

Saints or Sinners? Sexuality, Reputation and Representation of Queens from Contemporary Sources to Modern Media

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Recibido: 30 de mayo de 2021 / Aceptado: 23 de agosto de 2021

Abstract. This article explores allegations of sexual scandal connected with premodern royal women in Europe and China. It begins by assessing expectations of queenly ideals, particularly the emphasis given to female chastity in European and Chinese culture. This forms a foundation for an extended discussion of tales of sexual impropriety of both real and legendary queens from China in the third century BCE to eighteenth century Europe. This survey highlights three key themes: the idea of dangerous and destructive beauty, the topos of the wanton and promiscuous queen and perceptions of transgressive affairs. Finally, the article assesses the connection between the portrayal of the sexual scandal of royal women in contemporary sources with the way in which these women's lives are represented in modern media, particularly films and television series. Ultimately, it demonstrates that allegations of sexual scandal could both be a means to attack these women (and their royal husbands) in their lifetimes and could have long lasting negative impact on the memory of their lives, resulting in their political power, agency and activity being obscured by an emphasis on their love lives and supposed affairs.

Keywords: Royal women; queens; queenship; sexuality; political agency; memory.

[es] ¿Santas o Pecadoras? Sexualidad, reputación y representación de las reinas desde fuentes contemporáneas hasta modernos medios de comunicación social

Resumen. Este artículo explora las acusaciones de escándalo sexual relacionado con mujeres reales premodernas en Europa y China. Comienza evaluando las expectativas de los ideales de la reina, particularmente el énfasis que se le da a la castidad femenina en la cultura europea y china. Esto forma una base para una discusión extensa de historias de conducta sexual inapropiada de reinas reales y legendarias desde China en el siglo III a. C. hasta la Europa del siglo XVIII. Esta investigación destaca tres temas clave: la idea de una belleza peligrosa y destructiva, el topos de la reina lasciva y promiscua y las percepciones de los asuntos transgresores. Finalmente, el artículo evalúa la conexión entre la descripción del escándalo sexual de las mujeres reales en fuentes contemporáneas con la forma en que las vidas de estas mujeres están representadas en los medios modernos, particularmente películas y series de televisión. En última instancia, demuestra que las acusaciones de escándalo sexual podrían ser un medio para atacar a estas mujeres (y a sus maridos reales) en sus vidas y podrían tener un impacto negativo duradero en la memoria de sus vidas, lo que resultaría en su poder político, agencia y actividad, siendo oscurecidos por un énfasis en sus vidas amorosas y supuestos *affairs*.

Palabras clave: Mujeres regias; reinas; realeza femenina; sexualidad; agencia política; memoria.

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How to Cite: Woodacre, E. (2021). Saints or Sinners? Sexuality, Reputation and Representation of Queens from Contemporary Sources to Modern Media. *De Medio Aevo* 10(2), 371-385.

1. Introduction

Kings and Queens were highly visible—as the foremost man and woman of the realm, almost (in some cultures at least) bridging the gap between the hu-

man and divine, subjects looked to them as models of behaviour and had correspondingly high expectations of their conduct. A whole genre of material, so-called 'mirrors for princes' and indeed for 'princesses' sprang up to counsel rulers and their consorts

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on expectations of their behaviour.² Interestingly, recent research on ideals of queenship in a more global, *longue durée* sense, demonstrates how very similar these expected virtues for royal women were across time, place, cultures and religions.³ Queens were expected to be many things—perfect wives, good mothers, pious, modest, wise—but arguably the most important virtue expected of a queen, something which underpins it all in a sense, is chastity. While chastity was a fairly universal expectation of pre-modern women it was even more crucial for queens to adhere to for two reasons. First, because they were exemplars to the women beneath them on the social ladder but more importantly perhaps because queens, or the king's official consorts/concubines in a polygamous court context, were reproductive conduits for the royal succession, ensuring dynastic continuity and the stability of the realm by providing healthy, legitimate heirs. If the queen was unchaste this whole system was thrown into confusion—casting doubts about the legitimacy of the succession, undercutting the dynasty and denigrating her royal husband (who was also her lord and sovereign) by cuckolding him. Beyond the issue of the succession, both Christine Ekholst and Henric Bagerius in their research on critiques of medieval royal couples and Carolyn Harris in her comparative examination of Henrietta Maria and Marie Antoinette have clearly demonstrated how perceived or genuine unchastity on the part of the queen has been used to attack a king, or even topple him from power.⁴ If a king could not control his wife, harem or household—how could he control the realm? Thus, the queen's sexual behaviour was of central importance to the king, dynasty, court and kingdom—any allegation that she was unfaithful or unchaste could have potentially catastrophic consequences, just as Guinevere's affair with Lancelot undermined the legendary Camelot.

Sex and power were completely interlinked for queens—particularly for queens consort as her position itself rested on her sexual relationship with the king. In an ideal scenario this relationship was chaste, in that the queen only slept with her husband, and produced the desired heirs. The sexual nature of their relationship also gave her intimate access to the king and an excellent opportunity to influence him during their private time together. If a queen was considered too powerful or influential with the king, sex could also be used to bring her down or discredit

her. She could be accused of seducing or ensnaring the king, distracting him from his duties and leading to the ruin of the realm. Queens could also be accused of adultery, betraying the king in both a sexual and treasonous manner—Peggy McCracken argues that these accusations were a political weapon used to discredit a powerful queen and her allies at court or even remove her entirely.⁵ Finally, all queens—regnant, regent, consort and even dowager—could be accused of using or abusing the political power inherent in their position to satisfy their carnal lust as a means to attack and defame them.

This article will start by examining the expectations of queenly chastity in 'mirrors for princesses' and conduct literature before exploring three key themes which criticism of queenly sexuality have centred around—the notion that queens, mistresses or royal concubines were controlling the ruler by sex and/or witchcraft and exerting undue, and potentially destructive, influence via the bedchamber. Then it will engage with the topos of the wanton queen—regnant and consort queens who were perceived as promiscuous, demonstrating a concern over unrestrained female power and sexuality. In connection with this, the third theme will be transgressive affairs, particularly accusations of queens and royal women engaging in same-sex relationships or incest. Finally, the long-term representation of the sexual behaviour of queens and royal women in recent films and television shows will be briefly considered to see to what extent modern media have either parroted or reframed sexual slander directed at royal women. While premodern European queens will form the bulk of the examples here, this study will draw in examples from Chinese history to give a wider context and more global perspective in order to demonstrate that concern over queenly chastity and sexual behaviour was more than a European fixation.

2. Expectations of Chastity and Queenly Ideals

Chastity was not just an expectation of queens; it was held up as a key ideal of womanhood by many societies. For queens, it was doubly important both in terms of ensuring the legitimacy of the royal line, as noted previously and because queens were charged with acting as models of moral behaviour for all of the women of the realm, as the first lady of the land.⁶

² There has been considerable scholarship on the 'mirrors for princes' genre—one excellent example which expands the scope beyond literature written for European princes is Regula Forester and Nequin Yavari, eds., *Global Medieval: Mirrors for Princes Reconsidered* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015). There are several excellent considerations of 'mirrors for princesses' in Karen Green and Constance J. Mews, eds., *Virtue Ethics for Women 1250-1500* (New York: Springer, 2011).

³ Elena Woodacre, *Queens and Queenship* (Bradford: ARC Humanities Press, 2021).

⁴ Henric Bagerius and Christine Ekholst, "For better or for worse: royal marital sexuality as political critique in late medieval Europe" in *The Routledge History of Monarchy*, eds. Elena Woodacre, Lucinda H.S Dean, Chris Jones, Russell E. Martin and Zita Eva Rohr (London: Routledge, 2019), 636-654. Carolyn Harris, *Queenship and Revolution in Early Modern Europe: Henrietta Maria and Marie Antoinette* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

⁵ Peggy McCracken, *The Romance of Adultery: Queenship and Sexual Transgression in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 4.

⁶ For an extended discussion of the expectations of queens as models of behaviour, see the introduction of Woodacre, *Queens and Queenship*.

The emphasis on chastity as a key element of both queenly and feminine behaviour is an enduring expectation which can be seen in societal traditions which have their roots in the ancient and classical era in both West and East. The qualities of *constantia*, *fides* and *pudicitia* (steadfastness, loyalty and chastity or sexual virtue) were central to Roman conceptions of ideal female behaviour.⁷ Werner Riess argues that the stories of the rape of the virtuous Lucretia and Verginia who was killed by her own father to protect her from the lust of a powerful man, demonstrate an even deeper significance for female sexual virtue in Roman society: “the chastity and purity of a Roman woman as well as her sexual inviolability symbolized the invulnerability of Rome itself. The honourable female body stood in for the Roman body politic as a whole.”⁸ This resonates with Chinese ideals where chastity came at the top of a list of required virtues for women compiled by the Empress Xu or Renxiaowen (1367-1407 CE): “Chastity, tranquility, solitude, unhurried elegance, poise, seriousness, sincerity and one-mindedness, are women’s virtuous nature.”⁹ Lisa Raphals affirms the importance of chastity in Chinese culture, arguing that this quality was the defining element of a woman’s place in the traditional Confucian societal system in China, noting that chastity is women’s “most important aspect.”¹⁰

Just as chastity headed the list of qualities that Empress Xu compiled for female behaviour, it also came first in the list of queenly virtues that the fifteenth-century writer and printer William Caxton wrote in *The Game and Playe of the Chesse*.¹¹ Caxton stresses the importance of the queen’s chastity as the model she sets to other women as first lady of the land: “a queen ought to be chaste. For as she is above all other in estate and reverence, so should she be an example unto all others in her honest living.”¹² Giles of Rome in his thirteenth-century *De Regimine Principum* or “The Government of Princes” gives substantial consideration to the comportment of wives, reflecting that connection between wider societal values and how kings and queens should conduct themselves. Chastity also comes first on a list Giles gives on how wives should behave noting that they

should be should have the “six properties and goodness” of being “chaste, honest, still, abstinent, sober and stable.”¹³ Giles is keen to point out that while all men should “rule” their wives well, it is even more vital when it comes to the situation of a royal wife for “more peril may come to the realm of evil ruling of wives of kings and princes.”¹⁴ Giles claims that this danger is more acute when a queen is unchaste or “intemperate” noting that “it is most seemly that kings and princes have such wives, for of [the] intemperateness of their wives may come more harm than of [the] intemperateness of other men’s wives.”¹⁵

3. Emphasizing Chastity through Tales of Real and Legendary Queens

The importance of womanly and queenly chastity was communicated in several ways, such as ‘mirrors for princesses’ and conduct literature or instructional texts for girls, as well as recounting stories of real or legendary ‘worthies’ and ‘anti-worthies’ whose lives demonstrated how queens and ordinary women should (or should not) conduct themselves. Heroines of the past were often held up as exemplars of how to behave, such as the Ithacan queen Penelope, wife of Odysseus in Homer’s epics, who remained loyal and chaste during the many years of his absence, fending off suitors through her clever unpicking each night of the shroud of her father-in-law which she swore to complete before she remarried. Penelope became an “exemplum for chastity” even for those unfamiliar with the work of Homer as she was heralded in several Latin texts for her chaste behaviour; these texts were later used as tools for teaching both Latin language and morality to medieval pupils.¹⁶ Chinese conduct literature also used ‘worthies’ of the past to provide models for girls and royal women to follow. Madame Liu’s “Short Records of Models for Women”, one of the *Nü Shisu* (or Four Books for Girls) gives many examples of women who went to dramatic lengths to remain chaste in the chapter “Chastity and Ardency”.¹⁷ Indeed in her discussion of “Queenly Virtues” she tells the story of the consort of Emperor Shizong, the Lady Wulin, who committed suicide to

⁷ Guy de la Bédoyère, *Domina: The Women who made Imperial Rome* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 22.

⁸ Werner Riess, “*Rari exempli femina*: Female Virtues on Roman Funerary Inscriptions”, in *A Companion to Women in the Ancient World*, eds. Sharon L. James and Sheila Dillon (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 492.

⁹ Empress Renxiaowen, “Teachings for the Inner Court (Neixun)” in *The Confucian Four Books for Women: A New Translation of the Nü Sishu and the Commentary of Wang Xiang*, trans. Ann A. Pang-White (Oxford: OUP, 2018), 137.

¹⁰ Lisa Raphals, *Sharing the Light: Representation of Women and Virtue in Early China* (Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), 2.

¹¹ William Caxton, *The Game and Playe of the Chesse*, ed. Jenny Adams (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2009), 26-31.

¹² Caxton, *Game and Playe*, 26-31. My modernization above, original text is “...a queene ought to be chaste. For as she is above al other in estate and reverence, so shold she be ensauple unto al other in her lyvyng honestlye.”

¹³ Giles of Rome, *The Governance of Kings and Princes: John Trevisa’s Middle English Translation of the De Regimine Principum of Aegifius Romanus*, eds David C. Fowler, Charles F. Briggs, and Paul G. Remley (New York & London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1997), 201. Note my modernization of the text above, the original quotation is “chaast, honest, stille, abstinent, sobre and stable.”

¹⁴ *De Regimine Principum*, 201. My modernization above, original text is “more perel may come to þe regne of euel rewlyng of wyves of kynges and princes.”

¹⁵ *De Regimine Principum*, 189. My modernization above, original text is “it is most semelich þat kynges and princes haue suche wives, for of intemperatnesse of here wyues may come more harme þan of intemperatnesse of opere menne wyues.”

¹⁶ R. Natasha Amendola, “Weaving Virtue: Laura Cereta as a New Penelope” in *Virtue Ethics for Women 1250-1500*, eds. Karen Green and Constant J. Mews (New York: Springer, 2011), 140.

¹⁷ Madame Liu, “Short Records of Models for Women (Nüfan jielu)” in *Four Books for Women*, 246-47.

preserve her chastity when Lord Liang attempted to assault her.¹⁸

Yet real and legendary queens of the past could also serve as ‘anti-worthies’ whose unchaste behaviour did bring “peril” to the realm as Giles of Rome warned. The famous Guinevere is an excellent example of this, as her affair with Lancelot, the greatest knight at her husband King Arthur’s legendary Round Table destabilized the idyllic Camelot, playing a part in its eventual doom. Another failing of Guinevere’s which contributed to the end of Camelot was her barrenness, another undesirable trait for a queen—although given her lack of fidelity to Arthur, at least there was no question of the legitimacy of any child she might have borne. Other cautionary tales of biblical and historical queens whose unchaste behaviour brought down realms and led to their own downfall include Jezebel, the wife of King Ahab of Israel and the infamous Roman empress Messalina—interestingly, both women’s names are given in a nineteenth-century thesaurus as a synonym for a prostitute, the most unchaste of women.¹⁹ An excellent example from traditional Chinese literature is the tale of the Songstress Queen of King Dao of Zhao in Liu Xiang’s *Biographies of Women*.

3.1.1. Tales of Dangerous and Destructive Beauties: The Songstress Queen

The tale of the Songstress Queen highlights the first of our three themes, the danger of a king who is ensnared by a woman and becomes obsessed by her—bewitched by her beauty, great sex or even in some cases it was alleged by witchcraft. Ban Zhao’s *Lessons for Women* warns against excessive love between man and wife, noting that it can destroy the ‘proper’ dynamic between husband and wife, giving the woman a distorted sense of her own importance:

If husband and wife have the habit of staying together, never leaving one another, and following each other around within the limited space of their own rooms, then they will lust after and take liberties with one another. From such action improper language will arise between the two. This kind of discussion may lead to licentiousness.²⁰

This may have been a coded reference to the emperor’s relationship with his wives and concubines, indeed Chinese annalists often equated the excessive

interest of emperors in their imperial harems with poor government and the destruction of reigns.²¹

The tale of Songstress Queen holds a similar warning for emperors who might fall prey to a dangerous beauty and be consumed by lust and licentiousness which might warp his ability to rule effectively. King Daoxiang became obsessed with a beautiful singer from Handan and married her, against the advice of his counsellor. Once installed in the imperial court, the “dissolute and immoral” Songstress Queen deposed the king’s first wife to take her place as queen, framed the heir apparent of a crime to clear the path for her own son by the king, had an affair with the Lord of Chunping, took bribes and forced the king to execute his excellent general, Li Mu. Her actions not only caused chaos in the court, it also led to the destruction of the realm as when the Qin invaded, the army was too weak to repel them without their general to lead them. Thus, she is credited here with the destruction of the realm:

She destroyed the true queen and heir,
Working with her deceit with guile.
She was debauched with Lord Chunping,
And ruthlessly pursued what she desired.
She received bribes, ravaged Zhao,
And died in the kingdom she destroyed.²²

In her story, we can see not only the damage that can be done when the king falls prey to a woman’s beauty, but what happens when a woman gains excessive power—this link between sex and power is an enduring connection which we will continue to explore.

3.1.2. Tales of Dangerous and Destructive Beauties: The Zhao Sisters

The story of the infamous Zhao sisters, the concubine Zhao Hede and Zhao Feiyan who eventually became empress, rose to prominence in the Chinese court of Emperor Cheng in the first century BCE provides another cautionary tale of dangerous beauty. The sisters’ rapid elevation in rank came through both ensnaring the emperor with their formidable charms and using any means necessary to clear their path of rivals. For example, Zhao Feiyan was able to by degrade the position of both Empress Xu and the sisters’ virtuous rival Lady Ban when she accused them of “employing magical charms to put a curse on herself and a spell

¹⁸ Liu, “Short Records”, 225 and 229n12.

¹⁹ Peter Mark Roget, *Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases*, revised and ed. by Barnas Sears (New York: Sheldon and Company, 1878), 347.

²⁰ Ban Zhao, *Lessons for Women*, in *Images of Women in Chinese Thought and Culture: Writings from the Pre-Qin period through the Song Dynasty*, ed. Robin R. Wang (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003), 184.

²¹ Robert Joe Cutter and William Gordon Crowell, trans. and eds., *Empresses and Consorts: Selections from Chen Shou’s “Records of the Three States” with Pei Songzhi’s Commentary* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1999), 43. See also Keith McMahon, *Women Shall Not Rule: Imperial Wives and Concubines in China from Han to Liao* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013), 17-18.

²² Liu Xiang, *Exemplary Women of Early China: The Lienü Zhuan of Liu Xiang*, trans and ed. Anne Behnke Kinney (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 156.

on the emperor”.²³ The sisters were also accused of murdering several of the emperor’s offspring by other wives and concubines and were even suspected of contriving the death of Emperor Cheng himself.²⁴ Yet these dark deeds were not enough to blacken Zhao Feiyan’s name—a key part of the empress’ black legend is her sexual misconduct with her many lovers—an ‘unofficial’ contemporary history of the Han court claims that:

She used to invite cocky young men to her quarters dressed in women’s clothing, who arrived in curtained carriages, dozens of them entering the inner precincts every day. She had sex with them all, without stopping for rest. When one got tired, she’d replace them with the next. Still, she died childless.²⁵

Here we have another Guinevere perhaps, the barren and unchaste queen. One of the pornographic novels inspired by the sexual antics of the empress and her sister claimed that Feiyan’s desperation to have a child encouraged her to take lovers. Indeed, the crimes committed by the Zhao sisters in killing off the emperor’s offspring were said to be driven by Feiyan’s jealousy that other women were providing the emperor with heirs when she could not—with him or with any other man it seems. Ultimately the story of the Zhao sisters, like the Songstress Queen, stresses the destructive power of female sexuality and the doom which comes to the realm when the emperor falls prey to a beautiful woman. In this case, the Zhao sisters not only betrayed the emperor and damaged the line of succession, they were even held responsible for his death—one of the pornographic novels alleges he died due to an overdose of aphrodisiac from Zhao Hede. Lisa Raphals claims the tales of the Zhao sisters “present vivid examples of the influence of women as agents of destruction, chaos, immorality, and causes of the fall of dynasties.”²⁶

3.1.3. Tales of Dangerous and Destructive Beauties: Isabella d’Angoulême and Anne Boleyn

This idea of dangerous, promiscuous beauty corrupting the king is not just a theme of Chinese literature—we can find more familiar examples closer to home

in English history. We can see a similarity between the Chinese annalists who connected the obsession of emperors with their wives and concubines with poor government to Roger of Wendover’s description of King John’s infatuation with his young bride, Isabella d’Angoulême. Wendover describes John’s Christmas court of 1203 when the king “feasted sumptuously with his queen daily, and prolonged his sleep in the morning till breakfast time”, indicating that the king was either fond of sleeping in or was a coded reference to being prone to excess both in terms of food and sex with Isabella.²⁷ According to the chronicle, John’s lack of reaction when Philip Augustus of France invaded his territories caused his nobles to abandon him, disgusted at his failure to defend his territories. Wendover notes that

the king of the English was staying inactive in Rouen with his queen, so that it was said that he was infatuated by sorcery and witchcraft; for in the midst of all his losses and disgrace, he showed a cheerful countenance to all, as though he had lost nothing.²⁸

In this account, we have a king blinded by love to the point where he has lost the ability to govern—John’s behaviour is so illogical to his nobles (and particularly to a monastic chronicler) that it seems that malefic forces must be at work to explain why he could not leave the queen’s side. Here is another destructive beauty: Isabella’s hold on John is held up as the seeds of his destruction. While this was not the only mistake that John made, his love-induced apathy is presented as the start of a domino chain which would lead to the collapse of the Angevin holdings on the Continent. Indeed, Wendover declared openly that John’s marriage to Isabella was “very injurious to the king as well as to the kingdom of England.”²⁹ Moreover Wendover’s continuator, Matthew Paris describes Isabella in even more scathing terms as a Jezebel and an adulteress, alleging that the king himself killed her lovers, permanently blackening the queen’s reputation.³⁰

Sponsam habet sibi exosam et ipsum odientem, incestam, maleficam, et adulteram, et super hoc saepius convictam; unde rex sponsus ejus comprehensus laqueo jussit super stratum ejus suffocari.³¹

²³ *Books of the Han*, in Wilt Idema and Beata Grant, *The Red Brush: Writing Women of Imperial China* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2004), 79.

²⁴ Raphals, *Sharing the Light*, 81-86.

²⁵ McMahon, *Women Shall Not Rule*, 81.

²⁶ Raphals, *Sharing the Light*, 85.

²⁷ Roger of Wendover, *Roger of Wendover’s Flowers of history, Comprising the history of England from the descent of the Saxons to A.D. 1235; formerly ascribed to Matthew Paris*, vol. II, trans. J.A. Giles (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1849), 206

²⁸ Roger of Wendover, *Flowers of History*, 207

²⁹ Roger of Wendover, *Flowers of History*, 188.

³⁰ Louise J. Wilkinson, “Maternal Abandonment and Surrogate Caregivers: Isabella of Angoulême and Her Children by King John” in *Virtuous or Villainess? The Image of the Royal Mother from the Medieval to the Early Modern Era*, Carey Fleiner and Elena Woodacre eds. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 103.

³¹ Matthew Paris, *Chronica Majora*, Henry Luard ed. (London: Longman, 1874), vol. II, 563. Nicholas Vincent has translated this passage as “Hateful to him, who hates him too. She has often been found guilty of incest, sorcery and adultery, so that the king, her husband, has ordered those of her lovers who have been apprehended to be strangled with a rope in her own bed.” Nicholas Vincent, “Isabella d’Angoulême: John’s Jezebel” in *King*

In Paris' version of events, John looks even worse—not only had he been bewitched by Isabella in the early days of their marriage, by this account she looks to be damming him as well by her promiscuous behaviour. Nicholas Vincent has noted that while John and Isabella were not the only members of the Plantagenet who have been accused of sexual impropriety, these salacious tales could have a detrimental effect on far more than their personal reputation:

We are dealing here with the world of rumour, and especially with the malicious rumours that the ruled put about their rulers...With the Plantagenets, as with the more recent royal families, rumour and malicious report play no small part in the waxing and waning of a house's popularity. In certain circumstances, as perhaps with King John and Isabella, they can significantly undermine the standing of an otherwise powerful dynasty.³²

The particular sequence of words applied to Isabella by Matthew Paris "*incestam, maleficam, et adulteram*" were effectively applied to another English queen in the sixteenth century. Yet in Anne Boleyn's case it was not just her suspected lovers who were killed by the king, she paid the ultimate price for being suspected of adultery, going to the block at the Tower in May 1536. Anne's spectacular rise had been driven by Henry VIII's intense obsession with her, to the point that he was willing to go to extreme lengths to give rid of his wife Catherine of Aragon, risking war with Catherine's nephew Charles V, the most powerful man in Europe and ultimately breaking with the Catholic church when he was unable to secure a papal annulment. Henry's actions to secure Anne and make her his wife, led some contemporaries, particularly those who defended the previous queen and the Catholic church, to wonder what hold Anne could have on Henry: was it merely lustful infatuation or were other darker factors at work? Indeed the Imperial ambassador Chapuys noted in a letter to Charles V in January 1536 that the "King has said to some one in great confidence, and as it were in confession, that he had made this marriage, seduced by witchcraft, and for this reason he considered it null; and that this was evident because God did not permit them to have any male issue."³³ Shortly after proceedings started against Anne which accused her of adultery with multiple lovers, including her own brother George: the ultimate outcome of that trial was the death of both Boleyn siblings as well as other

men who had been accused. By framing Anne as an adulteress and seductress who may have even used witchcraft to trap the king in an unsuitable marriage, it could be argued that Henry VIII was trying to shift the narrative by ridding himself of Anne to avoid the reprobation levelled at John, or indeed the aforementioned Chinese emperors, for making disastrous decisions and running the realm into the ground because of his obsession with a woman.³⁴

3.2.1. Tales of Wanton and Promiscuous Queens: The Affair of the Tour de Nesle

Anne Boleyn's situation also fits with another stereotype, that of the wanton, promiscuous queen. In terms of consort queens, we can see considerable overlap with the dangerous seductress model discussed previously in the topos of the queen who through her affairs, threatens the stability of the realm and the royal succession and must be brought down to save both the king's reputation and the monarchy itself. Just as Boleyn was tried along with her supposed lovers and executed, her cousin Katherine Howard was condemned to death by Henry VIII and her supposed lovers, Francis Dereham and Thomas Culpeper. While these cases all provoked considerable scandal, ultimately they did not destroy the succession or the stability of the dynasty as the Tudor dynasty continued under Henry VIII's three children, including of course Anne Boleyn's daughter Elizabeth I. The Affair of the Tour de Nesle, also known as the Affair of the King's Daughters-in-Law, provides a scenario where sexual scandal not only brought down a queen and her lover but ultimately resulted in a multi-national succession crisis and, it has been argued, even indirectly caused the Hundred Years War itself.

To briefly summarize, according to contemporary accounts in early 1314, the daughters in law of Philip IV of France, Marguerite, wife of Louis, King of Navarre and heir to the French throne and Blanche, wife of his youngest son Charles were arrested and imprisoned for adultery with two knights, the d'Aulnay brothers. The king's remaining daughter-in-law, Jeanne, was questioned and briefly imprisoned on suspicion of enabling or at least being aware of, the affairs of the other two women. While Blanche was ultimately released and packed off to a nunnery in disgrace, Marguerite, the Queen of Navarre, died in custody at the stronghold of Castle Gaillard, supposedly by strangulation. Peggy McCracken has noted that this affair catapulted the scenario of an adulter-

John: New Interpretations, S.D. Church ed. (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1999), 200. However, it is worth noting the multiple meanings of some of the Latin words *incestam* can mean both unchastity as well as incestuous in Latin while *maleficia* can also mean wickedness or criminal behaviour as well as sorcery or witchcraft.

³² Vincent, "John's Jezebel", 204.

³³ Chapuys to Charles V, 29 January 1536, no. 199. *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, Volume 10, January-June 1536. Edited by James Gairdner. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office 1887. *British History Online*, accessed May 13, 2021, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/letters-papers-hen8/vol10>.

³⁴ There has been considerable debate about the reasons for the downfall of Anne Boleyn, but a scholar who has emphasised Henry's concern about witchcraft is Retha Warnicke, see Retha M. Warnicke, "The Fall of Anne Boleyn Revisited." *The English Historical Review* 108, no. 428 (1993): 661-4. Accessed May 13, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/574751>.

ous queen which featured extensively in medieval romances into the reality of the Capetian court, noting that “it realizes the anxieties that underlie romance representations of adulterous queens: the discovery of the queen’s adultery and the suspicion of a corrupted lineage.”³⁵

Tracy Adams notes that while historians “have long accepted the tragic story at face value” she urges caution as “queens too often have been accused of adultery for political reasons to accept the charge without further investigation simply because it is reported in chronicles.”³⁶ Indeed Adams’ reappraisal of Isabeau of Bavaria, another French queen accused of adultery along with a myriad of other vices, also argued for a more nuanced view of the sources that accused the queen of bad behaviour.³⁷ Adams argues that the charge of adultery against the two women “defies credibility” and that the opportunity for conducting an illicit affair within the tightly packed accommodation of the French court would have been challenging. Indeed, even the contemporary *Chronique métrique* of Godefroy de Paris expressed astonishment of how the lovers managed to meet (“*Je ne sai par quoi ne comment/Ainsi entr’elz deux accordèrent*”), suggesting that an “*enchantment*” might have made it possible.³⁸ The adultery accusation could be seen a means to get rid of daughters-in-law who had been unable to provide male heirs for the Capetian line and whose marriages were too difficult to annul without repercussions. Adams proposes an alternative interpretation that the affair may have actually been a response to a perceived conspiracy at court at a time when Philip was struggling with the barons as adultery was sometimes used as a coded reference in medieval romances to allude to conspiracy among the nobility. The harsh treatment meted out to Marguerite allowed Philip to appear to be enforcing morality by ridding the court of evil doers, putting a more positive gloss on the king’s turbulent final months.

Yet, like Anne Boleyn, here we have another supposedly adulterous queen, killed along with her reputed lovers, leaving behind a young daughter; in this case Jeanne, whose place in the succession was now very unclear. Shortly after her mother’s death, Jeanne became the test case for female succession, in the extended succession crisis that followed the death of Louis X of France and Navarre in 1316: her

mother’s death as an adulterous queen put a question mark on Jeanne’s legitimacy which, along with her extreme youth and female sex, did not help her case.³⁹ Ultimately, all the sons of Philip the Fair died without surviving male issue, leading to the end of the direct Capetian line and the threat that Edward III of England as the son of the Philip’s daughter Isabella of France, who ironically according to some sources, originally accused her sisters-in-law of adultery, might invade to claim the throne, which he effectively did to start the Hundred Years War.⁴⁰ Thus, this accusation of queenly adultery had extensive and long term dynastic and political repercussions and could certainly be held up by medieval chroniclers and romance writers as a tragic tale which illustrated how the lust of a wanton queen could lead to the end of a dynasty, war and woe for the realm at large.

3.2.2. Tales of Wanton and Promiscuous Queens: Elizabeth I of England

Moving beyond consorts, we can see that tales of wanton regnant queens can also be used to deliver morality messages. Indeed, contemporary commentary on the lovers or favourites of a regnant queen can be used to express disapproval on the unrestrained power and sexuality of a ruling woman. Keith McMahon has argued that attaching sexual scandal to female rulers was reaction to female rule itself which was seen as a reversal of the “natural order”:

When a woman ruled, it was an abnormal, temporary, and experimental interval. It was an in-between phase, or could only be understood as such. The pornographic imagination reduced the image of the woman ruler to its base sexual logic, the bedrock of proof justifying the rule against female dominance, by demonstrating that the politically ambitious woman was sexually voracious at her core.⁴¹

Criticism of female rulers could take the form of expressions of jealousy on the preferment of a queen’s favourite, such as diatribes against Elizabeth I’s long-term friend and companion Robert Dudley, including “A Treatise of Treasons”, “Leicester’s Commonwealth” and “Leicester’s Ghost”, reputedly penned by the Earl of Oxford.⁴² Contemporaries speculated about the true nature of their relationship:

³⁵ McCracken, *Romance of Adultery*, 172.

³⁶ Tracy Adams, “L’affaire de la Tour de Nesle: Love Affair as Political Conspiracy” in *Le crime de l’ombre: Complots, conspirations et conjurations au Moyen Age*, Corinne Leveleux-Teixeira and Bernard Ribémont eds. (Paris: Klincksieck, 2010), 22-23.

³⁷ Tracy Adams, *The Life and Afterlife of Isabeau of Bavaria* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2010).

³⁸ Godfrey of Paris, *Chronique métrique de Godefroy de Paris*, ed. J-A. Buchon (Paris: Verdrière, 1827), 227, lines 6263-4.

³⁹ See Elena Woodacre, *The Queens Regnant of Navarre: Succession, Politics and Partnership, 1274-1512* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 51-61.

⁴⁰ For more on the Capetian succession crisis and its repercussions see Derek Whaley, “From a Salic Law to the Salic Law: the creation and re-creation of the royal succession system of medieval France” in *The Routledge History of Monarchy*, Elena Woodacre, Lucinda H.S. Dean, Chris Jones, Russell E. Martin and Zita Eva Rohr (London: Routledge, 2019), 443-464.

⁴¹ Keith McMahon, “The Polyandrous Empress: Imperial Women and their Male Favourites” in *Wanton Women in Late-Imperial Chinese Literature: Models, Genres, Subversions and Traditions*, Mark J. Stevenson and Cuncun Wu, eds. (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 48.

⁴² Anonymous (attributed to Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford), “A Treatise of Treasons” (1572), “Leicester’s Commonwealth” (1584) and “Leicester’s Ghost” (1603), all available at *The Oxford Authorship Site*, <http://www.oxford-shakespeare.com/leicester.html>. Accessed 13 May 2021.

was Dudley the queen's lover? Would she marry him? Ambassadors hinted at rumours circulating at court of the queen's intimacy with Dudley in their letters home. The Count of Feria wrote to Philip II of Spain that "During the last few days Lord Robert has come so much into favour that he does whatever he likes with affairs and it is even said that her Majesty visits him in his chamber day and night."⁴³

Elizabeth's detractors were far from restrained in their depictions of her relationship with Dudley. William Allen's diatribe against the queen in 1588 first brought up her mother's supposed adultery to use against her adding the extra spice of Henry VIII's relationship with Elizabeth's aunt and even alleging he had slept with Elizabeth's grandmother and namesake:

being indeed taken and known for an incestuous bastard, begotten and borne in sin, of an infamous courtesan Anne Bullen (Boleyn), afterward executed for adultery, treason, heresy and incest, amongst others with her own natural brother, which Anne, her said supposed father kept by pretended marriage in the life of his lawful wife, the most renowned and blessed lady Queen Katherine, daughter of Castile and Aragon, as he did before unnaturally know and keep both the said Anne's mother and sister.⁴⁴

Allen then, after a lengthy discussion of the queen's other perceived faults and flaws accused her directly and explicitly of sexual immorality and intimate relations with Dudley "to serve her filthy lust".⁴⁵ Allen claims that Dudley was only one of her lovers:

With the aforesaid person and diverse others she has abused her body, against Gods laws, to the disgrace of princely majesty & the whole nations reproach by unspeakable and incredible variety of lust, which modesty suffers not to be remembered neither were it to chaste ears to be uttered how shamefully she has defiled and infamed her person and country, and made her Courte as a trap, by this damnable and detestable art, to entangle in sin [...] whereby she has become notorious to the world.⁴⁶

Allen argued that "She could never be restrained from this incontinence" and refused to succumb to the "condemnation of chaste and lawful marriage" which would have been a "bridle of her licentiousness."⁴⁷ Here we have a classic example of accusing a powerful woman of sexual misbehaviour as a way to attack her—it was not enough for Allen to rail against her political decisions and, in his view as a Catholic, her crimes against the Church—he brought her mother's supposed adultery and aimed to tar Elizabeth with the same brush of sexual "incontinence" to discredit her as thoroughly as possible.

3.2.3. Tales of Wanton and Promiscuous Queens: Catherine II of Russia and Empress Wu Zetian

While the veracity of the rumours around Elizabeth's relationship can never be definitively proven, other regnant queens clearly did have lovers. Catherine II 'the Great' of Russia, is one example—however, while not impervious to sexual slander, Catherine was perhaps less vulnerable to criticism as she had already provided male heirs to ensure the succession and was a widow during her regnant years. It is easier to be a "merry widow" than a never married single woman; indeed much of the concern about Elizabeth's sexuality reflected wider worries about the succession and the potential husband that Elizabeth might choose: be it Dudley or a foreign prince.⁴⁸ Catherine on the other hand was a bit freer to pursue amorous attachments, while estimates vary, she appears to have had roughly a dozen lovers or favourites over (and even before) her lengthy reign. As was the case with Elizabeth, courtiers and ambassadors observed these relationships closely to see what impact they would have on the court, internal or foreign affairs. Catherine's relationship with Potemkin was the most famous and significant—Simon Sebag Montefiore has gone so far to argue that they married secretly.⁴⁹ Yet while Catherine was able to conduct her affairs with relative ease, this did not mean that they were free from criticism. As her biographer John Alexander notes "the notion of a dominating, voracious, insatiable, promiscuous, castrating female has

⁴³ The Count of Feria to Philip II of Spain, 18 April 1559, "Simancas: April 1559," in *Calendar of State Papers, Spain (Simancas)*, Volume 1, 1558-1567, ed. Martin A S Hume (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1892), 46-64. British History Online, accessed May 13, 2021, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/simancas/vol1/pp46-64>.

⁴⁴ William Allen, "An admonition to the nobility and people of England and Ireland concerninge the present vvarres made for the execution of his Holines Sentence, by the highe and mightie Kinge Catholike of Spaine" (London, 1588; Ann Arbor: Text Creation Partnership, 2011), xi, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A16774.0001.001/1:1?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>. My modernization above, original text is: "beinge indede taken and knowen for an incestuous bastard, begotten and borne in sinne, of an infamous courtesan Anne Bullen, after warde executed for aduoutery, treason, heresie and inceste, amögest others with her owne naturall brother, which Anne, her said supposed father kepte by pretensed mariage in the life of his law full wife, the most renowned and blessed ladie Queene Katherine, daughter of Castill and Aragon, as he did before vnnaturally knovve and kepe bothe the said Annes mother and sister."

⁴⁵ Allen, "An admonition", xviii

⁴⁶ Allen, "An admonition", xix. My modernization above, original text is "VVith the forsaid person and diuers others she hathe abused her bodie, against Gods lawes, to the disgrace of princely maiestie & the whole nations reproche by vnspeakable and incredible variety of luste, which modesty suffereth not to be remembered neyther were it to chaste eares to be vttered how shamefully she hath defiled and infamed her person and cuntry, and made her Courte as a trappe, by this damnable and detestable arte, to intäggle in sinne...whereby she is become notorious to the worlde."

⁴⁷ Allen, "An admonition", xx.

⁴⁸ For more on this and the anxieties over the marriage of a regnant queen, see Elena Woodacre, "The Queen's Marriage; Matrimonial Politics in Pre-Modern Europe" in *Marriage in Pre-Modern Europe; Italy and Beyond*, Jacqueline Murray ed. (Toronto: CRRS Publications, 2012), 29-46.

⁴⁹ See Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Catherine the Great and Potemkin: The Imperial Love Affair* (London: Vintage Books, 2016).

threatened male psyches from time immemorial” and thus her behaviour was bound to attract criticism.⁵⁰ Some of this criticism was due to the example that she set to the maids and matrons of the realm who seemed keen (to male contemporaries at least) to follow the empress’ example to embark on affairs of their own. As noted previously, a queen as the highest woman in the land was expected to be an exemplar of ideal female behaviour—being unchaste and having multiple sexual liaisons out of wedlock clearly did not fit with contemporary expectations of queenly, or womanly deportment.

Moreover, Alexander argues that as Catherine grew older, her affairs attracted not only moral opprobrium but the notion of an increasingly elderly empress cavorting in bed with a younger favourite attracted “disgust, incredulity, or distainful mirth”.⁵¹ Nor was Catherine the only older female ruler to attract palace gossip for her younger male favourites. Keith McMahon notes that tales of the Chinese Empress Wu Zetian’s lovers found an enthusiastic audience centuries after her death as “Writers in later centuries, especially the Ming and Qing, liked to picture women over sixty who were still lusty and driven to have affairs with younger men.”⁵² Empress Wu is alleged to have had several lovers, including an Imperial physician and another man whom she reportedly had ordained as a Buddhist monk to ensure his access to her. In the later years of her long life she appears to have developed a deep attachment to the Zhang brothers, Yishi and Changzong, who were the chief officials of the Office of the Crane. Indeed rumours spread at court that not only were the Zhang brothers the Empress’ lovers, the entire Office of the Crane itself was reputed to be “a sinecure post designed to smuggle a series of beautiful young boys into the palace for Empress Wu’s entertainment.”⁵³ Just as in the Russian court, Wu’s biographer Jonathan Clement notes that Chinese courtiers also worried at the example that the empress’ behaviour set to other women at court and beyond. Indeed, Wu’s daughter Princess Taiping supposedly had several lovers including possibly the Zhang brothers themselves and her daughter-in-law Wei was allegedly engaged in an extramarital liaison.⁵⁴

3.3.1. Tales of Transgressive Affairs: Anne of Great Britain

Relationships with favourites could be used against queens regnant and consort to create sexual slander

of an even more serious kind; alleging that they were not only engaged in illicit affairs but same-sex relationships. Just as in the case of kings who were criticized for being influenced by a woman that they were infatuated with to make poor political decisions, Queen Anne was accused of being manipulated by her love for her favourite Abigail Hill-Masham. In 1708 multiple pieces emerged in the popular press which alluded to a lesbian relationship between Anne and Abigail. ‘A New Ballad’ widely attributed to Arthur Maynwaring (or Mainwaring) claimed:

When as Queen Anne of great Renown
Great Britain’s Scepter sway’d
Besides the Church, she dearly lov’d
A Dirty Chamber-Maid
...
Her Secretary she was not,
Because she could not write;
But had the Conduct and the Care
Of some dark Deeds at Night...⁵⁵

“The Rival Dutchess or Court Incendiary” took a different tack, focusing on Abigail’s sexuality rather than the Queen herself. In this imaginary conversation between Masham and Louis XIV’s morganatic wife Madame Maintenon, Maintenon asks Abigail if she is prone to “that Female Vice, which is the most detestable in Nature” and Abigail notes that

Especially at Court I was taken for a more modish Lady, that was rather addicted to another Sort of Passion, of having too great a Regard for my own Sex, insomuch that few People thought I would ever have Married; but to free my self from that Aspersion some of our Sex labour under, for being too fond of one another, I was resolved to Marry as soon as I could fix to my Advantage or Inclination.⁵⁶

However, the interesting element in this scenario is that this criticism of Anne’s relationship with Abigail was connected to the rupture of Anne’s relationship with her previous favourite, her longtime friend, Sarah Churchill, Duchess of Marlborough. Sarah herself worked to spread rumours of the intimate relationship between the Queen and Abigail, but intriguingly she did so not by providing explicit descriptions but by veiled allusions to its allegedly lesbian nature. While Sarah herself may have been more discreet in her gossipmongering, Maynwaring

⁵⁰ John T. Alexander, *Catherine the Great: Life and Legend* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 225.

⁵¹ Alexander, *Catherine the Great*, 225.

⁵² McMahon, “Polyandrous Empress”, 38.

⁵³ Jonathan Clement, *Wu: The Chinese Empress who schemed, seduced and murdered her way to become a living god* (London: Albert Bridge Books, 2014), 222.

⁵⁴ Clement, *Wu*, 224-5.

⁵⁵ Anonymous, “A New Ballad: To the Tune of Fair Rosamond” (London, 1708). *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* (accessed May 13, 2021). <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CW0106431336/ECCO?u=ucwinch&sid=ECCO&xid=9d7f163b&pg=1>.

⁵⁶ Anonymous, “The rival dutchess: or, court incendiary. In a dialogue between Madam Maintenon, and Madam M.” (London, 1708). *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* (accessed May 13, 2021). <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CW0104363792/ECCO?u=ucwinch&sid=ECCO&xid=48ebb-f69&pg=1>.

ing, the likely author of the “New Ballad” which did make rather explicit allegations of a sexual relationship between Anne and Abigail, was Sarah’s private secretary around time that the ballad was printed in 1708.⁵⁷ Sarah and Maynwaring were keen to discredit Abigail as she had not only replaced Sarah in Anne’s affections but had steered the queen towards the Tories and away from the Whig party which Sarah and Maynwaring were keen proponents of. Sarah herself called Anne’s attention to “The Rival Dutchess” in a 1709 letter to the queen describing the portrayal of Anne’s relationship with Masham in the pamphlet as “stuff not fit to be mentioned of passions between women”.⁵⁸ Rachel Weil has noted that Sarah’s tactical innuendos amplified their effect: “Sarah’s failure to specify what was wrong with Anne’s relationship with Abigail made the wrongness loom larger. It turned the relationship into a cause of, and also a powerful metaphor for, all that was wrong with Anne as a monarch.”⁵⁹ Again, we have shades of criticism directed at King John for his infatuation with Isabella d’Angoulême here: only this time we have a female ruler and a same-sex relationship. A tie can also be seen here to criticism of Wu Zetian and Catherine the Great, other widowed and older female monarchs who were felt by some courtiers and contemporaries to be potentially manipulated by younger favourites whom they were romantically or sexually infatuated with.

3.3.2. Tales of Transgressive Affairs: Marie Antoinette of France

Nor was Anne the only queen to be criticized for allegedly having a sexual relationship with a same-sex favorite—perhaps the most well-known case is that of Marie Antoinette who was roundly lampooned in the popular press for her Austrian heritage, her political influence, her profligate spending and with particular venom reserved for her supposed affairs with the Princesse de Lamballe and the Duchesse de Polignac. Marie Antoinette was not only accused of lesbian affairs, but she was also alleged in these *libelles* which emerged from the early 1770s onwards to have slept with a host of men at court, including several of her in-laws. The pamphlets were stridently critical of the queen, calling her “Perverted mother [...] Wife with no sense of decency, you prostitute

yourself to fearful pleasures [...] Born to become the most contemptible of courtesans.”⁶⁰ The assault on the queen in the popular press saw increasingly obscene texts and extremely explicit illustrations; Elizabeth Colwill has argued that “the queen assumed ever more active and varied sexual postures as the Revolution radicalized.”⁶¹

We can see a link between the pornographic depictions of Marie Antoinette to the aforementioned novels that featured the supposed sexual depravity of the Zhao sisters in China. The criticism of Marie Antoinette’s behaviour did more than just call the legitimacy of the royal children into question, it made the king look inept for his inability to control his lustful wife; or perhaps for his inability to satisfy her in order to keep her from seeking pleasure outside the royal bedroom. This was all clearly an attack on the king’s and the government’s political ineptness. Marie Antoinette’s body and sexuality became a canvas for the press to vent their frustration not just with the queen or the monarchy but the whole political system. The queen became a focus of hatred and the most effective means of attacking her, making her, the king, the royal family, and court look sordid and even ridiculous—was to accuse her of sexual misconduct in literally every way possible. Sexual slander also provided a means to break the perceived power of the queen, who was feared as a foreigner to be working against France’s best interests. Carolyn Harris has argued that the slanderous allegations of queen’s sexual misbehaviour, particularly the allegations of incest with her son were designed to by “blacken her character” and were a “logical extension” of the critiques of her as an “Austrian agent” with excessive political influence.⁶² By accusing her of rampant sexual relations with both sexes, masturbation and even incest with both her in-laws and even her own son, she could be painted as a “true monster”—the antithesis of the model woman, wife and mother that a queen was expected to be—thus justifying her eventual execution on 16 October 1793.⁶³

Indeed, accusations of incest could be seen as the final straw in terms of sexual slander aimed at queens—accusing her of not only a lack of chastity but of an act considered far beyond the pale of acceptability in many societies. In Marie Antoinette’s case it was part of this attempt to throw in colloquial terms “everything and the kitchen sink” at her in

⁵⁷ Mark Knights, “MAYNWARING, Arthur (1668-1712), of Ightfield, Salop” in *The History of Parliament: the House of Commons 1690-1715*, ed. D. Hayton, E. Cruickshanks, S. Handley, (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2002), <https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1690-1715/member/maynwaring-arthur-1668-1712>

⁵⁸ ‘The Duchess of Marlborough to Queen Anne (1709)’ in *The Private Correspondence of Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough*, vol I (London: Henry Colburn, 1838), 244.

⁵⁹ Rachel Weil, *Political Passions: Gender, the family and political argument in England 1680-1714* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 214.

⁶⁰ “Description of the Royal Menagerie of Living Animals”, reprinted in Chantal Thomas, *The Wicked Queen: The Origins of the Myth of Marie Antoinette*, trans. Julie Rose (New York: Zone Books, 2001), 245.

⁶¹ Elizabeth Colwill, “Pass as a Woman, Act Like a Man: Marie-Antoinette as Tribade in the Pornography of the French Revolution” in *Marie-Antoinette: Writings on the Body of a Queen*, Dena Goodman ed. (London: Routledge, 2003), 130.

⁶² Harris, *Queenship and Revolution*, 185-89.

⁶³ Colwill, “Pass as a Woman”, 161. Lynn Hunt, “The Many Bodies of Marie-Antoinette: Political Pornography and the Problem of the Feminine in the French Revolution” in *Writings on the Body of a Queen*, 131.

terms of sexual immorality—the final accusation of incest in 1793 may have been an attempt to stymie any plots to restore the monarchy and make the queen seem utterly corrupted by sex and power.⁶⁴ With Anne Boleyn as well the accusation of an incestuous relationship with her brother may have been a way to make her completely beyond potential redemption. While Warnicke suggests a link between the incest charge and suggestions of witchcraft, Bernard claims that by combining multiple charges of adultery with incest Henry VIII would be so enflamed that he would want to “destroy Anne, rather than giving her the chance to make amends after some mild reproof.”⁶⁵

4. Depictions of Premodern Queenly Scandal in Modern Media

Thus far our examination of sexual slander directed at queens in contemporary sources has demonstrated what Duane W. Roller observed in his examination of Thea Mousa of Parthia, a royal woman who was accused of having an incestuous relationship with her son in the first century CE, that “she fell victim to some of the same prejudices against powerful women that affected Cleopatra VII and others, since she was remembered more for her personal life than for any political ability.”⁶⁶ We tend to think of our modern era having a different perspective on royal women of the past, informed by feminism, revisionist scholarship, gender studies, women’s history and queenship studies to revisit these women’s lives in order to highlight their political acumen and reveal their central place in the events and cultural developments of the period. Yet, while that may be the case in academia, modern popular culture still demonstrates a fascination with these women’s private lives, which still tends to eclipse demonstrations of their political ability, as Roller noted.⁶⁷ This last section will briefly consider how the sexual slander levelled at the premodern royal women in this survey by their contemporaries has been treated in modern depictions of their lives. It will demonstrate that we are still repeating these sexual scandals of the past in the modern era; indeed, given the post-sexual revolution attitudes which have led to more explicit representations of sexual relationships on screen and more open

attitudes to same-sex relationships, we are representing them perhaps in more graphic detail than ever.

4.1. Depictions of Premodern Queenly Scandal in Modern Media: Sexual Slander on Screen

The love lives and affairs of premodern queens has made rich material for modern novelists and filmmakers. The Affair of the Tour de Nesle or the daughters-in-law of Philip IV has been revisited in film and fiction several times, forming a part of Maurice Druon’s famous *Cursed Kings or Rois Maudits* novels which were adapted for television in the early 1970s and again in 2005.⁶⁸ Given the modern predilection with scenes of a sexual nature on film in a post sexual-revolution society, there is perhaps added interest in lifting material from premodern sources which would lend themselves to this format. As Carey Fleiner noted in her analysis of filmic representations of Isabella d’Angoulême, the allusions made by Wendover and Paris that Isabella was a temptress who kept John firmly glued to her bed still feature in representations of the queen. Fleiner notes a scene in *Robin and Marian* (1976) in which a very young Isabella appears wrapped only in a fur duvet, begging John to come back to bed in front of the papal legate and his chancellor, noting that just as in the medieval chronicles, the depiction of John’s infatuation with Isabella “represents John’s corruption, weakness and consequent lack of respect from his own men.”⁶⁹ Isabella appears clad only in a bedsheet again in the 2010 adaptation of the Robin Hood story starring Russell Crowe, reinforcing this highly sexualised depiction of the queen.⁷⁰

The HBO series *The Tudors* became notorious for its oversexed depiction of the Tudor court and Anne Boleyn was no exception to this.⁷¹ While Anne’s guilt is still hotly debated in both academia and in popular culture, we are still repeating some of the allegations thrown at her by her contemporaries. For example, in the film of Philippa Gregory’s *Other Boleyn Girl* where Natalie Portman’s Anne begs her brother to sleep with her so she can beget the royal son that will salvage her precarious position.⁷² Marie Antoinette’s supposed affairs continue to feature prominently in depictions of her life including her heterosexual relationship with Axel Fersen in Sofia Coppola’s 2006

⁶⁴ John Carmi Parsons, “Dammed If She Didn’t and Damned When She Did: Bodies, Babies and Bastards in the Lives of Two Queens of France”, in *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Lord and Lady*, Bonnie Wheeler and John Carmi Parsons eds. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 271.

⁶⁵ G. W. Bernard, *Anne Boleyn: Fatal Attractions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 147. See also Retha M. Warnicke, *The Rise and Fall of Anne Boleyn* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 192.

⁶⁶ Duane W. Roller, *Cleopatra’s Daughter and other Royal Women of the Augustan Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 127.

⁶⁷ See my discussion of this regarding the portrayal of early modern queens in modern film; Elena Woodacre, “Early Modern Queens on Screen: Victors, Victims, Villains, Virgins and Viragoes” in *Premodern Rulers and Postmodern Viewers: Gender, Sex and Power in Popular Culture*, Janice North, Karl C. Alvstad and Elena Woodacre eds. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 27-50.

⁶⁸ Claude Barma dir., *Les Rois Maudits* (Paris: ORTF, 1972-3); Josée Dayan dir., *Les Rois Maudits* (Paris: France 2, 2005).

⁶⁹ Carey Fleiner, “She is my Eleanor: The Character of Isabella of Angoulême on Film—A Medieval Queen in Modern Media” in *Premodern Rulers and Postmodern Viewers*, 96.

⁷⁰ Ridley Scott dir., *Robin Hood* (Los Angeles: Imagine Entertainment, 2010).

⁷¹ See Megan L. Hickerson, “Putting Women in Their Place: Gender, Sex, and Rape in *The Tudors*” in *History, Fiction and The Tudors*, William B. Robison ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 307-328.

⁷² Justin Chadwick dir., *The Other Boleyn Girl* (Los Angeles: Columbia Pictures, 2008).

film to explorations of her same-sex affairs in 2012's *Les Adieux à la Reine*.⁷³ Yet, while affairs still feature prominently in recent depictions of royal women, modern media has crafted more sympathetic narratives to try to justify, rather than condemn their actions of queens who may have been adulterous or taken lovers. For example, Katherine Howard's relationships have been interestingly recast in light of the #MeToo movement in the musical *SIX*, still playing in the West End and elsewhere, to reframe her in the song "All You Wanna Do" as a victim of men who sexually manipulated and abused her.⁷⁴ Yet, while we are not condemning these royal women and the choices they made in the same way as their contemporaries did, modern media is still repeating the sexual slander or scandals and focusing on the love lives of these royal women more than their personalities or political influence.

Even when modern films are depicting the lives of powerful female rulers, including Elizabeth I, Catherine the Great and Empress Wu, directors are still choosing to focus their lens on their love lives instead of solely recounting the political dynamics of their reigns. The many treatments of Elizabeth I's life often include her relationship with Dudley, querying if her appellation of "the Virgin Queen" was indeed accurate. While in some depictions demonstrate Elizabeth putting duty over sex, in Shekar Kapur's 1998 biopic *Elizabeth* is shown consummating her relationship with Dudley and in 2011's *Anonymous*, Elizabeth is rampantly promiscuous to the point that her advisor William Cecil was charged with spiriting away her many bastards.⁷⁵ While some of the racy elements of Empress Wu's life were censored out in some Asian countries from the recent 2014 series *Empress of China* featuring the megastar Fan Bingbing, her lovers feature in other treatments of the empress' life including a 2003 novel by Shan Sa which adds in tales of lesbian affairs during Wu's early days in the Inner Palace.⁷⁶ Finally, while the far-flung allegation that Catherine the Great took an equine lover has only showed up in recent portrayals as a cruel joke in the dark comedy *The Great*, the empress' affairs generally continue to dominate portrayals of her.⁷⁷ This can be seen in the promotional materials from Marlene Dietrich's 1934 *Scarlett Empress* to Helen Mirren's 2019 television series, even though there was more of an attempt in the latter series to depict some of the political challenges of her reign alongside her love life.⁷⁸

The 2018 film *The Favourite* was critically received and won a best actress Oscar for Olivia Colman for her nuanced depiction of Queen Anne. Yet the film, while making Anne sympathetic, did little to demonstrate her abilities as a regnant queen—focusing instead on her being in a tug of war between Sarah and Abigail who both wanted to dominate the queen and court.⁷⁹ The allegations of a lesbian relationship between Anne and Abigail, and even with Sarah, are not just alluded to, but depicted multiple times, including one scene where Abigail was accidentally forced to witness Sarah and Anne having sexual relations when Abigail was caught out in Sarah's room looking for a book. In contrast, Helen Edmondson's play *Queen Anne*, performed by the RSC from 2015-17 to similar acclaim took a far more subtle view of the possible sexual relationship between Anne and her favourites, though Sarah does repeat a few verses of "A New Ballad" to a horrified Anne.⁸⁰ In the play, which covers the entirety of her reign, Anne emerges as a ruler who grows into the role and shakes off the controlling hand of Sarah to find a more supportive ally in Abigail.

5. Conclusions

To bring this all together, we can see that the link between sex and the depictions of powerful women are enduring across time, place, and culture. The consistent expectation of premodern women, and particularly queens, to be chaste and faithful led to the queen's interaction with men and women to be closely scrutinized with any hint of impropriety leading to rumour and innuendo of sexual "incontinence". We have also seen that, real or imagined, allegations of sexual misbehaviour could be a powerful weapon to discredit queens or disarm them politically—and could be used as a justification for them to not only to lose their position but face exile, imprisonment or even death. Allegations of queenly misconduct could also be a powerful weapon to use against kings as well to tarnish their image or criticize their rulership; indeed it may be the husband, not the wife, who is the intended target of sexual slander. Finally, this study has demonstrated that even (or especially) in today's liberated, feminist, post-sexual revolution society, sex still sells; we are still arguably more interested in a queen's love life

⁷³ Sofia Coppola dir., *Marie Antoinette* (Los Angeles: Columbia Pictures, 2006); Benoît Jacquot dir., *Les adieux à la reine* (Boulogne: GMT Productions, 2012).

⁷⁴ Aimee Atkinson, "All You Wanna Do", *SIX: The Musical*. 6 Music Ltd, 2018.

⁷⁵ Shekar Kapur dir., *Elizabeth* (London: PolyGram Entertainment: 1998); Roland Emmerich dir., *Anonymous* (Los Angeles: Columbia Pictures, 2011).

⁷⁶ Clement, *Wu*, 241-51. Go Yik Chun dir., *The Empress of China* (Beijing: China Film Group Corporation, 2014-15); Shan Sa, *Empress* (New York: Harper, 2003).

⁷⁷ Tony McNamara dir., *The Great*, series 1, episode 4, "Moscow Mule" (Los Angeles: Thruline Entertainment, 2020).

⁷⁸ Philip Martin dir., *Catherine the Great* (London: New Pictures, 2019); Josef von Sternberg dir., *The Scarlet Empress* (Los Angeles: Paramount Pictures, 1934).

⁷⁹ Yorgos Lanthimos dir., *The Favourite* (Dublin: Element Pictures, 2018).

⁸⁰ *Queen Anne*, written by Helen Edmondson, dir. Natalie Abrahami, Royal Shakespeare Company, Stratford-upon-Avon, UK, 4 January 2016.

and in repeating old rumours about their supposed sexual affairs than renovating their reputations and restoring the focus to their political agency and activity.

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