



*Ruling Sexualities:
Sexuality, Gender, and the Crown:
An Introduction*

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Abstract: This article serves as an introduction to the *Royal Studies Journal* “Ruling Sexualities” Special Issue. It begins with a brief explanation for the creation of this special issue and a discussion of the diverse approaches that each article takes towards several areas of royal sexuality. The articles featured in this special issue cover a considerable geographical area and chronological period. The authors analyse the evidence of the sexualities of both popular and less well-known monarchs in archival and modern sources. The discussion of royal sexualities that is provided in this special issue highlights new and important ways in which a monarch’s life and the evidence of their relationships can be uncovered and interpreted by both academics and heritage professionals alike. Indeed, it is made clear from this special issue, and the introductory discussion, that there is a need for further research into the importance of royal sexualities both within and beyond traditional historiography.

Keywords: sexuality; royal sexuality; gender; courts; favourites

In July 2018, researchers from universities, heritage organisations, and museums convened at the seventh annual Kings and Queens Conference to explore a relatively uncharted aspect of historical and royal studies: “Ruling Sexualities: Sexuality, Gender and the Crown.” The conference was co-organised by the University of Winchester and Historic Royal Palaces, the independent charity and research organisation that looks after, among other sites, Hampton Court Palace, Kensington Palace, and the Tower of London. Delegates gathered at Hampton Court Palace on the opening day of the conference where they explored sexuality in royal history, its representation today and in the past, and how it should and can be acknowledged jointly by academics and heritage professionals alike. The conference reconvened at the University of Winchester for the remaining three days, where speakers and audiences reflected on issues that were raised at Hampton Court Palace, alongside several facets of royal sexuality, with papers presented on subjects with considerable chronological and geographical breadth.

The conference organisers agreed that a special issue of the *Royal Studies Journal* would act as an appropriate vehicle for disseminating contributions to the conference to wider

audiences—an ambition that is realised in the following collection of articles. This special issue also includes the transcript of the opening keynote at Hampton Court Palace, highlighting the recent work of Historic Royal Palaces in researching and interpreting LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, plus other identities) histories and identities, and the potential that exists for developing the presentation of these histories at heritage sites. By publishing these articles, the editors hope to encourage debate and to acknowledge the potential for further examination of case studies that have received less attention.

The weighty implications of ruling sexualities form a thread that runs through existing historical studies. Until the last few decades, however, many histories of sexuality were defined by moral judgements about the actions and sexual reputation of these individuals within assessments of their ‘successes’ as rulers. Though such studies highlight key sources of evidence of ruling sexuality, considerable opportunities exist to explore further the cultural contexts of rulers and ruled within which such sources emerged. This issue of the *Royal Studies Journal* addresses three core issues in turn: contemporary sexual representations and reputations, the enduring fascination with royal sexuality after a monarch’s death, and the longer-term representation of the same in heritage and film.

All of the contributions to this issue explore forms of interaction with royal sexuality in both contemporary and archival sources. While it is usually accepted in academic history that it is not possible to apply modern categories of sexuality to a pre-modern context, an understanding of the meaning of relationships, sexual or otherwise, in the lives of monarchs has given greater depth and detail to their biographies.¹ The keynote address at Hampton Court Palace, entitled “Researching and Interpreting Gender and Sexuality at Historic Royal Palaces,” which was presented by Historic Royal Palaces curator Matthew Storey, and is transcribed here in full, outlines and explores some of the relevant theoretical approaches to gender, sexuality, and monarchy. For now, it is worth stating that contributors to the conference largely share the conviction of historian and literary scholar Valerie Traub that the term “queer” possesses “the analytic capacity ... to deconstruct sexual identity, to illuminate the lack of coherence or fixity in erotic relations, and to highlight the radical indeterminacy and transitivity of both erotic desire and gender.”² Sexuality, here, is taken to have transhistorical significance.

One of the most fundamental ways in which a ruler’s sexuality impacted on their rule related to the procreation of an heir. This impact is reflected in the emphasis that ruling houses placed on the continuation of dynasties, sometimes for centuries, alongside the legitimacy of the ruler’s spouse and heir.³ A ruler’s sexual partner or partners, and the successes of their relationships, could impact on a nation’s domestic and foreign policy and, by extension, the lives of those who bore the brunt of such decisions. Henry II of England’s (1133-1189) choice to take Eleanor of Aquitaine (1122-1204) as his wife resulted in England’s acquisition and

¹ See, for example, Molly McClain’s work on the letters of Mary II and Lady Frances Apsley, where a relationship dismissed by earlier male biographers as immature or unimportant is properly investigated and set in context. Molly McClain, “Love, Friendship, and Power: Queen Mary II’s Letters to Frances Apsley,” *Journal of British Studies* 47, no. 3 (July 2008): 505–527.

² Valerie Traub, “The New Unhistoricism in Queer Studies,” *PMLA* 128, no. 1 (2013): 23.

³ Ruth Mazo Karras discusses the many facets of sexuality within medieval Europe, including the importance of the legitimacy of a wife, and therefore the heir. See: Ruth Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2012), 84–85, 114.

control of nearly half of France. Meanwhile, Edward IV's (1442-1483) marriage in 1464 to Elizabeth Woodville (c.1437-1492) resulted in the disillusionment of the Earl of Warwick, and continued the internal conflict of the Wars of the Roses.

The role of royal sexuality in political 'successes' is highlighted by Karl Alvestad's contribution to this collection, which focuses on Harald Fairhair's (c.850-c.932) conquest of Norway. Fairhair's unification of Norway was based, in part, on his marital and sexual connections to the daughters of important Norwegian earls. The article is one of the first to consider the roles that these understudied women played in the successful outcome of the conquest.

The sexual reputation of a monarch, including accusations of promiscuity and homosexuality, was often wielded by contemporary critics to impugn a monarch's authority, and to highlight their inability to rule.⁴ This theme has been taken up in the work of Tom Linkinen, who shows how contemporaries and later chroniclers utilised accusations of same-sex desire to impair a monarch's ability to rule and to undermine their reputation.⁵ The allegations of homosexuality against Edward II of England (1284-1327), for instance, born from the favouritism that he showed to specific noblemen, though never proven, resulted in widespread support for the *coup d'état* that was led by his wife, Isabella of France (1295-1358).⁶ Conversely, the actions of Isabeau of Bavaria, during her husband's bouts of madness, resulted in the typically gendered accusations of adultery. Throughout the historiography, Isabeau gained notoriety as an irresponsible adulterer until recent studies revealed that this reputation was born of the factionalism of the Hundred Years' War.⁷ Gabriella Scarlatta's article in this collection examines two rulers who were the subjects of contemporary rumours about sexuality: Marguerite de Navarre (1492-1549) and Renée de France (1510-1575). Scarlatta does so by analysing the works of Betussi and Brantôme, showing that gender and sexuality were intricately connected to power in courtly circles and noting how formative this could be to the succession of dynasties.

Charlotte Backerra uses evidence from the private diaries of Charles VI, Holy Roman Emperor (1685-1740), to show how—amid public interest in royal sex lives—rulers might navigate a path between conformity and nonconformity to normative sexuality. Using the concepts of “norm competition” and “ambiguity tolerance,” Backerra demonstrates that Charles's infidelity to his wife Elisabeth Christine (1691-1750) was reconcilable with

⁴ For an account of how such language reflects early modern popular agency, see: Andy Wood, “‘The queen is a goggyll eyed hoore’: Gender and Seditious Speech in Early Modern England,” in *The English Revolution, c.1590-1720: Politics, Religion and Communities*, ed. Nicholas Tyacke (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 90.

⁵ Tom Linkinen, *Same-sex Sexuality in Later Medieval English Culture* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), esp. chapter 3, “Stigmatising with same-sex sexuality” (111–147).

⁶ The reputation and reign of Edward II has been discussed by numerous historians, including Paul Doherty and Kathryn Warner. See: Paul Doherty, *Isabella and the Strange Death of Edward II* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2003); Kathryn Warner, *Isabella of France. The Rebel Queen* (Stroud: Amberley Publishing, 2017); and Kathryn Warner, *Edward II: The Unconventional King* (Stroud: Amberley Publishing, 2014). Tom Linkinen analyses the accusations against Edward II and his potential same-sex relationships both during his reign, and in later contemporary material. Linkinen, *Same-sex Sexuality in Later Medieval English Culture*, 112–122.

⁷ Isabeau's life and reputation is discussed in detail by both Rachel Gibbons and Tracy Adams, who seek to reveal the truth behind the accusations against her. See: Rachel Gibbons, “Isabeau of Bavaria, Queen of France (1385–1422): The Creation of a Historical Villainess,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 6 (1996): 51–73; and Tracy Adams, *The Life and Afterlife of Isabeau of Bavaria* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2010).

expectations of marital fidelity. Irreconcilable, however, were Charles's sexual relationships with men, including with his sometime Groom of the Bedchamber, Michael Johann, Count Althann (1679-1722), and an unnamed hunter's boy. Backerra uses such evidence to suggest that Charles was in an atypical position to disregard sexual norms.

Nicola Clark's analysis of the liaisons of Catherine Howard (1523-1542) continues this theme of royal self-representation, by exploring evidence of the locations of her sexual encounters. She does so by discussing each location in terms of the language that Howard used to describe these liaisons and how they represent the Tudor culture of privacy. Moreover, the article examines not only the impact of Catherine's decisions to conduct her relationships in specific locations, but also the way that space, gender and sexuality can be uncovered in unique historical documents.

Implicit in all contributions to this volume is the view that sex and sexuality have had a considerable impact on the posthumous reputations of Europe's rulers, as well as courtiers and others who surrounded them. Rulers who feature most prominently in the historical consciousness of the premodern era appear inextricable from how and with whom they had sex and, of course, how far it served to reproduce their dynasties. Such characterisations are highly gendered. Charles II (1630-1685), who had a dozen illegitimate children with several women, remains the "Merry Monarch." Meanwhile, Marguerite de Valois (1553-1615) and Catherine the Great, empress of Russia (1729-1796), continue to be cast as hypersexual 'nymphomaniacs' and sexually aberrant because they were known to take lovers. In Britain, two early modern monarchs are apparently imaginatively inextricable from favourites with whom they are reputed to have had same-sex sexual relationships: notably James VI of Scotland and I of England (1566-1625) and his great-granddaughter Anne of Great Britain (1665-1714).

Such reputations are built on, and are influenced by, the memories of those who lived in the more immediate aftermath of rulers' reigns. So inextricable was James VI & I from allegations of his sexual relations with George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham (1592-1628), that rumours concerning their relationship loomed large in popular memory of the monarch several decades after his death. At his treason trial in August 1681, the radical Stephen Colledge (c.1635-1681), a joiner by trade, was accused of having declared that Charles II "came of the Race of Buggerers, for his Grand-father, King *James*, buggered the old Duke of *Buckingham*."⁸ Colledge's words drew on enduring rumours about James's relationship with Buckingham, which had been used to cast doubts on the authority of his son, Charles I (1600-1649), and grandsons, Charles II and James II (1633-1701). Such accusations had proliferated during the radical assault on the Stuarts' legacy after the trial and execution of Charles I in January 1649, but endured during the Restoration of the British monarchy in 1660.⁹

Historians and researchers of other disciplines acknowledge that contemporary critiques of medieval and early modern rulers that fixated on their sexuality informed, and indeed prejudiced, the appraisal of these individuals within the historiography, and did so until relatively recently.¹⁰ Correspondingly, scholars are devoting more attention to how the sex lives

⁸ Anon., *The Arraignment, Tryal And Condemnation Of Stephen Colledge For High-Treason, In Conspiring the Death of the King, the Levying of War, and the Subversion of the Government* (London, 1681), 30.

⁹ See, for instance: Balthazar Gerbier, *The None-Such Charles His Character* (London, 1650), 19–21.

¹⁰ See, for instance: Ruth Dawson, "Eighteenth-Century Libertinism in a Time of Change: Representations of

of monarchs and those who surround them have become historicised, be it within the historiography, or what Jerome De Groot describes as the “multiple places” beyond universities and other research institutions in which history is produced: “museums, television, front rooms, clubs, locally, [and] through the Internet.”¹¹ So too with studies of “collective,” “social,” and “public” memory and remembering, which converge in scope with De Groot’s “public history,” as well as the mnemonic practices of the (near-) contemporaries of medieval and early modern rulers that influenced historiography.¹² Such studies belong to a broader trend to consider the afterlives of monarchs.¹³

Two contributions to this special issue of the *Royal Studies Journal* follow this burgeoning interest in the intersection of memory and sexuality. In her contribution, Iliana Kandzha sheds light on the relationship of a Holy Roman Emperor and Empress, Henry II (973-1024) and Cunigunde of Luxembourg (c.980-1033), whose union was childless. Kandzha writes of the centrality of the language of chastity in retrospective assessments of Henry and Cunigunde’s union, especially in later medieval representations. Here, representations are shown to be unstable, influencing not only hagiographical narratives after the couple’s canonization in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, but also competing, popular claims about Henry’s immorality and even impotence.

Robert Kusek and Wojciech Szymański collaborate in this issue to explore how Polish annalists, chroniclers, historians, illustrators, and poets levelled allegations of sodomy against two of the country’s rulers, Bolesław II the Generous (1042-1081) and Henry III of France (1551-1589). Despite this attention, the authors situate their research against a Polish historiography that has remained entirely silent on the issue of nonheteronormative sexuality. Kusek and Szymański’s work leads them to considerations of how Polish heritage has challenged hegemonic and homophobic representations of these rulers.

Historians are often aware that public perceptions of the past are shaped by adaptations of historical stories through different media, and by the interpretation of historic sites and museum collections. This can lead to anxiety among academics and curators about the accuracy of the public perception of history. Yorgos Lanthimos’ 2018 film *The Favourite*, with its creative interpretation of the relationships between Queen Anne and her female favourites Sarah Churchill, Duchess of Marlborough (1660-1744), and Lady Abigail Masham

Catherine the Great.” *Women in German Yearbook* 18 (2002): 67–88; and Kathleen Wellman, *Queens and Mistresses of Renaissance France* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), esp. chapter 6. James VI & I is a particular subject of such studies. Michael B. Young has been particularly influential in this regard. See: Michael B. Young, *King James and the History of Homosexuality* (New York: New York University Press, 2000); and Michael B. Young, “James VI and I: Time for a Reconsideration?,” *Journal of British Studies* 51, no. 3 (July 2012): 540–567. Young’s work acknowledges the influence of Roger Lockyer and Jenny Wormald, whose seminal works on James he nonetheless argues are problematic. See: Roger Lockyer, *James VI & I* (London: Longman, 1998); and Jenny Wormald, “James VI and I: Two Kings or One?,” *History* 68, no. 223 (June 1983): 187–209.

¹¹ Jerome De Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2016), 2.

¹² For a recent example, see: John S. Garrison and Kyle Pivetti, eds., *Sexuality and Memory in Early Modern England: Erotics of Recollection* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

¹³ Estelle Paranque, ed., *Remembering Queens and Kings of Early Modern England and France: Reputation, Reinterpretation, and Reincarnation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); and Gabrielle Storey and Karl Christian Alvestad, eds., *Memorialising Premodern Monarchs, Medias of Commemoration and Remembrance*, ed (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming 2021).

(c.1670-1734), led to a slew of articles in the press addressing the accuracy or inaccuracy of the film's presentation of history. While defending the approach taken by the film, Sarah Churchill's biographer, Ophelia Field, used the release as an opportunity to discuss how the film's approach "conveyed larger biographical truths."¹⁴ Hannah Grieg, the film's historical advisor, defended the approach taken by the film, but admitted that "accuracy (as generally defined by our clunky accuracy-o-meters that make us think it is measurable) was never the goal in *The Favourite*."¹⁵ These articles suggest that, although creatives may find rich source material to adapt in histories of royal sexuality, audiences seek to separate fact from fiction. Yet, the study of popular and creative interpretations of royal histories reveals the shifting understanding of sexuality, gender, and relationships.

Perhaps the public desire to determine the accuracy of *The Favourite*, comes, at least in the United Kingdom, from a tradition of historical drama that did make claims to documentary accuracy. The 1970s television dramas that are taken by Sarah Betts as source material for her article in this issue are remembered for their well-researched presentation of history. They are also compared nostalgically to more recent historical dramas, which are perceived to sensationalise and sexualise history. Yet as Betts demonstrates, sex and sexuality were integral to the plots of these dramas, reflecting the interlinked private and public lives of their historical subjects. Through a public history reading of the material, Betts demonstrates that this use of the depiction of sexuality emphasised an understanding of the nature of monarchy appropriate to 1970s Britain.

Looking at similar sources, Aidan Norrie's contribution analyses the portrayals of Elizabeth I's (1533-1603) gender through modern adaptations of her famous "Tilbury" speech. The article examines specific scenes from four modern depictions of the speech in order to analyse how the infamous line, "I know I have the body of a weak, feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king," has been utilised by writers and represents authorial perceptions of Elizabeth's gender. Norrie argues that though many writers happily portray Elizabeth as the "weak, feeble woman," they struggle to comprehend and display her incompatible role as a "female king."

In her contribution, Amy Saunders also explores the perception of history through narrative re-imaginings, combining it with the presentation of historical accounts by museum and heritage professionals. Similar to Norrie, Saunders studies another single regnant queen whose sexuality has been subjected to intensive scrutiny: Queen Christina of Sweden (1626-1689). Christina's gender-nonconformity has been understood and portrayed in different ways, and Saunders highlights this in examples from film and literature. Saunders also identifies Christina as having huge potential to present LGBTQ+ narratives in museum and heritage contexts. As a European monarch who can be thought of as queer, Christina can easily claim a central place in these contexts, and objects relating to her can be found in the collections of many major institutions. However, while the United Kingdom's cultural sector has made huge

¹⁴ "Is *The Favourite* historically accurate in its depiction of Queen Anne's lesbianism?," *New Statesman*, accessed 18 July 2019, <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/film/2019/01/favourite-historically-accurate-its-depiction-queen-anne-s-lesbianism>.

¹⁵ "The *Favourite*: the real history behind the new Queen Anne film," *History Extra*, accessed 18 July 2019, <https://www.historyextra.com/period/stuart/real-history-the-favourite-film-queen-anne-olivia-colman-hannah-greig/>.

progress in recent years in engaging with LGBTQ+ histories and identities, there is still work to be done.¹⁶ Saunders identifies the challenges confronted by institutions that face practical and resource constraints to re-interpret and re-catalogue their collections, along with remaining institutional anxieties and fixed ideas of their role.

Together, the contributions to this special issue draw inspiration from, and seek to expand, a developing corpus of research that partially gathers its energy from increasing engagement with sexuality across various sites of historical consumption. In doing so, the issue offers answers to persistent questions not only about how sexuality has been deployed within public discourses about rulers, but also how we can take archival evidence of nonheteronormative sexuality without surrendering to anachronism. Moreover, this issue shows how a ruler's sexuality constituted a central current of their posthumous reputation, both in the short-term and over the centuries that followed. It does so by tracking how commentaries on the sexuality of historical figures have been shared within and across generations by changing technologies of historical communication—from print to film and photography. It is within these currents of social memory that historiography and heritage—to name but two sites of historical consumption—continue to engage with the question(s) of sexuality. With a spatial and temporal sensitivity to the diversity of human experience that was lacking in earlier accounts of ruling sexualities, this issue continues to engage with a subject that retains prominence in historical discourse.

¹⁶ See, for example: John Vincent, *LGBT People and the UK Cultural Sector: The Response of Libraries, Museums, Archives and Heritage since 1950* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014).