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Russell, Lucy, Countess of Bedford



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Abstract

Lucy Russell (*née* Harington) (1581–1627), Countess of Bedford, daughter of John Harington, 1st Baron Harington of Exton (1539/40–1613) and Anne Keilway (c. 1554–1620), was Queen Anna of Denmark’s First Lady of the Bedchamber from 1604 to 1619 and one of the most powerful courtiers of the Jacobean period. While her husband shunned public life, she wielded cultural and political influence through literary patronage of male authors including Ben Jonson and John Donne, the masques put on by Queen Anna’s court, and her frank correspondence with both her former lady-in-waiting and close friend Lady Jane Cornwallis Bacon (1581–1659) and collector and diplomat Sir Dudley Carleton (1573–1632). Her interests included garden design and collecting visual art, coins, and medals. She also wrote poetry and shared at least one elegy with Donne, in effect agreeing to its scribal publication. The fact that she worked hard to restrict the circulation of her verses, however, perhaps explains why only one of her poems survives, and that with but eight manuscript witnesses.

Introduction

Lucy (1581–1627), Countess of Bedford, was the elder daughter of courtier and landowner John Harington, 1st Baron Harington of Exton, and the heiress Anne Keilway, from 1603 to 1613 the guardians of Princess Elizabeth Stuart (Lawson 2007). Her husband, Edward Russell, 3rd Earl of Bedford, whom she had married in 1594, was both fined and banished from court following his implication in the Essex Rebellion of 1601. It was therefore crucial that Bedford obtain her own position when King James ascended the throne of England in 1603 – she succeeded, becoming Queen Anna of Denmark’s First Lady of the Bedchamber. She managed to hold on to the office for the remainder of the queen’s life, until 1619. She cemented her courtly position by acting as a patron of the arts, and in particular by commissioning, performing in, and even directing court masques, a literary genre favored by her employer Queen Anna. Not only did she exchange poetry with the literary luminaries of the day, but she also employed her pen extensively abroad, cultivating and nourishing her various correspondences, thus showing her support for the Protestant cause on the continent.

She is considered one of the most powerful courtiers of King James's reign.

Biography

Raised a staunch Protestant, Bedford leaned towards Puritanism in her adult life and possessed linguistic talents that led John Florio to dedicate his Italian-English dictionary to her, writing that she was as fluent in "Italian as in French, in French as in Spanish, in all as in English" (Florio 1598, Sig. A3v; Crawford 2014, 131). Her marriage, at thirteen, to the twenty-one-year-old Edward Russell, 3rd Earl of Bedford, was thought a good match, but by 1601, with his fortune already dwindling, the earl was unfortunate enough to be found complicit in the Essex Rebellion, fined £20,000 and exiled from court. The Bedfords' misfortunes also stretched to their issue, as their longest-lived child, Francis (b. 1602), barely survived a month.

When James VI was offered the Crown of England, the Harington family saw an opportunity to re-establish themselves at court. Rather than attend the late Queen Elizabeth's state funeral, Lady Bedford and her mother rode to Scotland to meet the new queen and escort her to England. Before the party reached the border, she had been appointed to Queen Anna's Privy Chamber, and her mother was being considered as governess to the Princess Elizabeth – within months the Haringtons were appointed as Elizabeth's guardians (Akkerman 2013, 291–292).

Masques

In the months after James's coronation, her position was challenged by Lady Penelope Rich (*née* Devereux), who briefly threatened to take her place after a mysterious illness forced Lady Bedford from the queen's side. Compelled to cement her position as Queen Anna's First Lady of the Bedchamber, Bedford took charge of the queen's first ever masque performance at the Stuart court, *The Vision of the Twelve Goddesses*. Having commissioned the libretto from Samuel Daniel

rather than Ben Jonson, the obvious choice, she assumed the position of "*rector chori*" (director) and also performed the part of Vesta, Goddess of the Household. It was a powerful statement, and her performance effectively created reality, as through it she reclaimed her position as Queen Anna's First Lady, remaining goddess of the royal household until the queen's death in 1619. That *The Vision* was seen as Bedford's rather than the queen's is clear from the fact that the score for one of the masque's dances bears the title "The Lady Lucies Masque" (Akkerman 2013, 294–297). Thereafter, Bedford performed in all of Anna's masques bar one, missing *Tethys' Festival* in June 1610, possibly because she was 6 months pregnant (as Anna had been in 1605 while performing *The Masque of Blackness*, causing an uproar). She may also have been unwell: the daughter she delivered on September 5 that year lived mere hours, and a miscarriage followed in 1611 (Payne 2014).

The relationship with Queen Anna deteriorated, however, with the two women falling out in 1617 when Anna dismissed Bedford's friend the Countess of Roxburghe from the Bedchamber. Bedford turned to the masque again, and in February 1617 she acted as "Lady and mistress of the feast" (producer) for Jonson's *Lovers Made Men*, enabling James Hay, later 1st Earl of Carlisle, to entertain Baron de Tour, the French ambassador (McClure 1939, 55, 57). In May she orchestrated Robert White's *Cupid's Banishment*, the last masque of Anna's court and the only one to assign speech to a female participant (McManus 2002, 179–201; the speech was given by Anne Watkins of the Ladies Hall, a finishing school in Deptford). White's dedication thanked Bedford for her "honorable furtherance and noble encouragement," describing his masque as "the fruits" which she "first sowed:" her involvement perhaps went beyond mere commissioning and production.

Politics

From the moment her husband was crippled in a riding accident in 1613, Lady Bedford "controlled

the Russel interest” in close correspondence with William Herbert, 3rd Earl of Pembroke. Her sister Frances married Sir Robert Chichester whose brother Arthur, Lord Belfast, was appointed to the Privy Council in 1622. Both the Duke of Lennox and the Marquis of Hamilton were political allies of her childhood friend the Princess Elizabeth, by this time the exiled Queen of Bohemia, and sat on the junta of foreign affairs, as did Pembroke and Belfast. Together they acted as a faction, voting against the Spanish interests and in favor of the pro-Protestant military alliance Elizabeth Stuart tried to effect. Bedford can be situated at the informal center of this group in England, gathering the politickers around her at Bedford House (Adams 1978, 143–144; see also Crawford 2014, 126).

Patronage

As an influential court lady, she was patron to several authors including John Donne, Michael Drayton, Ben Jonson, and Samuel Daniel (see Lewalski 1993) and she attracted over 50 dedications from authors in print and manuscript (Williams 1962, 161; O’Connor 2011, 72; Payne 2014), including famed calligrapher Esther Inglis (Hearn 2003, 235n11). Bedford was an avid collector of coins and medals, as well as paintings by Daniel Mytens, Nathaniel Bacon, Michiel van Miereveldt, and Isaac Oliver, and also designed the gardens at her estate More Park in Hertfordshire, though little evidence of her influence on them remains (O’Connor 2011, 72–73).

Poetry

In an undated letter, John Donne identifies Bedford as a poet, presenting his patron with a “petition for verse,” namely the verses she had shown him at her Twickenham estate—verses she said she regretted writing. Donne insisted that she should not “repent her making,” promising not to circulate these or any other poems by her hand: “I will not show them. . .nothing should be so used that comes from your brain and breast.” Donne had, however, already told Sir Henry

Goodyere that he had “write to her Ladiship for the verses she shewed in the garden,” and in all likelihood circulated them within their small circle of acquaintances, despite his promise (Donne 1651, 67–68). Her disdain for any wider distribution of her work, either in print or in manuscript, which was shared by many early modern women, and by Donne himself, perhaps explains why only one of her poems survives in manuscript. The surviving poem is the elegy “Death be not proud, thy hand gave not this blow,” a rebuke of Donne’s “Death I recant,” written in honor of her kinswoman Cecily Bulstrode who died at Twickenham in August 1609 (Harington-Russell 1609, 131–132). Two of the eight surviving manuscript witnesses in miscellanies attribute the poem to her: Bodleian Rawlinson MS Poetry 31 is headed by “By L. C. of B.”; British Library Harley MS 4064 “By C. L. of B.” (see EMWRN; Milgate 1978, appendix B, 235–237). Donne’s own elegy is divided into two, with the second part meant to undermine the first part that reminisced on Death’s universal superiority by arguing that Bulstrode is ultimately victorious over Death through her soul’s regeneration. By reciting the first half of Donne’s opening line of Holy Sonnet 10, Bedford particularly objected to the first part of the elegy, presumably also because Donne’s portrayal of Death as universal was incongruent with her Calvinist belief in predestination. Her elegy urged him to reconsider the terms of grief, arguing that tears can never be excessive, and he subsequently revised his standpoint, writing a second elegy on Bulstrode, “Language thou art too narrow,” whose opening lines point to his failure to express himself adequately in his first elegy and thus his failure to console Lady Bedford with verse (Summers 1992, in particular 212, 225–226; Brown 2008; Crawford 2014, 144–147).

Letters

When Queen Anna died, Bedford not only lost her court position, but also contracted smallpox, which “setled in one of her eyes whereby she is like to lose it” (McClure 1939, 250). Her letters, nevertheless, continue to show her interest in

court politics. Her correspondence with Lady Jane Cornwallis Bacon, which resides in the Essex Record Office, was re-edited in 2003 and not only shows how she kept abreast of the rise and fall of those at court through her social contacts, but is also remarkable for its frankness about loss, her melancholic humors, and her childless state (Moody 2003, 37–39). Further correspondence, particularly that with Carleton which shows her unwavering political support for the bellicose Elizabeth Stuart, survives in The National Archives, Hatfield House, the Bedfordshire and Luton Record Office, and the British Library (Franklin 2011, 2).

Conclusion

Lady Bedford was one of the most influential courtiers of the Stuart period. The foundations of her position as First Lady of the Bedchamber was her manipulation of court masques, which she not only performed in, but would sometimes commission, direct, and produce. A formal office in the queen's household allowed her to act as patron to male literary luminaries, but she was also a poet in her own right. In 1625, she commissioned a medal from Nicholas Briot bearing the motto IUDICIO NON METU ("By judgement, not fear") (Hearn 2003, 230–231), words she lived by. She died in 1627.

Cross-References

► Esther Inglis

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