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Foreign Queenship, Royal Marriage, and the Politics of Transition in the Age of Shakespeare

Abstract

Foreign Queenship yokes an examination of the intersections of race and gender in staged representations of transnational unions to the formation of religious and political identity in the early modern period. Tracing the taxonomy as well as the instrumentality of difference in canonical and non-canonical plays, I focus on the cultural and racial identity of foreign queens and the vexed representations of their reproductive bodies. Mirroring and problematizing the historical matches they evoke, my project looks to these plays to ask key questions surrounding foreign royal women. It investigates their markers of difference; their interaction with power and the transformation that happens as a result; and the staging of their racialized bodies as loci of competing ideologies on which the success of a dynastic alliance, incorporation, and succession hinged. Each chapter pursues these themes across geographically disparate contexts, engaging directly with Spanish, French, and Portuguese texts as well as New World narratives. This comparative approach allows me to unpack how theatergoers understood monarchical couplings and the functionality of foreign queenship both inside and outside of England. By doing so, my project provides new perspectives on how thought on royal marriage contributed to political and religious theories of cultural mixing and racial purity, ideologies and practices of gender, and the regulation of sexuality.

Theoretical Contribution and Overview:

This project takes the recurring presence of foreign queens on the early modern stage—examples include Marlowe’s Catherine De Medici, Fletcher’s unnamed queen in *Queen of Corinth* as well as Shakespeare’s Margaret of Anjou, Blanche of Castille, Tamora, Cleopatra, and Katherine of Aragon—as its chief focus and puts their representation in dialogue with theories of conjugality and righteous queenly conduct. My focus on the destabilizing power of foreign queens within a matrimonial contract that prevents women from political and economic participation in the commonwealth contributes to a vigorous area of research that connects larger theoretical, religious, and political debates to issues of gender and race. In the recent volume of essays *Rethinking Feminism in Early Modern Studies: Gender, Race, and Sexuality* (2016), editors Ania Loomba and Melissa E. Sanchez called for early modern studies “to locate ways in which gender is also constitutive of racial and economic forms of privilege and hierarchy” (4).

My work addresses this gap and explores how the physical and imaginary presence of politically and culturally powerful foreign queens in early modern England prompted lively debates about Englishness and hospitality, national genealogies and the myth of origins, procreation and sexual desire, and conversion and apostasy. It does so by reading plays alongside medical treatises, sermons and polemic, Natural Law theories, conduct and cultivation books, husbandry and horticultural manuals, recipes and cookery books driven by a moral, intellectual, and somatic encoding of difference. The overarching aim of the project lies in revealing how these plays serve as both a reverberation of early modern racial and gendered logic as well as a site of its construction.

Organization of Chapters:

My project opens with an examination of the dominant theories about conjugality in the history of political and religious thought, including the “sexual contract” and patriarchalism. This overview focuses on how marriage as a political analogy between rulers and subjects worked within the parameters of a royal union and how contact with non-Christian populations engendered a new anthropological approach to marriage.

My first chapter examines two figures side by side: the demonized Margaret of Anjou in the *Henry VI* plays (1590s) and Anne of Bohemia in *Thomas of Woodstock* (1603-4), whose past identity is completely erased to accommodate her newly-acquired Englishness. My second chapter turns to the paradoxical portrayal of Queen Katherine of Aragon in *Henry VIII* (1613), which points to the inevitability of cultural mixing in the face of the anxieties of mixture and the construction of Protestant purity that bookend the play.

In my third chapter, I read Fletcher’s *Queen of Corinth* (1617) and *The Island Princess* (1621) with contemporary attitudes to the much-debated Spanish match and imperial expansion in mind to understand how the Jacobean theatre brought the domestic in conjunction with the colonial in more apposite ways, and by doing so, contributed to a fantasy of universal harmony, predicated upon the natives’ capitulation to a European patriarchal order, that wove together Old World dynastic politics and New World expansionist agendas. My fourth chapter sheds light on plays like Massinger’s *The Roman Actor* (1626), which sounded the alarm on the threat of a French Catholic queen at the beginning of the Caroline period; and focuses on how Queen Henrietta Maria’s royal entertainments, in turn, started as an assertion of her cosmopolitanism (1620s and 30s) and then transformed into an exposé of her Englishness (1640s and 50s) while in exile.

My fifth chapter examines Katherine of Braganza’s association with whiteness in royal wedding progresses (1663), which granted her cultural capital and consolidated the operations of existing hierarchies of race, nation, and sexuality. I conclude with an afterword summarizing how royal marriage became a reiteration of as well as a locus of inquiry around purity of the blood, gender and sexual desire, lineage and nobility, and loyalty and obedience.