luigi Lucheni, Marie Antoinette, Alex von Fersen, Empress Eugénie, Napoleon III, Zenaida Youssoupoff, Prince Felix Yusupov

*... and Its Intriguing Dangerous
Splendour*

INTEGRAL

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Elizabeth I, The Virgin Queen and Her Lovers

The powerful Queen, daughter of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn, never married and this is one of the greatest mysteries of the history of England.

But for a queen known for her alleged virginity, Elizabeth I's love life has long been the subject of great speculation. Dr. Anna Whitelock, a reader in early modern history at Royal Holloway, University of London, explores what really went on behind the closed doors of the so-called "Virgin Queen".

Over the years, countless books, novels, plays and films have depicted Elizabeth I's relationships with figures such as Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, and the young Duke of Anjou. In the absence of conclusive proof one way or another, the question 'did they or didn't they?' will always linger. Yet what is clear is that, both at home and abroad, rumours about Elizabeth's love life—real or imagined—circulated throughout her reign. Far from being the Virgin Queen, for some hostile observers Elizabeth was the 'whore' of Europe.

Contemporary beliefs about the 'insatiable' sexual appetites of women, together with Elizabeth's failure to marry, fuelled suspicions that the queen was engaged in secret sexual liaisons. Her Catholic opponents challenged her virtue, and accused her of a "filthy lust" that had "defiled her body and the country". The king of France joked that one of the great questions of the day was "whether Queen Elizabeth was a maid or no". The courts of Europe were abuzz with gossip as to the queen of England's behaviour.

From the very earliest months of her reign, rumours spread of Elizabeth's relationship with Robert Dudley, her "sweet Robin" whom she had known since childhood. Within days of her accession, Elizabeth had appointed Dudley as master of the horse—a position that guaranteed almost daily contact. The Spanish ambassador reported to the king of Spain that "Lord Robert has come so much into favour that he does whatever he likes and it is even said that Her Majesty visits him in his chamber day and night".

Tracy Borman explores the complex and sometimes scandalous relationship between Elizabeth I and Robert Dudley. Elizabeth I is remembered in history as the Virgin Queen. She was the daughter of Henry VIII by his second wife Anne Boleyn and in stark contrast to her much-married father, she famously declared: "I will have but one mistress here, and no master." During the course of her long reign, she was besieged by many suitors but gave each one nothing more than "fair words but no promises". Yet it is generally accepted that there was one man who, more than any other, tempted Elizabeth to relinquish her single state.

Robert Dudley (1532/33–1588), was the fifth son of John Dudley, 1st Duke of Northumberland. The duke had wrested power during the minority of Edward VI (who became king aged nine on Henry VIII's death), but was executed for putting his daughter-in-law, Lady Jane Grey, on the throne after the young king's death in 1553. His son Robert led troops in support of the coup, but was swiftly defeated by Queen Mary I and was thrown into the Tower of London.

Robert Dudley's sojourn in the Tower coincided with that of the new queen's half-sister, Elizabeth (who Mary suspected of plotting against her). They had been friends since childhood, Dudley having been among her brother Edward's companions. Close in age, Elizabeth and Dudley had shared the same tutor, Roger Ascham, who had been greatly impressed by his precocious young pupils.

It was in Dudley that the eight-year-old Elizabeth had confided upon the execution of her third stepmother, Catherine Howard, in 1541, vowing: "I will never marry." He would always remember the

conversation, and it may have been the reason he decided to marry Amy Robsart nine years later. During the years that followed, Robert kept his wife away from court—mindful, perhaps, that it might damage his relationship with Elizabeth.

The years of uncertainty during Mary Tudor's reign (1553–1558), when Elizabeth lived in constant fear for her life, brought her ever closer to Dudley. He remained loyal to her throughout, even when it risked his own safety. They spent many hours together and had a great deal in common, sharing a love of hunting, dancing and lively conversation. This sparked endless gossip among the princess's household, particularly given that Dudley was a married man.

His loyalty was rewarded when Elizabeth became queen in 1558, at the age of 25. She immediately appointed Dudley to be her Master of Horse, a prestigious position that involved regular attendance upon his royal mistress. But it was no longer easy for the couple to meet in private. As queen, Elizabeth's every move was scrutinised not just by her people, but by the whole of Europe. "A thousand eyes see all I do," she once complained.

Nevertheless, Elizabeth made it clear that she had no intention of giving up her favourite. If anything, she found ways to spend even more time with him. A year after her accession, she had Dudley's bedchamber moved next to her private rooms in order to facilitate their clandestine meetings. Before long, their relationship was causing a scandal not just in England, but in courts across Europe.

The obvious intimacy between them provoked endless speculation about just how close their relationship was. Elizabeth's chief rival, Mary, Queen of Scots, was in no doubt that Elizabeth and Dudley were lovers and later told the noblewoman Bess of Hardwick that he had visited the queen's bed numerous times. It is unlikely that Elizabeth, who had seen so many powerful examples of the perils of sex and childbirth, would have risked the throne she had fought so hard for by sleeping with her favourite. But their friendship probably charted a careful course between platonic and sexual.

The rumours flared up again in 1587, when a young man going by the name of Arthur Dudley arrived at Philip II's court in Madrid, Spain, claiming to be the illegitimate child of the English queen and her favourite, Robert Dudley. His age placed his conception at 1561, which coincided with Elizabeth being bedridden with a mysterious illness that caused her body to swell. The account therefore had an air of credibility, made more so by the fact that Arthur was able to name a servant who had allegedly spirited him away from the royal palace of Hampton Court (near London) as soon as he was born and raised him as his own, only confessing the truth on his deathbed in 1583. There is no firm evidence to corroborate the story, but it suited King Philip's interests to discredit the English queen.

Ironically, the death of Dudley's wife in 1560, at her residence Cumnor Place, removed any hope that Elizabeth may have privately cherished of one day marrying him. The circumstances were suspicious. Amy insisted that all her servants attend a local fair. When they returned, they found her at the bottom of a short flight of stairs, her neck broken. Whether it was an accident, suicide or murder has never been resolved beyond doubt.

The finger of suspicion pointed at Dudley, whom his enemies claimed would not have flinched from having his own wife put to death so that he could realise his ambitions of marrying the queen. Mary, Queen of Scots quipped that the queen of England was about to marry her "horsekeeper" who had killed his wife in order to make way for her. Elizabeth was also in the frame: many believed that her passion for Dudley had driven her to have his wife murdered so that she could have him at last.

Yet it is extremely unlikely that Dudley or Elizabeth had any hand in Amy's death. They would hardly have taken such a risk, especially as they would have known that it would prove counterproductive to

any plans they may have had to marry. The scandal reverberated not just around the kingdom but across the courts of Europe, so that Elizabeth was obliged to distance herself from Dudley in order to avoid being implicated any further.

But in private, the queen refused to give up her favourite. Now that the scrutiny of the court was even more intense, she was obliged to go to even greater lengths to conceal their meetings. In November 1561, for example, she disguised herself as the maid of Katherine Howard (later Countess of Nottingham) in order to enjoy the secret pleasure of watching Dudley shoot near Windsor Castle. Another attempt at discretion was less successful. When her close friend and attendant Lady Fiennes de Clinton helped Elizabeth escape court in disguise to meet Dudley at his house for dinner, Philip II of Spain's envoy heard of it and immediately reported it to his master.

In the letters that Queen Elizabeth and Dudley exchanged, they used the symbol 'ôô' as code for the nickname of 'Eyes' that she had given him. Elizabeth kept her favourite's letters, along with his portrait, in a locked desk next to her bed. On a visit to court in 1564, the Scottish ambassador Sir James Melville spied the portrait as Elizabeth was searching for one of his own royal mistress. When he asked if he could borrow it to show the Scottish queen, Elizabeth immediately refused, "alleging that she had but that one picture of his". Spying Robert Dudley in a corner of the bedchamber, Melville slyly observed that she should not cling so to the portrait, since "she had the original."

As her reign progressed and the pressure to marry grew ever more intense, Elizabeth pretended to consider numerous potential suitors. But she would never commit to any of them. The Venetian ambassador shrewdly observed: "She has many suitors for her hand, and by protracting any decision keeps them all in hope."

Meanwhile, now that the scandal of his wife's death had faded, Robert Dudley stepped up his campaign to make Queen Elizabeth his wife. He besieged her with protestations of his undying affection, all of which his royal mistress received with obvious pleasure but with no firm promises.

By 1575, Dudley was growing desperate and decided to make one last, spectacular attempt to persuade Elizabeth to marry him. Pulling out all the stops, he invited her to his Warwickshire estate, Kenilworth Castle, and staged several days of extraordinarily lavish entertainments at a huge cost. The queen loved every minute of her visit there, but would not be dazzled into acquiescence. Genuine though her affection for Robert was, she knew that marrying him would court disaster in her kingdom, sparking such intense opposition from Dudley's rivals that it might even spill out into civil war.

On Saturday, July 9, 1575, at about 8 pm, Elizabeth I arrived on horseback at Kenilworth Castle, the Warwickshire power base of her long-time favourite Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester. As the queen passed through the castle gates, along the tiltyard and into the outer courtyard, she was met by actors reciting speeches of welcome and bearing symbolic gifts, including the keys to the castle. Trumpeters saluted her and when, at last, Elizabeth reached the inner courtyard, dismounted her palfrey and made her way to her chamber, there was a peal of guns that could, it was said, be heard for 20 miles.

For nearly three weeks the queen, her ladies-in-waiting and leading courtiers were housed at the castle and entertained by Dudley with diversions ranging from music, masques and dancing to tilting, hunting and bear-baiting. Elaborate banquets at which guests consumed up to 40 barrels of beer and 16 barrels of wine *per day* were punctuated by fireworks displays and, on at least one occasion, the gyrations of an Italian acrobat. In the words of the French ambassador, nothing "more magnificent" had been seen in England "for a long time".

The stage upon which these splendours unfolded was Kenilworth itself: Dudley had lavished a reputed £60,000-worth of building works in anticipation of the queen's visit. Known as the 'princely pleasures', the July 1575 festivities have gone down in history as the longest, most expensive party of Elizabeth's 45-year reign. These revels also constituted Dudley's last-ditch attempt—after nearly 15 years of trying—to win the queen's hand in marriage.

Contemporaries described Dudley as the man who knew Elizabeth best and exercised the greatest influence over her. The two shared many interests, including riding and hunting. But theirs was also an attraction of opposites: the queen was indecisive; Dudley impulsive. In all probability they never consummated their relationship—though there may have been a sexual component to it. Whatever the case, there was undoubtedly a strong and enduring emotional bond. Elizabeth's pet name for Dudley was 'eyes', and he seems to have been the only one of her many suitors that she seriously contemplated marrying.

For all his desperation to marry the Queen, Dudley had been secretly courting one of her ladies-in-waiting, Lettice Knollys. Described as being one of the best-looking women of the court, she was of royal blood, being the great-niece of Elizabeth's mother, Anne Boleyn. This no doubt added to her attraction for Dudley, who had enjoyed a flirtation with Lettice for the previous 10 years. Now that his last-ditch attempt to persuade Elizabeth to marry him had failed, he took Lettice as his mistress.

For a time, Elizabeth was blissfully unaware that her favourite was betraying her. But three years into the affair, Lettice became pregnant. She was not a woman to be set aside and insisted that Dudley marry her. Fearing the inevitable backlash from his royal mistress, he agreed only to a secret ceremony, which took place in 1578. The bride was said to have worn "a loose gown"—a coded reference to her pregnant state. It was not long before the secret leaked out at court.

When Elizabeth learned that her cousin had stolen the only man she had truly loved, she flew into a jealous rage, boxing Lettice's ears and screaming that "as but one sun lightened the earth, she would have but one queen in England". She then banished this "flouting wench" from her presence, vowing never to set eyes on her again. Although she eventually forgave Dudley, their relationship had lost the intimacy that had defined it for so many years.

When Lettice Knollys, Countess of Leicester, married Robert Dudley in 1578 without telling Elizabeth I, sparks flew in the Palace of Whitehall. The atmosphere within the queen's apartments at the Palace of Whitehall was icily cold when, in late 1579, Lettice Knollys stood before Elizabeth I. The queen raged at the woman in front of her in no uncertain terms. "As but one sun lightened the Earth, she would have but one queen in England," Elizabeth seethed, before reputedly boxing Lettice's ears and banishing her from court.

But towards the end of Dudley's life, they grew close once more. In 1586, he went to command her forces in the Netherlands. Missing him, she wrote an affectionate letter, which she signed: "As you know, ever the same. ER." "Ever the same" or "semper eadem" was her motto, but she and Dudley knew how much more it signified in their relationship.

The following year, the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots at Elizabeth's orders threw her into turmoil and it was to her old favourite that she turned for comfort. Dudley was also by Elizabeth's side through the Armada crisis of 1588 (the Spanish navy's failed attempt to invade England, thwarted by the English fleet). By now he was gravely ill but did not hesitate to accept the post of 'Lieutenant and Captain-General of the Queen's Armies and Companies'.

He walked beside her horse as his royal mistress delivered her famous speech at Tilbury on 8 August 1588, while inspecting the troops that had been assembled to defend the Thames Estuary against any incursion up-river towards London: "I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king and of a king of England too."

He stayed with the queen in the immediate aftermath of the Armada, wishing to be certain that the danger had passed. One of the last recorded sightings of the pair together was at a palace window, watching a celebratory parade staged by his stepson, the Earl of Essex. By now in poor health, Dudley took his leave of Elizabeth. He, at least, must have known that it would be for the last time.

A few days later, he wrote to Elizabeth from Rycote in Oxfordshire, ending the letter: "I humbly kiss your foot... by Your Majesty's most faithful and obedient servant." These were probably the last words ever written by Robert Dudley. Five days later, on September 4, 1588, he breathed his last. Elizabeth was inconsolable at the loss of "sweet Robin", the only man whom she had ever truly loved. Their relationship had survived almost 50 years of trials and tribulations, and Elizabeth was lost without him.

In the days immediately after his death, she kept to her room, unable to face her court or council. The brief note that he had sent her from Rycote now became her most treasured possession. She inscribed it "His last letter", and kept it in a locked casket by her bed for the rest of her life. For years afterwards if anyone mentioned Robert Dudley's name her eyes filled with tears.

The pair's attraction to one another was widely commented upon all that period and their flirtatious behaviour shocked observers. When in 1560 Robert Dudley's wife, Amy Robsart, was found with her neck broken at the bottom of a staircase, speculation was rife as to the involvement of the Queen and her favourite. In the years that followed, their close relationship continued, but any lingering possibility of a future marriage was cast aside.

Elizabeth's councillors were determined to secure a favourable marriage for her, both as a means of consolidating England's position in Europe and to provide an heir to succeed her. While there was no lack of suitors, including Philip II of Spain; Erik XIV of Sweden and the Archdukes Ferdinand and Charles of Austria, no one managed to win the queen's favour or the unanimous support of her council. While foreign negotiations continued, Elizabeth enjoyed the attention of young male courtiers like Thomas Heneage, Christopher Hatton and Walter Raleigh, and later Robert Devereux, earl of Essex, all of whom flirted their way into the queen's favour.

But Robert Dudley remained the queen's first, and probably only love. Perhaps as a reaction to Dudley's marriage to Lettice Devereux, dowager countess of Essex in the autumn of 1578, the following year Elizabeth welcomed Francois, the Duke of Anjou, brother of the King of France, to the English court to present his suit for marriage.

Elizabeth's last serious suitor was François, the Duke of Alençon and Anjou (1555-1584), and the youngest son of King Henry II of France. He had first been proposed as a husband in 1578, when he was 23 and Elizabeth 45. Despite the considerable age gap, the pair became very close, aided by the fact that the duke was the only one of the queen's many suitors to court her in person. Calling him her "frog", Queen Elizabeth showered the young duke with affection, and he gave every appearance of returning her love. But it all came to nothing, and François eventually returned to France in 1581.

It was not an ideal match. Anjou was a 20-something tiny and pockmarked Catholic who was widely rumoured to be a transvestite. Nonetheless, Elizabeth had always longed to be wooed in person by one of her illustrious suitors, and for a time she seemed to be genuine in her affections and interest in Anjou, whom she affectionately named her 'frog'.