Anna of Denmark and Henrietta Maria: Virgins, Witches, and Catholic Queens

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As uncomfortable as it is for historians to admit, we cannot deny the veracity of the old adage, ‘history is written by the victors’. Before the advent of gender and feminist histories in the latter part of the last century, victors were almost all invariably men. History’s discussion of the women on the edge was often restricted to queens and queans: the latter because they usually revolved around a titillating sexual exploit, and the former because ‘silly’ queens consort were often depicted as foils for their sensible, and altogether competent, husbands.

Excepting perhaps Marie Antoinette, Henrietta Maria, wife of Charles I of England, is one of the most maligned queens consort in the popular consciousness. While the same cannot be said for Anne of Denmark, wife of James VI and I, this lack of malice is probably because her name barely stirs any form of recognition. The mother of Charles I is usually eclipsed by her son’s execution, and is generally relegated in relation to her husband, even though it is through James and Anne’s daughter, Elizabeth, Queen of Bohemia, that the present Queen traces her descent.

That Anne and Henrietta Maria have been sidelined is indisputable. As Dunn-Hensley ably demonstrates in her excellent new study, generations of historians are responsible for this negative press. It is not unusual for biographies of James VI and I and Charles I to gloss over the king’s wife, or to only mention them in relation to a scandal of their making, or indeed their role as mother to the kings’ children. The significance of the book is quickly demonstrated: Anne has been variously described in the scholarship as ‘a stupid wife’, ‘a stupid woman’, and is accused of having ‘strong prejudices, no scruples, and very little intelligence’, which meant that ‘the more remote she was kept from politics the better’, because her ‘love for gaiety and dancing, for games, masques and pageants, was childish rather than courtly’ (p. 4). These descriptions must certainly bring great discomfort to contemporary gender historians. Henrietta Maria has of course been the subject of closer study – primarily because she was the wife of the only English monarch to be publically executed – but she fares no better than her mother-in-law. She is routinely seen as, at best, performing no actions of real importance, and at worst, being directly responsible for the downfall of the monarchy. Her negative legacy is blamed on her religion – had she ‘been a Protestant and a woman of profound sagacity, she might have saved her husband’ (p. 4) – and indeed her own intelligence and agency: ‘to examine

traditional scholarship of Henrietta Maria is to see the representation of incompetent and disorderly female rule mapped onto the life of the queen' (p. 5). Dunn-Hensley does discuss scholars who have attempted to redress this glaring imbalance – I would add the excellent, recent, work of Erin Griffey, Catriona Murray, and Carolyn Harris to the list – but the weight of bad press will not be shifted easily.

As readers are deftly reminded, while 'early twentieth-century scholars might have found it easy to dismiss queens Anna of Denmark and Henrietta Maria as frivolous and superficial, those living in the early modern period would hardly have shared this view' (p. 19). Queens consort played important roles – both symbolic and political – in early modern England. The king's wife would normally be appointed regent in her husband's absence: Catherine of Aragon served as regent for six months in 1513 while Henry VIII was in France; likewise, Catherine Parr was regent of England between July and September 1544 while Henry was on campaign in France – and even more importantly, should Henry have died while absent, she was designated regent of Edward until he reached his majority. Aside from their (potential) political roles, queens consort also often served as the 'human' face of the English monarchy: they often distributed alms to the poor, entertained foreign dignitaries and ambassadors, and as Dunn-Hensley ably demonstrates, they commissioned and patronised literary endeavours both at court, and in the wider literary sphere. Perhaps most importantly – which underscores the potential danger in having a Catholic queen who was subservient to the pope in Rome – they had the ear of their husband, the king. Their importance to the monarchy is best demonstrated by the fact that they are crowned and anointed at their husband's coronation – or, in the case of consorts such as Elizabeth of York and Anne Boleyn, crowned at their own coronation.

Dunn-Hensley has decided to refer to James's queen as Anna. This decision is based primarily on the fact that 'the name "Anna" was used in the oath of office when she became queen of Scotland' (p. 14n2). The takeaway point, however, is that we don't even know the correct spelling (and presumably pronunciation) of Anne's name. Anne is of course not the only consort to suffer this problem: Henry VIII's first, fifth, and sixth wives are spelled variously as Catherine, Katherine, Katheryn, or Katharine, depending on author preferences. Even my reference to James's wife as Anne here, which I feel comfortable doing based on the weight of scholarly practice, demonstrates the limited attention this not-undeserving woman has garnered.

The assumption that Anne was a Catholic was one of the more interesting, if not curious, aspects of the book. While the Catholicism of Henrietta Maria, Catherine of Braganza (wife of Charles II) and Mary of Modena (James II's second wife) is well attested, Anne's confessional identity is certainly debated, which Dunn-Hensley acknowledges when she notes the 'scholarly disagreement about the details of Anna's conversion and about her confessional identity' (p. 26). Anne arrived in Scotland a practicing Lutheran: indeed, James's desire to marry into a Protestant royal house was a major factor in his decision to court Anne. As the thousands of Protestant denominations that exist today demonstrate, the 'brand' of Protestantism one adheres to can differ greatly, and Anne certainly felt out of place in Calvinist Scotland. The two most convincing pieces of evidence that Anne did convert to Catholicism are that she sent letters to Pope Clement VIII expressing her Catholicism, and asking for papal protection for her family, and for papal support for her husband's claim to the English throne. We know of no response from Clement. The second piece of evidence is that she refused communion at her coronation as queen consort of England: despite several attempts by the Archbishop of Canterbury to make her acquiesce, Anne was resolute in her 'no'. Dunn-Hensley asks her readers to consider that if the sources she mentions are to be believed – in addition to Anne herself, Robert Abercromby, a Scottish Jesuit (although Dunn-Hensley is inconsistent in the spelling of his name), and Giovanni Carlo Scaramelli, Venetian Ambassador in England, who wrote on 28 May 1603 (not the 18 May Dunn-Hensley writes) that Anne had 'became a Catholic' – 'we might ask why Anna's faith did not cause more of a ripple during her time period, and why scholars so often either debate the nature of her faith or completely ignore it' (p. 29). My response is that the evidence is, at best, inconclusive. Indeed, I find her claim that 'Scottish observers may have confused Anna's practice of Catholicism with Lutheranism' highly improbable, given both the recentness of the Reformation in Scotland, as well as the familiar polemic uses of Catholicism (p. 29).

That Dunn-Hensley is 'willing to dispense with rigid definitions of what being Catholic means in favor of a

fluid reading of religious identity' is somewhat problematic, but given that she is right in pointing out that reconstructing the religious beliefs of a person who lived 400 years ago is nigh on impossible, one might be inclined to let this less-rigid part of her argument slide (p. 26). It cannot be missed that should Anne have retained her Lutheranism, a not-insignificant part of Dunn-Hensley's argument would be rendered somewhat moot. However, her 'lax' definition of Catholicism does mean that accusations of her conversion to Catholicism – which were so widespread that Elizabeth sent her ambassador to Scotland, Robert Bowes, to question Anne on reports of her conversion, who replied that she was not a member of a church hostile to England – would certainly have tainted Anne's image, and indeed may even be partially responsible for her negative press in the scholarship to date.

The 'foreignness' of the two queens is something that the study does well to bring to the fore. Both queens brought 'foreign' courtly traditions with them, to say nothing of the difficulties of having to learn English, and become acquainted with English courtly and social customs. As is well established, Henrietta Maria was French – the longstanding enemy of England – and her Catholicism meant her loyalty was split between her husband and England, and the 'foreign' pope. But it seems both Anne and Henrietta Maria were a victim of particularly xenophobic times. It is impossible to ignore the fact that in March 1603, a Scottish man ascended the throne of England. The English were not entirely happy with a 'foreigner' on the throne – much of the polemic against Mary I had focused on her 'foreignness', evident in her Spanish mother, and her marriage to Philip II of Spain – and unfortunately for James, anti-Scottish sentiment flourished during his English reign, something that he could do little to stop. Indeed, whenever he opened his mouth, he reminded his audience – whatever it was – that he was a foreigner. In public, people gawked at, and whispered about, the 'Scottish elf', and 'Jockies'. It is little wonder then that he worked so hard to ensure that his sons – including the eventual Charles I – were thoroughly anglicised in their upbringing. Both Anne and Henrietta Maria suffered from the same xenophobia, although it is less overtly recounted in the contemporary accounts.

One of the events James has become most synonymous with – the Gunpowder Plot – perhaps explains both Anne's uncertain confession identity, and the public angst over Henrietta Maria's Catholicism (it being a symbol of her 'foreignness'). While ostensibly about returning England to the Catholic fold, Guy Fawkes revealed his own xenophobia. During an initial interrogation, Fawkes declared that he intended 'to blow you scotch beggars back to your native mountains'. Ignoring the collateral damage that would be the death of the English members of parliament, Fawkes revelled in the king and queen's foreignness: even to the point where he could use it as a justification for mass-murder. As Dunn-Hensley notes, the aftermath of the Gunpowder Plot was not a safe environment for Anne to openly practice her Catholicism – if indeed she was a Catholic – and the anti-Catholic, and anti-foreign, sentiment explains James's reluctance for Charles's marriage to the Spanish infanta, Maria Anna.

For all the rhetoric of the dangers of 'foreigners' that was publicised in Jacobean and Caroline England, the practical realities of monarchy demonstrate the importance of realising otherwise. The majority of English kings since the Norman Conquest had chosen wives from foreign royal courts; and indeed, daughters of English kings had been 'married off' to foreign rulers – as James was keen to emphasise by his descent from Henry VII. Dunn-Hensley forces us to consider that 'although essential for the creation of dynasty, the royal bed, when occupied by a foreign princess, could be a frightening reminder of the nation's vulnerability to the whims of their own king' (p. 145). While it was the king who invited the foreigner into the royal bed, for largely misogynistic reasons it is the foreign queen who is the target of the negative press.

Witchcraft is present from the very beginning of Anne's association with the British Isles. Anne is partially responsible for the onset of James's witch-mania, epitomised in his treatise, *Daemonologie*. James blamed witchcraft for the terrible storms that forced Anne to land on the coast of Norway as she attempted to sail to Scotland. James's obsession led to the North Berwick witch trials – the women confessing to their 'role' in the storms under torture. Dunn-Hensley, however, broadens the scope of witchcraft in an enlightening manner, reminding her readers that the 'darker narrative of female disorder' was often figured, discussed, or conceptualised, in terms of witchcraft (p. 3).

Despite the association of this darker narrative with feminine desires or activities, we are rightly reminded that ‘while anti-Catholic rhetoric likened the practices of the Roman church to witchcraft, that fact does not necessarily mean that people conflated witchcraft and Catholicism in a simplistic way’ (p. 41n47). The label of witchcraft is thus more reflective of the two queens’ confessional identities – real or imagined – and their position as foreign-born wives of English kings, rather than anything supernatural. As recent scholarship on witchcraft in early modern Europe has demonstrated, witchcraft was as much a tool of political and social control as it was of religious orthodoxy.

Dunn-Hensley’s credentials as a literary scholar really do bring a new depth to the study of the two queens, as literary sources justifiably make up large portions of the evidence she analyses. I was particularly impressed, however, by the way she ably analysed *Macbeth* within the complex and shifting contexts that link the Scottish witch-hunts, the Gunpowder Plot, and the popular conceptions of Anne. *Macbeth*, which plays into ‘larger Jacobean narratives about queenship, sexuality and power’, has long been associated with James: and it is fitting that Anne’s figuring in the content is foregrounded so convincingly.

One of the things that struck me most about Dunn-Hensley’s study was her discussion of Elizabeth I. Elizabeth looms large in the book: both as James’s predecessor, and the architect of many of the religious and political situations both James and Charles had to navigate. This is not entirely unexpected. What Dunn-Hensley cleverly does, however, is demonstrate that the half-century of female kingship England had lived through under both Mary I and Elizabeth turned out to be a hindrance for the two queens consort’s agency, rather than a boon. Put simply, the ‘images of power that had been effective for Elizabeth proved problematic in the hands of the consort, for they suggest a dangerous overreach’ (p. 7). The picture that Dunn-Hensley paints – quite perceptively, I think – is that the vision John Knox expounded in the *First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* had come true, and that by the end of Elizabeth’s reign, courtiers, poets, and the like began to ‘envision a social structure that once again placed the male in a position of dominance’ (p. 6). As a scholar primarily of Elizabeth I, I am painfully reminded that the image of ‘Good Queen Bess’ that lingers in both the popular imagination and the more Whiggish histories that are still written really does disintegrate when her final decade is placed under the spotlight. From the 1590s on, England was at war in both Ireland and the Low Countries, the exchequer was in the red, Essex rebelled, and Elizabeth’s granting of monopolies and her open favouritism was deeply unpopular. ‘Gloriana’ was more than fraying at the edges, and as Dunn-Hensley ably demonstrates, it was Anne and Henrietta Maria who suffered in the aftermath. This sentiment is best summed up in the book’s conclusion, which is likely the most succinct summary of Elizabeth’s memory in 17th-century England of late: ‘During the last decade of her reign, many of Elizabeth I’s subjects longed for a new king, but many of their descendants would want nothing more than the return of their Virgin Queen. The Elizabeth that they desired, however, was not the flesh and blood woman, but Gloriana, a version of the queen that they had created, a product of nostalgia for a golden age, which is always at least a generation prior’ (p 223). Memory is a funny thing.

Curiously, not all of the children of the two queens are discussed: indeed, Elizabeth, Charles and Henrietta Maria’s second daughter, isn’t mentioned at all. If these women were so regarded for their roles as mothers, why aren’t their children – and their relationship with their children – more fully developed? There are also some perplexing textual inconsistencies (names are spelt inconsistently, and even abbreviations are not used uniformly), and the referencing sometimes feels like an afterthought – indeed, the two footnote references that accompany one sentence in chapter two are further evidence of the drop in editorial standards Palgrave Macmillan has suffered since its merger with Springer.

As historians, we attempt to write histories that are both reflective of the evidence, and convey as much of the context of the life and times of the person or event under discussion as possible. As Dunn-Hensley more than ably demonstrates, this desire for truth and impartiality has generally not been afforded to either Anne of Denmark or Henrietta Maria, although this is slowly changing. As distant as we are from the lives of the people being studied, we owe it to them to be fair and impartial: their lives ‘become historical accounts, and those accounts form the basis of the legends and myths that come to define individuals and eras for

posterity' (p. 223). What did Anne of Denmark ever do to deserve to be repeatedly described as a 'stupid woman'? Even more paradoxically, both queens 'successfully' performed the primary role of a queen consort: they gave birth not only to a 'heir and a spare', but also daughters who could be 'married off' in support of their father's dynastic or geo-political ambitions. Certainly, the disruption of the Interregnum is partially to blame for the poor reception the queens have received, but as wives of the king, neither can be blamed for their husbands' obstinate belief in their divine right to rule, nor are they responsible for their husbands' decision to dissolve parliament for long periods and embark on a personal rule.

In the last sentence of the book, Dunn-Hensley somewhat timidly asks her readers – by prefacing the point with 'As I have tried to show in this book' – to consider that in tracing 'representations of queenship from the Jacobean period through the Caroline period, we find that negative representations of queenship and female authority can have serious material consequences, in this case ultimately contributing to the English civil war and the fall of the Stuart monarchy' (p. 227). This is a bold and well-supported observation, which should be made with increasing confidence thanks to this fine addition to the scholarship. Certainly, no male royal in early modern England – king or otherwise – has been subjected to the continued literary denigration that marks both Anne and Henrietta Maria's posthumous memory.

While neither Anne or Henrietta Maria have the equivalent of a 'let them eat cake' anecdote attached to them, the mother and wife of the king executed as part of the Civil Wars in 1649 have certainly suffered in the popular, and indeed scholarly, consciousness. Dunn-Hensley provides an interesting, if sometimes simplistic, reconsideration of these two queens. The biography's simplicity, however, is not Dunn-Hensley's fault: one can hardly re-evaluate people when they suffer from a distinct dearth of considered and thoughtful evaluations, and this book goes a long way in redressing this almost shameful gap in the scholarly conversation.

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