Queens Consort, Cultural Transfer and European Politics, c.1500-1800

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The field of queenship is continually expanding and drawing attention from scholars. Over the years, and especially through the Queenship and Power series at Palgrave Macmillan, a notable number of studies have emerged highlighting the importance of queens as consorts, regnants, and regents during the early modern period. This collection contributes strongly to this emerging field by providing interesting insights regarding the roles of queens consort and how they wielded political power. This collection stems from a Hera-funded project entitled *Marrying Culture*, which has brought together scholars from different fields to examine the cultural dimension of royal marriages. The collection’s European focus, including Eastern and Nordic European countries, and its scope, which pays particular attention to queens consort active during the 17th and 18th centuries, complement prior works undertaken on queenship.⁽¹⁾

While the volume does not appear to have been divided into discrete sections, definite themes can be delineated, including ‘the public lives of queens consort’ (p. 6) and ‘opportunities for cultural transfer’ (p. 8). Though the introduction may sometimes confuse the reader as it deviates from the chapter order, the chapters themselves transition smoothly and often complement one another. More importantly, the volume’s sources are varied and truly European, thus demonstrating the importance of having access to diverse languages when studying history. Through nine body chapters, an introduction, and an afterword, this collection offers a valuable contribution to the field of queenship. The queens described in the work are a useful combination of such well-known figures as Catherine the Great and lesser known personages such as Hedwig Eleonora of Schleswig-Gottorf. This balanced coverage highlights the influence that consorts exerted in Europe despite their individual personal reputations.

The first chapter focusses on the only two 16th-century queens consort included in this edited collection, the Polish sisters Katarzyna Jagiellonka (1506–83) and Zofia Jagiellonka (1522–75), who became Queen of Sweden and Duchess of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel, respectively. This chapter examines how these queens served as important cultural vessels in their adoptive countries, and how their mother used them as a powerful Polish cultural device. Through detailed and thorough research, Almut Bues reveals the impact of

the Jagiellonian sisters in their adoptive countries and the importance of their heritage to them (p. 28). The originality of this chapter lies in its interest in the sisters' influence in the arts and botanic endeavours, thus showing how they sought to implement their own touches at their new courts.

In the next chapter, Helen Watanabe-O'Kelly considers the case of Maria Amalia, Princess of Saxony and Poland (1724–60), and the significance of royal ceremonies for understanding a consort's personality. While this chapter's structure lacks clarity, in the sense that some arguments appear repetitive, the variety of the sources and the quality of the research sheds light on the critical role this particular consort played in European politics. The strongest part of this chapter remains the analysis of Maria Amalia's skills and activities as a diplomat. Through key diplomatic correspondence, Watanabe-O'Kelly demonstrates how Maria Amalia used her personal network and relations to influence political matters, and noted the shift in dynamics that occurred when Maria Amalia gave birth to a son and 'she was allowed to be present at the meetings of the king with the four Secretaries of State' (p. 55). This extremely fascinating part of Watanabe-O'Kelly's chapter remains, however, rather underexplored. A crucial aspect of the analysis of Maria Amalia's true agency in political matters would involve a more detailed examination of some letters mentioned by the author as demonstrative of how the royal couple manipulated the foreign minister Bernardo Tanucci. Nevertheless, this chapter offers great insights into the life and political power of queens consort between European dynasties.

The third chapter is, in my view, the most problematic of this collection. While it is thoroughly researched and well-written, the focus on two European Empresses differs from the other chapters in the volume as they examine queens in lesser positions. Furthermore, the chapter completely omits mention of Beem and Taylor's collection on male consorts, thus neglecting useful parallels that could have been used to reinforce Christina Strunck's arguments concerning the dynamics between royal couples. Another problematic issue is the lack of reference to other scholars who have considered the body politic of a female ruler (2), an omission that seems especially egregious in a chapter in which the case of Queen Elizabeth I of England is cited (p. 64). However, aside from these two criticisms, this chapter is well-structured and offers interesting parallels between the cases of Empress Maria Theresa and Catherine the Great of Russia. The major strength of this essay is Christina Strunck's thorough analysis of the ways in which the rulers' female gender was often intertwined with a masculine reputation and how this impacted their rulership. These representations of female rulers are vital to understanding the difficulties they had to overcome in order to rule in male-dominated societies.

The following chapter, co-authored by Elise Dermineur and Svante Norrhem, focusses on Luise Ulrike of Prussia, who became Queen of Sweden in 1751. Its originality lies in its approach and the analysis of how Luise Ulrike used cultural space to wield political power. Though the chapter is a bit slow to set out the main argument, the research is thorough and compelling. Dermineur and Norrhem shrewdly demonstrate how a foreign princess's distinct culture and education impacted her ability to engage with patronage. This chapter nicely echoes that by Bues, dealing with similar themes in a different social, spatial and chronological context.

The case of Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, Queen of Great Britain and Ireland, is examined next. In this chapter, Clarissa Campbell Orr, an expert on the British queen consort, pays particular attention to Charlotte's cultural interests, such as 'books on botany and natural philosophy' (p. 111). Orr argues that the queen's French and German cultural background have to be taken into account in order to understand her role as consort and 'a confidante to her husband' (p. 9). The first part of this chapter establishes an overview of the dynamic between George III and his wife, while the second shrewdly focusses on Charlotte's cultural influence at the English court. Campbell Orr effectively reassesses Charlotte's role and importance in British history.

Jill Bepler's chapter reveals and studies the correspondence of Hedwig Eleonora of Holstein-Gottorp, Queen of Sweden, who exerted some political influence as she represented her dynasty at the Swedish court. Bepler convincingly demonstrates that this Swedish queen has too often been underestimated and overlooked, yet in

truth she played an important role in Swedish and European politics. Bepler has done some interesting research for this essay; however, her bibliography is slightly problematic, as it does not differentiate the primary sources from the secondary works, thus causing the reader to question the primary sources upon which this chapter truly relies.

The two chapters that follow are complementary in their examinations of different aspects of the same queens: Henrietta Maria of France and Catherine of Braganza. Anna-Marie Linnell's work is well-researched and sheds light on interesting primary sources; however, there are issues with the structure of the chapter. In the introduction, the author describes her interest in revealing different representations of the two consorts from 1660 onwards, yet she then goes on to an analysis of Henriette-Maria's marriage negotiations around 1624–5 – leaving the reader somewhat confused. Furthermore, the second part of the chapter focusses primarily on Catherine of Braganza, and few comparisons between the two consorts are offered. Linnell's arguments are strong, but the chapter's structure deviates from the plan established in the introduction. Adam Morton's chapter on the two English consorts' religion, on the other hand, is both well-structured and convincingly argued, featuring strong elements of comparison and noting powerful parallels between the two cases. The research is compelling and the chapter well-written as Morton demonstrates how religious tensions – often embodied by the Catholic consorts – caused anxiety at court. The real strength of Morton's chapter is its ability to elucidate strong differences and similarities in how the two foreign queens were received by the English.

The last chapter of this collection takes a unique approach, and Thomas Biskup reassesses the 'Brandenburg-Prussia's dynastic relations with its less powerful neighbours' (p. 203) with thorough research and a pleasant writing style. The German princesses featured in the chapter are relatively unknown to an English audience, and Biskup provides valuable insights into Germano-European royal dynasties as he reveals the role of four princesses in facilitating cultural transfer in their adoptive lands. Though the Brandenburg-Prussia branch of House Hohenzollern may have appeared to be less ambitious than their Habsburg counterparts, Biskup argues that the root of their power lay in the choice to make alliances with lesser houses that were geographically closer.

The collection concludes with an interesting and necessary afterword, which provides insightful parallels and demonstrates the importance of queens consort in both cultural transfer and transnational history. For the editors of this volume, queens consort were either 'agents, instruments or catalysts of cultural transfer' (p. 246), and they express hope that these categories will help future research to further identify and elucidate the roles of queens consort. More importantly, they argue, this work demonstrates that the study of queenship remains a crucial endeavour that needs continued exploration. Queens were as important as kings to modern European politics and society, and as such, they deserve our full scholarly attention.

Overall, this edited volume provides insightful analyses on queens consort and is without a doubt a valuable contribution to the field of queenship, though to some extent it neglects to engage with the works undertaken by other scholars interested in queenship. Clarissa Campbell Orr is not the only academic who has paid attention to queens, and the acknowledgement of other scholars and references to their work would have strengthened some of the key arguments made in the collection. Importantly, however, this collection shows that the field of queenship continues to grow and draw scholarly attention. By incorporating a cultural approach into the study of queens' roles on the political scene, we acknowledge their importance for history and develop alternative ways of writing histories that have focussed largely on male rulers. Scholars and students who have an interest in queenship will not want to miss out on this collection.

Notes

1. *The Man behind the Queen: Male Consorts in History*, ed. Charles Beem and Miles Taylor (New York, NY, 2013) and Therese Earenfeight, *Queenship in Medieval Europe* (New York, NY, 2013).

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2. Carole Levin, *The Heart and Stomach of a King: Elizabeth I and the Politics of Sex and Power* (Philadelphia, PA, 1994, 2nd edition 2013) and Anne McLaren, *Political Culture in the Reign of Elizabeth: Queen and Commonwealth 1558–1585* (Cambridge, 1999).[Back to \(2\)](#)

The editors are happy to accept this review and do not wish to comment further.

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