The Queen’s Bed, and What Can Be Found There


The identity of the book under review is somewhat confusing, since the Russian edition names the original title as The Queen’s Bed: An Intimate History of Elizabeth’s Court, yet dates the copyright to 2013, while the book under this title did not appear before 2014. However, 2013 saw the book by the same author Elizabeth’s Bedfellows: An Intimate History of the Queen’s Court which more closely corresponds to the Russian version of the title. A brief search by specific word combination shows that the 2013 and 2014 books are indeed the same.

This book is not exactly what it claims to be, since both title versions have ‘history of court’ – which the book is not. Apparently, royal court is social structure which functions in specific ways, and a ‘history’ suggests at least a description of how it would work throughout a certain historical period (in our case, Elizabethan). There is nothing of the sort in Whitelock’s book. Instead of a history, there are loads of stories about this or that person, or a specific episode from Elizabeth’s life, richly outfitted with racy details of the 16th-century daily life – such as the lists of ceremonial gifts, the methods of treating smallpox or the issue of toilets which is given about three pages.

In fact, there is nothing wrong with romance, plots and toilets – these are quite legitimate subjects of both popular and academic histories. The book is both amusing and well-sourced, making a good reading. However, it does not qualify as ‘history of court’. Apparently, the fact that the author is rather a journalist than a historian, prevents her from understanding what exactly a ‘history’ is.

Being centred around the figure of Elizabeth herself, the narration makes rather a conventional biography. Indeed, the final chapter of the book is fully engaged with the subject of Elizabeth’s biographies written both in the past and nowadays. Even cinematography is utilized: a special paragraph lists some films featuring Elizabeth and another is dedicated to a specific film scene with Helen Mirren. So the book desperately needs to be re-labelled as Another Biography of Elizabeth I.

Biography is a slippery genre, nearly always struggling to balance between a mere list of documented facts and outright fictitiousness. And an even more slippery genre is a biography of Elizabeth Tudor, the self-proclaimed Virgin Queen, since the inevitable – and uneasy – issue of her sex life comes into question. From this point of view, Whitelock’s is quite balanced and ethically impeccable. Perhaps even too impeccable for a modern-day biography: the author’s consistent avoidance of answering the question what was the nature of Elizabeth’s relationship with her favourites bears a tint of Victorian attitudes – but only in case it is not a matter of the famous British understatement (immortalized by George Mikes) which is so subtle that the reviewer somehow has failed to understand it.

This is also a very feminine book, obsessed with the issue of female vulnerability in the pre-20th century world – the issue once overlooked by earlier male biographers such as Lytton Strachey, the unlucky wooer of Virginia Woolf, but now perhaps a bit too subject of fixation. Indeed, to some extent it looks like a rebuke, if not revenge, to Strachey (who is directly referred to at pp. 355-356). The irony of the present-day situation is that Strachey’s approach to royal biography, in his own time bold and advanced, is increasingly being seen as misogynistic and loaded with patriarchal stereotypes; so the tendency to avoid recognizing unsavoury facts of a historical person’s life, once motivated by feudal courtesy, comes back under the guise of pro-woman point of view. Nevertheless, this point of view makes at least some sense if one wants to get an insight how Elizabeth herself might have perceived her position.
So, as a biography, it is quite successful, and I would highly recommend it to anyone who wants to get an overall impression of Elizabeth’s personality and lifestyle. There are yet some minor absurdities which are intolerable even in a popular book – thus, the text on p. 6 has ‘early Christian writers, such as Plato, Seneca and Cicero’ (which is faithfully reproduced in the Russian translation). Indeed in the Middle Ages and perhaps well into the Renaissance era these classical authors were perceived as early Christian – which does not mean they were. (Should I in all seriousness remind my readers that, of the three, two died far before Christianity?).

As for the Russian translation, it is unusually good for a present-day mass-market publishing house, and the commentary is well-edited, so the book is certainly of use for students who is beginning to study Elizabethan culture.

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