

Dorota Babilas

Uniwersytet Warszawski

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5055-2741>

From Britain's Most Unloved Queen to the Favourite? Film Representations of Queen Anne

When Queen Victoria was born in 1819, her maternal grandmother, the Duchess of Saxe-Coburg-Saalfeld wrote in a letter that: "The English like queens."¹ However, it seems that Queen Anne (reigned: 1702-1714), the last of the Stuarts and Victoria's predecessor as the sovereign, despite many great achievements of her reign has not attained the kind of legendary status associated with some of the other British female monarchs, especially Victoria and Elizabeth. The cultural image of Queen Anne has been wholeheartedly negative. Ever since the 19th century she has been condemned as physically unattractive, intellectually dull, unable to give her dynasty an heir, and bullied by an unscrupulous bevy of ambitious favourites in political matters.

As I have already observed in another article,² there are many characteristics that link Anne to more illustrious (and appreciated) queens. Like Elizabeth, she was the last scion of a once powerful dynasty; with her childless death the reign of the Stuarts ended and a new royal family – in this case the Hanoverians – was invited to the British throne. However, unlike the Virgin Queen who made a political point of her refusal to marry and bear children, Anne was a devoted wife to Prince George of Denmark and strove all her life to produce offspring. If measured by the number of pregnancies alone, her fecundity would exceed even Victoria's. Unfortunately, whereas all of Victoria's nine children reached adulthood, Anne's seventeen pregnancies most often ended in miscarriage or stillbirth, and the few children who survived died very young. The last hope of the Protestant branch of the Stuarts, Prince

¹ Sydney Lee. *Queen Victoria. A Biography*. London 1904, p. 11.

² Dorota Babilas. "Queen Anne's Cultural Afterlife" in *Exploring History: British Culture and Society 1700 to the Present. Essays in Honour of Professor Emma Harris*. Ed. Lucyna Krawczyk-Żywko. Frankfurt am Main 2015, pp. 11-13.

William, Duke of Gloucester, succumbed to pneumonia in July 1700, just a few days after his eleventh birthday.

Concerning her intellectual ability, Queen Anne was not a prodigy like Elizabeth, but shared quite a lot with Queen Victoria. Both were brought up in a sheltered environment away from the hustle and bustle of the royal court; they had rather limited education and expressed no particular interest in the scholarly disputes of their times. Anne was not an avid reader, but neither was Victoria – the former, as Robert O. Bucholz observes, at least could blame her lack of interest in literature and the visual arts on poor eyesight.³ Both Anne and Victoria liked music and learned to play musical instruments. The recent studies by James Anderson Winn and Cedric D. Reverand emphasise the role of Queen Anne as patroness of artists, particularly composers and poets.⁴ There was a bit of physical similarity between the queens, too. Both Anne and Victoria suffered from obesity and practically became invalids in later life. The Victorians could be quite cruel in their descriptions of the last Stuart queen. James Anderson Winn quotes the clergyman Whitwell Elwin describing Anne as “ugly, corpulent, gouty, sluggish, a glutton and a tippler” in his edition of the works of Alexander Pope.⁵ Actually, most of these epithets were, at some later point in history, used to describe Queen Victoria as well, with the exception that Anne’s condition was exacerbated by gout.

Like Queen Elizabeth before them, Anne and Victoria were raised to be staunch and dutiful Protestants. This fact proved to be of the greatest political consequence to Anne who, when forced to take sides during the Glorious Revolution in 1688, decided to support her sister Mary and her Protestant husband William of Orange rather than her Catholic father, James II. She had a profound sense of obligation and royal dignity. She was the last monarch to personally preside over the majority of cabinet meetings or to deny the royal assent on an act of Parliament.⁶ She was also the last British monarch to practice the medieval custom of “touch healings” of her subjects for scrofula; one of the children touched by her in 1712 was Samuel Johnson.⁷

³ Robert O. Bucholz. “Queen Anne: victim of her virtues?”, in *Queenship in Britain, 1660-1837: Royal Patronage, Court Culture, and Dynastic Politics*. Ed. Clarissa Campbell Orr. Manchester 2002, p. 116.

⁴ James Anderson Winn. *Queen Anne, Patroness of Arts*. Oxford 2014. Cedric D. Reverand, ed., *Queen Anne and the Arts*. Lanham, MD 2015.

⁵ James Anderson Winn, op. cit., p. xvii.

⁶ Guida Myrl Jackson-Laufer. *Women Rulers Throughout the Ages. An Illustrated Guide*. Santa Barbara, CA 1999, p. 30.

⁷ Mary Wilson Carpenter. *Health, Medicine and Society in Victorian England*. Santa Barbara 2010, p. 58.

Lastly, Anne followed the example of Elizabeth as the Queen in whose name significant military victories were won. Even though she never rallied her troops the way Elizabeth famously had done, the military triumphs of Anne's chief commander, the Duke of Marlborough, against the French, fought during the War of the Spanish Succession at Blenheim (1704), Ramillies (1706), Oudenarde (1708), and Malplaquet (1709) were – at least in the opinion of the Victorians – comparable only to the heroic deeds of Henry V at Agincourt, Crécy, and Poitiers.⁸

However, as far as the Victorian perception of the personality of Queen Anne is concerned, it was largely influenced by the publication of the memoirs of Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough including long fragments of letters, which she had received from the Queen. Sarah was the wife of John Churchill, the first Duke of Marlborough – Anne's great military commander. For many years she was also the closest companion and attendant to the Queen, but their friendship ended in bitter separation in 1710, after which Sarah was determined to destroy Anne's reputation. The scandalous recollections of the former Mistress of the Robes were first published in 1742 as *An Account of the Conduct of the Dowager Duchess of Marlborough from her First Coming to Court to the Year 1710*, edited by Nathaniel Hooke. In a sense, Sarah paved the way for later vengeful socialites like Harriette Wilson, Karoline Bauer or Daisy, Countess of Warwick, who published the memoirs of their royal affairs. The printing of Sarah's story solidified Anne's popular image as an emotionally dependent woman with a strong suggestion of lesbianism about her, completely dominated by her female favourites. In 1839, a new edition of *The Memoirs of Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough* was prepared by Mrs A. T. Thomson.

The deepening conflict between the Queen and the Duchess was political, as Sarah supported the Whigs and tried to persuade Anne to grant more favours to them rather than the Tories. The final bone of contention, however, was personal jealousy of the Duchess over Abigail Hill (later Lady Masham), her distant Tory relation who replaced her as confidante of the Queen and Keeper of the Privy Purse. Eventually, the Queen had enough of Sarah's badgering and dismissed her from the court.⁹

Queen Anne's posthumous reputation gets even more interesting in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. A few new biographies of both the Queen and the Duchess were published, one of the most influential being Ophelia

⁸ Philip Henry Stanhope. *History of England Comprising the Reign of Queen Anne Until the Peace of Utrecht*. Leipzig 1870, p. 81.

⁹ Rachel Weil. "Royal Flesh, Gender and the Construction of Monarchy" in *The Body of the Queen. Gender and Rule in the Courtly World 1500-2000*. Ed. Regina Schulte. Oxford and New York 2006, pp. 93-94.

Field's *The Favourite* in 2003. Even before that, the sexual innuendo of the Duchess of Marlborough's memoirs, intended to compromise the Queen, bore unexpected fruit when Anne and Sarah, quite suddenly, were – for better or for worse – awarded the status of celebrity lesbians. Paradoxically, the same arguments that used to be raised in order to discredit the Queen, were now voiced to “save” her, in the minds of the public, from the sin worse in modern eyes than sexual indiscretion, that is being dismissed as boring and insignificant.

Ophelia Field notes that the process of creation of the positive image of Anne as the lesbian Queen of Great Britain started in the 1970s when “a collection entitled *Lesbian Lives* stated with absolute confidence that they [Sarah and Anne] had a physical relationship after 1692, if not before.”¹⁰ In Field's view, however, there is not enough evidence to support the claim that there was ever a carnal side to the intense emotional friendship between the two ladies. In her article for *The Gay and Lesbian Review* she writes: “it is unlikely that their relationship was ever physically consummated, not least because Anne was an invalid for most of her adult life: ‘exceedingly gross and corpulent,’ as Sarah put it, disfigured by smallpox, gout, and endlessly failing pregnancies.”¹¹ Ruth Herman also admits that although “Anne was indeed devoted to Sarah Churchill, and much has been made of the passionate letters she wrote to her,” she has found “no evidence at all of any direct accusations of homosexuality levelled against Queen Anne herself. In fact to all intents and purposes, Queen Anne was an exemplary wife and would-be mother. She was a well-loved queen, considered to be dutiful, Christian and Anglican, devoted to her people.”¹² Anne Somerset, in *Queen Anne. The Politics of Passion* (2013) concludes that the Duchess's accusations seem ungrounded, especially as she took great care to argue that her own relationship with the Queen was never erotic in nature: “The Duchess's allegations might carry more weight if she had been content to let it be thought that Anne's earlier feelings towards her had a sexual component, but she did not acknowledge the possibility. To her, lesbianism was a disgusting vice, with which she had never been tainted.”¹³

Representations of Queen Anne in works of literary fiction, both English and French, are relatively rare and mostly negative. At best, she is described as uninspired and mundane, at worst (as in Victor Hugo's 1869 historical novel

¹⁰ Ophelia Field. “Queen Anne's Ladies” in *The Gay and Lesbian Review*. 1 May 2004.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ruth Herman. “Dark Deeds at Night” in *Queer People: Negotiations and Expressions of Homosexuality 1700-1800*. Ed. Chris Mounsey and Caroline Gonda. Crambury NJ, 2007, p. 206.

¹³ Anne Somerset. *Queen Anne. The Politics of Passion*. London 2013, p. 934.