

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by two delightful return guests from the University of Winchester, Dr. Ellie Woodacre, reader in Renaissance history, and Amy Saunders, a doctoral student in history and heritage, to discuss modern depictions of historical queens in TV and film, or as we're calling it, Queens on Screens. First, I'd just like to touch on something that we were chatting about before we started recording, which is that history scholars either love or hate historical media. Can you tell us why that is?

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[Listen to Ellie's episode on queens' sexuality and reputation](#) or [read the transcript](#).

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EW: It's one of those things. We all either have opinions about it, because obviously, when you see someone that you've been researching for many years on the screen, so you feel quite connected to them. And some people actually that I know feel almost quite protective of them, so want to kind of see them represented kind of faithfully, etc. So I think there's that kind of motivation. Sometimes that can mean that they don't want to watch it at all, because like they're terrified for how it's going to, like for example, a novel came out about Joan of Navarre, who I've written a biography of. And I literally have not been able to bring myself to read it, because I'm just terrified of what they've done to poor Joan. I'm sure it's fine, but you know, Joan is too close to my heart for me to go there. So I think we tend to fall one, we either are just desperate to see it all and digest it, or we're just afraid to kind of touch it. So I don't know what Amy thinks about that one.

AS: Yeah, no, I completely agree. And I feel like I can't watch a historical drama that's in my area with someone else, because if they're not a historian and I'm sitting there, they're not going to get the film, because I'm just sitting there going, "well, what about this" all the way through. A bit like Ellie, one of the ones that I am both excited for and a little bit nervous for is the new *Mary and George* TV series, which is, going outside the courtship, it's going to be about the Duke of Buckingham and James, VI and I. And I'm both excited that it's happening and really nervous. I think we might have a little watch party for that and like do it together.

EW: Absolutely. Yeah, it's funny, last night I was teaching my master's students in medieval queenship. And we were talking about regnant queens, we were talking about Sibylla of Jerusalem. And so I brought up some of *Kingdom of Heaven* and I explained to them that that movie came out right in the middle of when I was doing my MA dissertation on the queens of Jerusalem. So it was almost kind of eerie to be like writing about Sibylla and there she was on the screen with Eva Green playing her. So we were talking about that when last night. It was a kind of a fun one to go back to.

AT: Now, something that I believe Amy and I talked about last time she was on the podcast is how different depictions of queens are really reflections of the context. So the time and place they're made, the genre or style of the film. And so there's all of these different factors that are influencing how a story is told. So when we're getting into, obviously nothing is ever going to be 100% accurate because you can't. It's a fictionalized version no matter how close you try to get. And so what do you think the important questions are in terms of making a faithful adaptation? What needs to be correct? What needs to be faithful and true?

EW: This is a difficult one because I feel like this is one of the things that we as historians, like Amy was saying, we can be really annoying people to watch historical films with because we do pick out all the inaccuracies. But one of the things that I talk to my own students a lot about when we talk about this kind of scenario of queens on screen is two things. One, films and TV shows etc. are really in some ways portraying

the present age as much as they are the past. So we have to kind of think about that as well because they're really speaking to the audience as much as they are kind of trying to faithfully or not - I mean, some of them don't. Catherine, *The Great* show if you like, it says deliberately like, it's kind of riffing off her life. It's not trying to be faithful necessarily. And that's what makes it work in a way. But for me, what I always ask is not is it accurate? Do they get the dress right? Is this completely a completely accurate retelling of their life? I'm more interested in the why. So every time that a writer, a producer, an actor has made a change, omitted something from their life, portrayed them in this way and that way or their sexuality in this way or that way, they've made a conscious choice. And so that process of why and what does that mean and what significance does that have for the audience and how we consume and connect with history? That's what I'm more interested because it's really easy to say, "Oh, that's just wrong." Yes, absolutely. And they do often, but sometimes it's deliberately wrong. And then it's what why did they do that? Why did they skip over these important parts of their life or insert a fictional character etc.?

AT: Well, that brings up an interesting point because I like, I assume many people who will be listening to this am a huge fan of *Bridgerton*. And that's another one where they have made that deliberate choice to deviate from history, especially when it comes to the queen, because for anyone who doesn't watch *Bridgerton*, I feel sad for you. But also, the big historical inaccuracy, like very deliberately is that they made Queen Charlotte of African descent. And so she's still meant to be Queen Charlotte. She is still meant to be, I believe a German aristocrat who married into the royal family. But they very deliberately made that choice of making her someone of African descent. And there's a prequel series where they work that in, like they show how radical that would have been if it had happened and how it changed the lives of basically every person of African descent in England and presumably in the empire. It's a fascinating choice that Shonda Rhimes is made, which you have to assume that because she is a black woman, that was very much part of the decision-making process. So when we're looking at why storytellers choose things, it's also a fact that when we're looking at whose stories are told and whose are not, obviously we aren't seeing nearly as many non-white queens in Western media. I know at least one of our guests is a huge fan of K-dramas. So we have a bit more when it comes to the Asian queens, but there is definitely a racial bias. And I know Amy, we talked last time about Christina of Sweden was definitely queer. We can't necessarily label exactly how she was queer, but she was definitely queer. And obviously that's something that has often been left out of her story. So when it comes to the biases of the storytellers and the biases that they are assuming the audience has, how do you think that that impacts the stories that we're telling for better or for worse?

AS: Firstly, I completely agree with Ellie. It's the why that is really interesting. And then sometimes I'll say to someone, "oh, that felt a bit problematic." And I don't mean in terms of a historical accuracy point of view. I mean that they've gone and put lots of money into a film about powerful women, and then excluded their real life agency or depicted pregnancy and childbirth in a really not very nuanced way. And so, yeah, the why is so important. For me, it's not about the historical accuracy, because you want your audience to be engaged. You want your audience to enjoy it. But that doesn't necessarily mean that we need to leave out some of the really interesting things that did happen. So there's just some things that did happen that I always think, "oh, that would have fit with this theme. And you haven't put them in there. And that was a real life thing that would have been really interesting."

AT: And I will say a lot of the biases that we see that we hope you're seeing less of it nowadays, but you still see it from time to time, are just standard sexist nonsense. So for example, when we see Cleopatra as being overly sexualized, that's both this sort of exoticization of a woman of color. But it's also that's how the Romans wrote about her. So I feel like we're getting that, you know, exoticization/over-sexed foreigner, sort of a double whammy, where it's both historically accurate in the sense that that's how the Romans wrote about her, but

they were clearly biased. But then the people who are making films that are based on those writings are also biased because they want to sell tickets.

EW: Absolutely. There's a lot to unpick there. Like you said, it's thinking about the sources, it's thinking about the producers, it's thinking about the audiences. There's all sorts of reasons why queens on screen do not necessarily reflect the accuracy of their lived experience.

AS: Sometimes you look at it and I think, "oh, you've clearly done a lot of historical research for this, but you haven't necessarily done the historical research of the books that we would suggest" as kind of academics who, that's our thing, is those queens. So one of the ones that really stands out for me is the recent *Mary Queen of Scots* film where pretty much 90% of the time you see Scotland, it's really dark and like uncivilized and things. And you think, this is a misunderstanding of early modern Scottish culture that has been challenged multiple times in the last few decades. And yet we're still going, look at Elizabeth in the south with the lovely sunlight coming through, like the windows of Hatfield House and here is Mary Queen of Scots in the dark and the damp and it's all backwards and everyone hates it, which is very interesting that we're beyond that in the academic literature.

EW: Absolutely. And I can say exactly the same thing about *Elizabeth: the Golden Age*. I used to teach Golden Age of Spain and one of the things that we really deal with is La Leyenda Negra, the Black Legend of Spain. And it's exactly like you said, Elizabeth, you know, again, it's all sunshine and rainbows and everything is light. And then you go to Philip of Spain and everything is dark and he's surrounded by all these people in black who are clutching rosaries and it's again, it's such an ancient, nasty, unpleasant and untrue kind of characterization of an entire empire and people, etc. And I often call it to my students Elizabeth: the Black Legend rides again, because it really is using that light and dark and those tropes and those things again that we've all knocked on the head in terms of academia, but those same myths are still being perpetuated on film.

AT: And what's funny about that, I mean, there's a lot of funny things about that, but what stuck out to me about that was, I believe it was *The Spanish Princess* about Catherine of Aragon and it was one of the Philippa Gregory adaptations. And it very much does the exact opposite where it shows her in this beautiful paradise of Spain, where you've got the gorgeous architecture and the lovely weather. And then she's in England. And it's very much that, "well, this is gross."

EW: No, you're right. I guess we can have the same myth. And I think for an American audience as well, they might see England as kind of rainy, etc. Whereas an English audience, like I said, might be thinking of "England's great and other is bad," so yeah, I guess it depends on who it's talking to, right?

AS: It's really interesting thinking off on something Ellie said a minute ago about how dark clothing in productions that have like an English or a British side and then a Catholic country's European side. It's really interesting how black is then used as "this means they're Catholic. And this means that they're manipulating the situation. And this means that," you know, and Henrietta Maria in the 1970 Cromwell film, is just entirely in black and these big crazy ruffs. But all of her portraits, she's in beautifully colored dresses, but she must be in black because she must be the villain of the situation.

EW: It's true. I always think of her in yellow, those beautiful portraits of her in yellow dresses. Exactly. Yeah, yeah, yeah. So these stereotypes and myths are really kind of pervasive, definitely.

AT: And I think we're also getting into how we tell stories and so what those clothing and the lighting and

everything symbolizes and that cinematic element of how you're telling a story through the visuals, even if the visuals are not accurate. And I think this ties into a theme that's actually come up in other conversations about queens, which is that even the ones that we do see all of these stories about. So like Elizabeth and the rest of the Tudors obviously is the big one that everybody knows the stories and there's so much media around them. But even with those stories, no matter how many variations of them you get, a lot of times they are very much flattened into these archetypes. And so, you know, when we're talking about Catherine de Medici as the villain or Mary Tudor and Elizabeth being juxtaposed where Mary is the villain, bitter, old, unattractive, barren woman. And Elizabeth is the young, fresh, incoming queen who is the future of England. And it does seem like you see the same tropes generally applied to the same queens over and over again, or Marie Antoinette as this, profligate, flighty young woman, which I think we have been seeing a bit more nuance with, well, I think we've been seeing more nuance with hopefully most of the queens. But it does still seem like they are often shuffled into these archetypes.

EW: No, I completely agree. And it's something when I first started working on this myself, I kind of started to categorize them for just to make it too easy for my students actually to kind of digest, into victors, villains, viragos, virgins and victims. And it was something I was kind of playing with and it was something I developed ultimately into a publication. But I really found that there we're these boxes that we're putting these women into. And I think it is making these women maybe identifiable, recognizable, sometimes more approachable. Again, particularly thinking about the rise of kind of teen films, if you like, and how queens have been kind of fit into that with that kind of virgin dynamic. So I think it is sad that we still put them into these boxes. But again, it says a lot about us as a society. And again, how we're digesting and dealing with these women in power in a previous age by putting them into boxes and categories that we feel like, "Oh, I understand what this means." But it does absolutely flatten them. And in some ways that sometimes reduces their agency by just putting them into the this, they're going to be the victim or the villain, etchere. It's not actually doing them a great service.

AS: We then get the same parts of their lives and reigns recreated every time because they're going into those boxes. So you'll have a whole film about Elizabeth and Mary Queen of Scots, but it will still just do the same bit. And then ignore her before coming back to Scotland and ignore the bit where she's in prison in the north for ages. And it will have like one scene where she's conspiring. And then suddenly she's being executed. And what we've talked about before with Christina, everything always happens up to her abdication. There is nothing beyond that because it doesn't fit into the boxes that they're trying to tick about the narrative they're telling.

EW: Yeah, definitely. And actually one thing that I'm thinking about, I guess as I'm getting older, is the fact that we generally don't look at older queens on screen, if that makes sense, if we think of like Elizabeth I and Catherine the Great, right? There's been so many movies made about both of their lives, but they tend to be their early years, right? When they're young and nubile and hot and sexy, etc. And like, you were just saying, Allison, young Elizabeth, this whole kind of the rise of Elizabeth and, coming to the throne and all and Dudley and all that kind of stuff. But we get much less. There is the *Elizabeth and Essex*, Bette Davis thing, but we get so much less towards the end of their lives. And Catherine the Great, again, you get a lot of young Catherine, her coup and her rise to power. But we get a lot less the Crimean War and Potemkin and that kind of thing. And I would say, I guess I owe Helen Mirren something because recently, because she's just kind of grand dame, I feel like, who's played lots of queens at various ages of their lives. There have been recently, she's done one for Elizabeth and one for Catherine, where she did play her again, as this woman at the height of her powers in the kind of important bits of her reign that again, just normally get shunted out, if you like, exactly what Amy was saying, we tend to replay these same sections of their life again and again.

AT: Well, and speaking of the great Helen Mirren, she also did that amazing stage play at, I believe, the National Theatre, where she played Queen Elizabeth over the course of something like 60 years of her reign. And one of the things that I love about the modern era that we're living in is that there are so many film versions of stage productions that we can enjoy now. So you can see Helen Mirren as Queen Elizabeth on the stage. And it really is just impressive that she's doing that whole span of Queen Elizabeth II's reign. But I do feel like we are seeing more older queens and not just in the, dowager queen mother, who's a secondary character because it's really about, you know, their son or whatever. But specifically, I'm thinking of like *The Serpent Queen* is fairly recent. And I know we've had at least a couple old Elizabeth I films. I know we have because we've had so many Elizabeth films. I know they exist. I know I've seen them. I just can't remember what they're called.

EW: No, there are some. Like I said, the famous Bette Davis, *Elizabeth and Essex* is a really good example. And they have said, you know, the Cate Blanchett one is meant to be a trilogy. So apparently there is going to be a third installment. Again, when Elizabeth's older, I guess as Cate gets older to play it, I don't know if that's the logic, etc. So it's not that it's completely ignored, but there is a real imbalance, if you like. And Helen Mirren, again, also did Queen Charlotte in *The Madness of King George*, she was fantastic in that as well. So yeah, again, I just think as maybe as we're getting more menopause-friendly or older woman-friendly, hopefully we will be looking at, older queens. And actually, K drama is a great example of where the dowager queens are actually, they are the people doing the political maneuvering because again, in those courts, they are the matriarchs. They are the ones with the power. And sometimes they are the villains, but quite often they are the political movers and shakers, the Cerseis, etc. So that's a really interesting kind of shift in dynamic where in those dramas it's actually the dowager queen who's often the focus, if you like, or the key character.

AS: I wonder as well what we were saying about how the context of what we're living in changes, what we're depicting, the queen (*Queen Elizabeth II*) continued living for a very long time. And how much effect that had that we were seeing older royal women in the media on social media, doing kind of events and things up until relatively later part of her life. And so there's that, "oh, well, we can depict this. Maybe we will rethink how they were interacting at that age" - well, not at that age, most of them did not live that long, but at an older stage of their life.

EW: Yeah, and perhaps with Victoria, I think we could see that because there did used to be a lot of stuff on the young Victoria and Victoria and Albert, the love story, etc. But again, the Judi Dench one with *Mrs. Brown* and the one recently the kind of more colonial-themed one, etc. There was a bit more late Victoria, Judi Dench, again, Judi Dench and Helen Mirren, I guess they're flying the flag for older queens, etc. But yeah, I think you're right. I think there is something to be said as Elizabeth II's kind of life arc, if you like, perhaps drew out an ability to engage with or connect with older queens.

AT: And the Judi Dench one that you're talking about, that's *Victoria and Abdul*, right, where it's like a young clerk comes from India and ends up making friends with the queen, which is actually based on a real story.

EW: I think you're right. There are a lot of long-lived important queens. And again, we're not helping them out by just looking at one bit of their life. So it's good that we're starting to kind of pull out their lifespan.

AT: I do feel like we have to acknowledge though that a lot of queens didn't make it to old age. So we've mentioned Marie Antoinette, we've mentioned Mary Queen of Scots, like just to be fair, long-lived queens are not necessarily the norm throughout history. I mean, most of Henry VIII's wives didn't make it very long, even

the one who survived. Other than Anne of Cleves, they were all dead within like a few years of him at the latest.

EW: No, and actually that kind of brings us on to something else is that we love the death of queens. I mean, again, the early modern period is kind of ripe with queens that are executed. And actually that has become huge fodder for film. And in some ways, that has almost dominated their stories as well. That this fact, I kind of explain, it's like the Titanic when you watch these kind of films, you know it's going to happen, you know Titanic, the boat is going to go down. You know, if you watch film about Anne Boleyn or Lady Jane Grey or Mary Queen of Scots or Marie Antoinette, that she's gonna kick the bucket and it's gonna happen. It's just a question of what are they gonna do? How gory are they going to go? How much are they going to show? Or is it just going to be alluded to, etc. And it is that always builds up to the kind of denouement at the end. But yes, absolutely. And I think that is again, that can sometimes dominate their story, a violent death.

AS: It really reminds me of *Six* the musical because they say a lot in there about like, I did all these other things, just because I got executed, like there was all this other stuff happening. Or when Anne of Cleves is talking and she's like, "well, you realize that afterwards, I owned this palace and I did all these things" and so either the death or their divorce or the death of their husbands. Because I find that with Catherine of Braganza, Catherine of Braganza goes up and does loads post-Charles II's death, but it's like, oh, he's dead. So, so is she, nothing happens to her after that. And it's like, no, she goes and becomes the regent of Portugal. That's fairly significant. But we're not going to talk about that because Charles is dead. And the important thing is the man in her life.

EW: I think Amy's touched on something really, really important there is we're also really obsessed with queens' love lives. And again, sometimes we are doing a disservice to their power, their agency, their political acumen, etc, by just focusing on did Elizabeth I sleep with Robert Dudley or not. And how many affairs did Catherine the Great really have and all these kind of things. We're not actually, again, engaging with these women as rulers, as powerful sovereigns. And just like Amy said, by focusing just on the man in their life and their relationship with him, we're not seeing them as individuals and we're not seeing their whole life story as well. So I think there's definitely been an emphasis as kind of the post-sexual revolution here, as there is more sex on screen, again, their lives and their sex lives have become increasingly kind of a part of the narrative in a way that they just weren't in the golden age of Hollywood.

AT: Well, do we think that that's "sex sells" or do we think that that is giving them more dimension in terms of acknowledging that women can be sexual and can still be powerful? Because if it's at the expense of her agency and her power, definitely, I see where you're coming from. I agree that that media exists. But I also don't want to imply that they can't coexist because one of the things that we talked about last time when we were talking about Christina of Sweden was exactly this, where they gave her some nonsense love story that was heteronormative. And it's like, "what, this doesn't even make sense! What are you doing?"

AS: There were two, there's the first one from the 1930s, where she meets this Spanish ambassador when he doesn't know she's queen, and they spend the night together. But it's all very implied because it's the 1930s. So it's all just scenes of a bed and the door closing. And then she gives up her throne in that one for him essentially. And then he dies. And she's like, "Oh, well, I'll go off anyway into my perfect Mediterranean ideal lifestyle." But it's all been motivated by a man. And then you get *The Abdication*, which is the one that came in the '70s, where she has already abdicated, and she's having this conversation with a cardinal. And it's basically just about them checking that she's really Catholic to before they let her into Rome. But then she sort of falls in love with the cardinal and he kind of falls in love with her. But then he becomes pope. So he's

suddenly out of reach, as if he wasn't already out of reach as a cardinal and to an ex-queen. So yeah, the second one has a bit more to it in terms of her, other aspects of her life. But both of them are very much driven by that, "let's add a man in here and make this a romance." Well, we didn't really need to.

AT: And so how would you say that that compares with the much more recent film, *The Girl King*?

AS: Yeah, so in that one, we see her kind of exploring for the first time her sexuality and realizing that actually she likes women and realizing that that isn't necessarily compatible with her position as queen and the expectations on her as queen. But there are other multiple layers, again, as you go through the three films, they get more layered in terms of her agency and in terms of what she's interested in. So there's this great scene where she's going through a room of all the things that her army has plundered from Poland. And she's going through them like, "wow, look at this book and look at this thing" and you can see the other aspects of her patronage and her personal interests in art and literature and things coming through. So they're all very different to each other. And you can clearly kind of put them in order just by looking at the synopsis in terms of what we were saying earlier about how it's reflecting the present and what we deem appropriate in the present to put on film, but also the kind of social action of the present. So yeah, you can definitely, you can definitely just put them in order straight away from the synopsis.

AT: And I think this is getting back to an earlier conversation that Ellie and I had on queens' sexualities. And the idea that a queen is very much, like her first duty is to bear the heir. And you simultaneously have a woman who is inherently sexualized in that way, but is also meant to be presented as pure and chaste because, if she's sleeping around, we can't guarantee that the heir is truly of the royal line. And so I think there is this weird dichotomy. It's like the virgin/whore dichotomy in one person. I feel like the whole insistence on that chaste public appearance means that like a lot of women, many queens have deliberately been sort of de-sexualized in their public image because when they are seen as sexualized, there is punishment and possibly a revolution and craziness. But I do like seeing at least modern takes, generally speaking, I find are positive. So when we're looking at something like *The Great*, because, something that I've talked about in different queen conversations is that these were often like teenage girls who better have been virgins when they got there. And so their sexual experience is very much dependent on the guy that they were stuck married to. And I feel like *The Great* in particular has a very good depiction of what that would have been like for essentially a teenage girl who'd been thrust into that situation with a guy who does not care about her, doesn't care about her happiness. But interestingly, in this portrayal, I'm not saying anything about how accurate it is, but he cares enough about her satisfaction to let her have a mistress, like a man mistress, as long as they know for a fact that he is infertile and cannot threaten the line. And so it is really fascinating to see her sort of, like we were saying about Christina in *The Girl King* is that, sort of sexual awakening and understanding that this can be pleasurable and, how to take your own pleasure and, all these ideas that up until quite recently would have been completely unbearable for men to think that women were thinking about.

EW: No, fair enough. And I think actually you brought up something. I think as we are showing more of queens' sex lives on screen, we're seeing the good, bad and the ugly. So we are seeing, again, there are some explicit, pleasurable sex scenes. But there's also more depiction of what you were just saying. The fact that most of queens' sex lives were probably not great because, again, you're stuck with someone that you didn't choose, that you might not have any feelings for. There may not be any chemistry between you and yet you have to produce an heir. And in some cases, there are scenes of effectively marital rape and the depiction of queens, which is really hard to watch. But again, in some ways might be more accurate than, I mean, I'm not saying that they didn't have great sex lives, they might have done. But yeah, given the fact that a lot of them were,

again, like you said, shipped off very young, sometimes having to start their sexual experience younger than maybe they should have. I mean, look at poor Margaret Beaufort, right? So, that is a real thing to consider. And I do think there has been a bit more realism to show that as well, as the kind of affairs and the Axel von Fersen and Marie Antoinette scenario.

AT: I'm sorry, I did really enjoy *The Serpent Queen*. So I'm just going to keep bringing it up. This is actually just one long ad for *The Serpent Queen*. But I do think *The Serpent Queen* did that side of it really well also because I don't know if you've seen it. But the first sex scene is again, she's a teenage girl. She presumably doesn't really know anything about what's meant to be happening here. But you've got a bunch of old men of the court watching them try to have sex for the first time. And it is incredibly awkward. And you then come to find out that she's also being manipulated by his mistress, which in turn sort of foreshadows their whole power dynamic that's just sort of a constant struggle until they find a way to work together. And so yeah, like you were saying, the good, bad, and ugly.

AS: That's always one of those scenes that resonates really creepily, negatively with us now, is whenever they have all the counselors in a room. And it happens in so many of the films. And again, as you say, because they're young women and sometimes they're also relatively young men. And we all just feel very, very cringe in that situation. It's a very awkward, yeah. So that's always really interesting if that then goes on a journey. But yeah, the *Charles II Power and the Passion* TV show they did, Catherine of Braganza is like fully in all of her white undergarments and she's like hiding under the duvet essentially, absolutely has no idea what's going to happen played by Shirley Henderson, who's quite short in comparison to Rufus Sewell. And it elicits that whole kind of, all this doesn't feel like something that I want to be watching, which is really interesting. Yeah.

AT: And with *The Serpent Queen*, it's not just that one-off of, "oh, that made me feel all sorts of uncomfortable feelings." It then continues because she had trouble conceiving. So you're seeing this both very clinical and very intimate recurrence where they are like, "okay, now try it this way, now try it this way" over the course of several scenes. And there's clearly no passion between these people. And there's like the emotional components as well where they seem to like each other well enough as friends. But this is not the kind of marriage that most people dream of if they're romantics. But this is her job. She knows that if she doesn't get the heir, she could be sent back to Italy. And there's nothing for her there. And so she's trying to do everything she can, including whatever the doctors tell her to, to get an heir. And it really speaks that that issue that we were talking about is like that is the core precarity of being a queen consort.

EW: Absolutely. And I think all this really speaks to something that actually has been a real discussion in the field recently, is this whole idea of privacy and what that means or what that was for the royal court. And these women live their lives in public. I mean, as we were just talking about again, their sex lives were observed. And again, first nights may have been watched, their pregnancies, their childbirth, again, giving birth in public, because it had to be verified that this child came out of the queen's body. It's that like the whole bedpan incident with Mary of Modena. So yeah, their lives, everything about their lives, even the most private moments could be public. But I think in a way, just kind of struck me that actually by putting these things on film, we're not letting any of their private lives be private, like for all time, does that make sense? Like we are still kind of breaking down that that public/private thing by kind of invading their private lives on screen.

AT: Okay, speaking of invading their privacy, what bedpan incident? Because I don't know what you're talking about and I need to know.

EW: Okay, so Mary of Modena is the second wife of James II. So James II's first marriage to Anne Hyde



produced Mary II and Queen Anne. But his second wife was Catholic and James obviously had become publicly Catholic. And so when Mary of Modena became pregnant, there was a real concern that again, this was going to create this new Catholic dynasty, that if she had a son, it would displace the two Protestant daughters and there would be this Catholic dynasty. And so she does have a son. And this effectively is the genesis of the Glorious Revolution effectively, but there is a debate about whether or not the queen actually had that child. And there was gossip and actually Queen Anne as Princess Anne was kind of feeding this gossip that they had brought in a son, that she hadn't actually given birth to the son, that they just brought one in conveniently. And so everyone had to be interrogated, everyone who is at the birth had to basically give statements of kind of what happened and did the queen actually give birth to a child and was it a boy and it was a healthy or was something smuggled in, etc. But it's a really interesting case of again, court gossip, politics, and also this whole issue about public and privacy, because obviously the queen was effectively giving birth in public, because it had to be verified that she was actually giving birth to a live healthy child.

AT: And there's all these stories about, the servants know before the king does that the queen isn't pregnant, because they're the ones who change her period sheets. And actually, just last time Amy was on here, we had a lot of discussion of Christina's potential genitalia, because that's also been a matter of some speculation, which my understanding from Amy is best guess is she probably wasn't intersex, it was just dark, because it was Sweden in winter. And when Christina was born, it was initially announced that it was a boy, but in fact, it was a girl. And so a lot of people have latched on to this as a way of saying, "you know, oh, well, maybe Christina was intersex." And yeah, we don't need to go all the way back into this, but my assumption is that she underwent a lot of very intensive medical exams throughout her life. And I feel like if she was intersex, there would have been some documentation of, their queen regnant's potential inability to bear an heir. But yeah, I respect where it's coming from, but I don't think it's likely, but that led to, however many hundreds of years later, we're talking about this woman's genitalia.

AS: Yeah, I think it's really interesting that we sort of have to have a reason or an excuse why a woman doesn't want to have children in these films. So, with Christina, there's got to be lots of reasons why she doesn't, why she abdicates and doesn't want children. And with Elizabeth, I think it's really interesting because Elizabeth I is the only one that we get who isn't depicted as like, the child being the end goal. But then when you look at the recent Mary Queen of Scots one, Mary is off there to one side having James. And then there's two like parallel scenes, and Elizabeth sat on the floor in dark clothes, just surrounded by lots of ribbons and things, they're all red. So it's like reflecting the birthing scene that you're also seeing from Mary. And it's like Mary picks to have the child and then everything else went wrong. Elizabeth put her duty above what she wanted personally, and then felt like she was always wishing that she had a child of her own. And a lot of the scenes in it are parallels in that way, which is basically being like, the queens can't have it all. They can't have a child and happily rule, or they can't have a child and keep their head, or they can't - yeah, which is really interesting. And with Elizabeth I especially, kind of that double of duty or child, then when we look at how the modern monarchy and things are represented in heritage, that comes through a lot again. There's always all these comments about, "oh, it's so important that they followed their duty and you think, but it's 2023, or 24 now, when we're talking about modern monarchy, what does that duty look like? And why are we still kind of harking back to someone who was around 400 years ago to make those comparisons?"

EW: So I think that was a really good point you brought up about Elizabeth I and how her childlessness has been portrayed. And I think that there's an interesting one that has followed some of the ebbs and flows of again, how we feel about, women not having children today, in that sometimes she is portrayed exactly like Amy was saying is being really sad that she's this kind of barren queen. Sometimes it's portrayed is her greatest strength that she's this powerful dynamic woman who doesn't need to have children, doesn't need to

have a man and etc. But then there's *Anonymous*, which takes that completely the other way and basically insinuates that she had loads of children. It's just it was Cecil's job to just kind of keep squirreling them away, kind of thing. So it takes completely the opposite thing.

AS: I haven't seen that. And now I want to.

AT: You do not want to see it - as someone who isn't even a historian, it annoyed me so deeply. So the premise of *Anonymous* for anyone who's considering going and looking up this movie is that Shakespeare was a frontman and Queen Elizabeth's illegitimate son - oh, sorry, spoiler - who is an aristocrat, actually wrote them, but can't publish them because he's an aristocrat and it would be bad for his image or something. And so he pays this uneducated actor, Shakespeare, to be his frontman. And it's been many years since I have seen it. And I am still dealing with the PTSD. It was very bad.

AS: I've heard a lot about the kind of the Shakespeare part. I didn't realize they were the same movie. Sounds like an interesting combination.

EW: And then interestingly, they have a mother-daughter pair portraying Elizabeth at the different stages of her life. So they got Vanessa Redgrave and I think it's Joely Richardson playing Elizabeth at the different stages of her life. But yeah, this is an Elizabeth who is effectively a harlot Elizabeth. But like I said, this kind of whole subtext that no, Elizabeth wasn't the Virgin Queen, she actually had loads of bastards and like Cecil was constantly having to deal with the fallout of her relationships. It's just a really interesting kind of flip on the way that Elizabeth promoted herself and the realities of her life. And also this whole issue about kind of how we negotiate childless queens effectively.

AT: It is ridiculous to me that the whole fact that women frequently died in childbirth and continue to frequently die in childbirth is not considered sufficient reason for a woman to be like, "no, thank you, I have power. So I don't have to do that. So I'm not gonna" or just, you know, I'm child free by choice. And I personally recommend it if that's your desire. So yeah, this idea that there has to be some reason or they have to be really sad about it and feel like something is missing in their life is a bit ridiculous. But that does get us into queens as mothers. So when we see depictions of the queen mother, the dowager, which I know we have a whole other episode about, the mothers of the kings, whether they be dowagers or not. But I feel like you do see a lot of interesting secondary characters, because usually when we see a queen mother figure, they are secondary to their son, the king in depictions.

EW: I have a good exception to that one. So there's a recent K drama series, *Under the Queen's Umbrella* on Netflix. And the central character is a mother and the whole thing is around motherhood. So basically the queen consort, I guess we would say, has these sons. And there is again a competition, basically whose son is going to be the heir. So some of the other concubines' sons and her sons, etc. Who's going to be the new crown prince because her eldest son, the crown prince, dies. And so it is all about motherhood and these different mothers and how they are maneuvering for their sons. And then the dowager queen, who is also messing up with that, etc. So really motherhood and the women and the central character is the queen who is a mother and all of everything that she does is driven by her desire to ensure that her sons will keep their place and will be at the head of the succession, etc. So it is a really interesting one, it's an unusual one where the mother is not the sidekick or the villain or the extra or the sympathetic person to play off of. She is the central character and motherhood is the whole driving engine of the plot.

AS: I feel like I need to go watch this now,

EW: Highly recommend.

AT: Ellie's gonna start her own royal K drama podcast.

EW: I have to. I'm a bit obsessed.

AS: I think that's really interesting just to say on the motherhood and pregnancy and childbirth. But aw well, as you say, a lot of these women died in childbirth or there was a lot of complications in childbirth. And that still doesn't seem to be covered in a nuanced enough way or a way that really deals with the complexity of the emotions. And some of that goes back to what we were saying about that public and private, their pregnancies and their fertility was so important to so many people. And then sometimes I think we forget that that's a personal experience as well, and that they're going through a lot of emotions that potentially are getting like 30 seconds on the screen and then off we go. And I haven't seen it, but everyone always says that the exception to that is *The Favorite* with the children being represented by the rabbits, which I haven't watched yet, I do need to watch. But I think that's really interesting as well that there's bits of women's bodies that we can talk about and there's bits of pregnancy in childbirth, we can talk about. But there's lots of things that we miss from an emotional point.

AT: And one of the things that comes up a fair bit on this podcast is issues with lack of documentation. And so in 2021, a film called *Amina* came out and it was about the Hausa warrior queen and it was criticized for historical inaccuracies. But the director responded that they just don't have sufficient archives and data for the historical events that were happening in Nigeria around this time. Like they just couldn't because they don't have the information due to various factors, largely colonization. But it does seem like particularly when we're talking about women's history, that's always going to be an issue where even if you are trying to be as historically accurate as possible, there is going to be that lack of documentation issue that keeps coming up. And maybe that's why we have so many things about the Tudors is because that's been extremely well documented. Whereas stories like *Amina's*, the records, if they ever existed don't survive today for the most part.

EW: I really enjoyed *Amina*. I thought it was good. I mean, obviously the inaccuracies is again, that's a whole, another issue we've kind of discussed earlier, but it was really interesting, it's one I recommend to my students. But yes, with queens always we're dealing with a lack of documentation. Theresa Earenfight's great article, "Highly Visible, Often Obscured" talks about the fact that queens were incredibly visible. But the sources relating to their lives are not as full or rich or as well-kept or as well-documented as that of the king. And there's all sorts of reasons and factors for that. But Eleanor of Aquitaine is a great example. So many books, so many fiction novels, so many films, *Lion in Winter*, all the rest have been made by Eleanor of Aquitaine. When you look at the actual sources available about her life, they're not as much as you would think given the amount of stuff that's been created around her life. So I would say that yes, in some ways it's easier to work with someone like Queen Victoria, where you've got everything, but then again Queen Victoria, I mean, a lot of her personal letters were burnt by her children. And there are gaps in the documentation even for her. So yes, it is easier in some ways to kind of talk about the accuracy thing or have more material to work with from someone who is more documented or more recent or more modern, etc. I don't think that stops stories from being told. But again, it's just like we do as historians working on queens, we're making a jigsaw puzzle and we don't have all the pieces. So we have to do the best we can and try and guess what the gaps in between might have looked like.

AS: And for some queens, we have loads of documentation or more documentation than others, and they still don't get their time in the limelight. So like Henrietta Maria is so rarely anywhere. And when she is, she is just

the villain. And as we said, like the Catholic in black sitting in the corner whispering into Charles's ears. And that's what we get. That's all we get. Despite there being so much material culture, so much, and so much written stuff from both sides of the civil wars and then so many of her letters that she's writing to Charles and he's writing to her. There is so much material, but it's almost like we don't want to deal with that for lots of other reasons that aren't necessarily to do with the types of sources that are more around like modern national identity and things like that. But I think yeah, if you've got less sources, you can be more creative with it. And hopefully people will be less likely to be like, "well, this is wrong" because a quick Google search won't tell you if it's wrong. Whereas with some of the queens where there are more things to look at, a quick Google search would make you go, "wait a second. Why did they do this?" So yeah.

EW: Yeah. And I think actually filmmakers in some ways like it better when they they have that room, like you said, because there are these gaps. I mean, Boudica is a great example. I mean, we have so little sources on Boudica. And most of them are Roman sources written by Romans that didn't even live in her lifetime, right? And yet God only knows how many films, new series, etc. have been made. We're constantly re-telling Boudica story. And in some ways, it's quite freeing for a filmmaker because it's almost like on the line between like legend and reality, that you can you can go for it because there isn't a source says, "no, she never did that," because we just don't know. So they can take the outline and color in, in whatever way they want to. So yeah, I think you're right maybe in some ways they prefer the queens that they can, that there is that freedom to kind of play around with a little bit.

AT: Well, I think we are hopefully getting into an era of more critical reading of the documentation that we do have. So like you mentioned, Boudica, it was Romans writing about her and not even during her lifetime, but well after. And, you know, Grainne O'Malley, the pirate queen from Ireland. My understanding is that basically all the documentation we have about her is from the English that she was actively fighting. And when we're talking about Cleopatra and the biases that were at play there. Just taking those things at face value, I think has always been an issue in different contexts, including scholarly as well as popular media. Look at the biases of the storytellers, don't just take them at face value.

EW: Yeah, it's absolutely true. And particularly when we're working on global queenship, there are so many early modern queens globally, including like Indonesia, for example, there's all these regnant women, we're never talking about Indonesian queens. But some of the information we have about some of the African and Indonesian queens, etc. come from the Portuguese, the Dutch East India Company, etc. So they are colonial observers and who are reporting on these women with their own very particular lens. And sometimes they are some of the only sources or documental sources that we have. But you're right, we have to be really careful. And as historians, we're constantly thinking about, okay, we'll hang on, what's the lens here and what's the bias? Filmmakers, again, are they using those sources with that same criticality?

AS: I think as well, like, what do they actually want to get out of it? Like, it's okay for them not to want to get the historical accuracy out of it. It's okay, it's entertainment. And it's informed by all those different things we were talking about earlier. But who are they trying to appeal to? I saw Ellie earlier mention *Reign* and that's totally like, I think I got through the first series and thought, "I can't be watching this." It's the bit where the queen has the extra child that's like living under the castle and I was like, "I don't know what is happening here." But they were trying to do something with that. And the same with the Marie Antoinette, where she's in like Converse and whatever, they're trying to do something with that. And you know that's not historically accurate. You don't have to be a historian sitting there going, "what are they doing?" That it's part of whatever they're going for. So, we don't just have to be like critical in terms of, "well, that was inaccurate or why did you do this?" Sometimes they have their own very legitimate reasons to do that.

EW: Yeah, you're absolutely right. And I always describe *Reign* as Mary Queen of Scots went to high school. I mean, it's a teen drama, right? It is almost ahistorical in some ways. And actually, if you read interviews with the actors and the producers, that is the vibe. Like Amy was saying, that's the vibe they're going for, right? This is meant to be something, to appeal to a particular audience in a particular way. And they've taken that genre of the teen scenario and just set it in Mary Queen of Scots' lifetime. But it's not necessarily meant to really be representing Mary Queen of Scots.

AS: I would have proper loved it when I was 15.

EW: Well, I've had so many queenship students come to me, either loving Philippa Gregory or *Reign*. And we have to have conversations.

AT: It is very much a CW teen drama. And anyone familiar with CW shows will know exactly that that is its own specific sub-genre. And *Reign* is very much part of it. But I do enjoy the ones where it is the very deliberate. So when we're talking about *The Great* being described by Hulu as anti-historical, but it's still blurring the lines of what's real and what's not, because a lot of the ridiculous stuff that you see in *The Great*, like the episode where someone's spreading a rumor that she had sex with a horse. That's real. Not that she had sex with a horse, but that those rumors were actually a thing. And so, while in *Bridgerton*, we know that the racial element is not historically accurate. We know that that was not a thing in any way. With *The Great*, I feel like it's more of a question of, I am constantly Googling to be like, "wait, did that actually happen?" Because I don't know. And my line for what is too ridiculous to be real is just obliterated.

EW: Yeah, and I think this is interesting. I think this is a recent phenomenon in that I think historical films and series, etc., about queens fall into different categories, right? There're the ones that are trying to be real, or at least selling themselves as the true story, etc, of so and so, right? There's that whole genre. But I think recently, you're right, there's been this new genre of riffing off historical character and doing it openly and deliberately, again, in the way that *The Great* does so well, saying, "yeah, we're having a bit of fun with it. It's okay. We're taking something that happened and kind of running with it in a different direction," kind of thing. And that's okay. And in some ways, I think that is quite nice because the inspiration is there. But because they're being open to say, "look, this isn't meant to be historically accurate," I think that is quite refreshing. And in some ways, better than one to say, "oh, this is a true story." And you're like, "no, it's not."

AS: I think the Queen Charlotte that followed season one of *Bridgerton*, I think they start that, don't they? Where they're, "this isn't real," like because of all the stuff that had happened when they did the first series, they then like tongue-in-cheek at the beginning of the first one have that at the very beginning. And those intro texts can be really interesting, because like Ellie says, when it says "this is a true story," you're like "eh...", whereas when it says, when it takes a more kind of comic approach to that, it's then like, okay, this is fine. They're not setting it up to be.

AT: But it is fascinating how the *Queen Charlotte* prequel season of *Bridgerton*, which I believe is what you were referring to. (AS: Yes.) It very much has that combination of we know the racial element didn't really happen. I'm guessing there was never actually a scene in the real Queen Charlotte's life where she was seriously contemplating climbing over a wall to escape her own wedding. But we do know that King George's mental illness, which is central to that whole season, and it is obviously brought up in the main *Bridgerton* series - that's real. Like, we know that's real. That's why there was the Regency. That's why it's called the Regency era, because he was not competent to run the country. And that's why there was a Regency. Anyone

who doesn't know where the term Regency era comes from, there it is. But it is really fascinating, that combination of what we know isn't real, what we know is real, and the stuff that we're not sure about as viewers who, unlike other people in this conversation, don't have a PhD in a history subject. And we're just sort of left to either wonder or do a lot of Googling.

AS: I like the lot of Googling, though, to be honest. I've always described it as a gateway drug. Like, if people go and watch those things or read those fictional books, and then that's the thing that gets them into museums, that gets them into history, that gets them thinking, "maybe I will go do a short course or a history degree," or "maybe I will read these books" or whatever, then that's amazing. I'm so here for all of that. So it doesn't necessarily have to be accurate, but as you know, when you're sitting there Googling and engaging with it and having a good time, I think that makes me happy.

AT: But then they end up in Ellie's class and tell her that they love *Reign* and Philippa Gregory, and she destroys their lives. (laughter)

AS: Yeah, but then Ellie turns them into PhD students who never leave, from personal experience. (laughter)

EW: But I think this is a really good way to kind of bring it to a close, because it makes us think about what the value of queens onscreen is. And I completely agree with Amy. I mean, so many of my students have come to me. And I was totally obsessed with Elizabeth Taylor's Cleopatra, when I was a little girl, etc., that these can be a gateway drug to learning more about history, learning more about queenship, learning more about the real women. And that's where it really works. If it helps people transition from, "I didn't know about this person, now I want to know more about this person. Now I'm really interested in the past in a way that I wasn't before." That is the wonderful thing about representing queens on screens, even when it isn't right. If it is that kind of gateway drug, that element to help you transition to maybe becoming a historian, then it's all it's a win.

AT: I will say though, I do have sort of a wish list of queens that I would love to see because obviously we have a white, English-speaking bias. And so we're mostly seeing films about white Europeans. There are a lot of Chinese films about women like Empress Cixi and Indian films about the Rani of Jhansi. We know you love the K dramas. So there are those options out there now, but there are still queens like Anacaona, who was a 1400s Taino tribal leader. She was a poet. She was a composer. She tried to maintain peace with the Spanish invading colonists. But then she was murdered with other tribal leaders when the governor thought that insurrection was brewing - like, where is her movie? Where is Artemisia of Caria? Because she was an antagonist in the *300* prequel and a seductress, ugh, of course, in the 1962 film *The 300 Spartans*. But I want her movie, and Artemisia II doesn't even get that much because she can't be incorporated into a story about men. And you were saying Elizabeth Taylor, playing Cleopatra. And I know there's at least one other example where a white actress, Flora Robson, played Empress Cixi in yellowface in the 1963 film *55 Days at Peking*, which centers three white characters in dramatizing the siege of compounds in Beijing during the Boxer Rebellion. So good job Hollywood. We love that. But as much as I love seeing films about Cleopatra, I want to see a film about Hatshepsut. And because, she was the, I guess, the equivalent girl king, Christina's Egyptian counterpart, where she wore a fake beard. And so archaeologists thought she was a man, but she was definitely a woman. So I just feel like there's all of these interesting stories, well-documented or not, that are being overlooked. And I think it's getting back into the whole franchise issue that we see in popular media, where it's easier, it's seen as a safer bet for Disney to make another Marvel movie than to make an original film. And I feel like that's sort of the same thing that we keep seeing in royal and historical dramas, is it's easier to put out something else about the Tudors than to present a "new character."

EW: Absolutely. You're absolutely right. And I think this is true of, of queenship studies more generally. I mean, one of the things I'm always saying is there are so many women whose stories need to be told. There are so many queens whose lives are equally exciting or even more so than the women that we're really familiar with. And Hollywood, you're right, tends to intensify that dynamic because they are just retelling the same stories again and again, Anne Boleyn and Elizabeth, Catherine the Great. And again, it does tend to be European queens, it tends to be the same stories again and again. So I am really excited about the globalization of cinema and series, etc. The fact that things like Netflix are giving us series from all around the world and stories that maybe we're not as familiar with. And maybe that will help crack open Hollywood, if that makes sense, in that way, because yes, there's a lot more women whose stories definitely need to be told. And I think Hollywood should come and chat with some, if they want some good stories, we've got plenty to tell them.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast, and remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.