



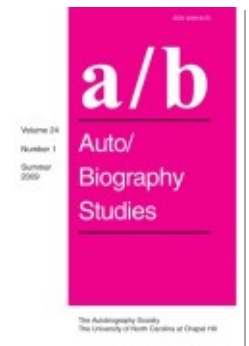
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Royal Portraits in Hollywood: Filming the Lives of Queens
(review)

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Royal Portraits in Hollywood: Filming the Lives of Queens. By Elizabeth A. Ford and Deborah C. Mitchell. Lexington: U of Kentucky P, 2009. 327pp.

Reviewed by Lucy Curzon

AS THEIR BOOK TITLE suggests, Elizabeth A. Ford and Deborah C. Mitchell investigate the representation of queens and queen-like figures in feature film and mainstream television of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This is a highly topical subject, given the longstanding but largely un-theorized popularity of royal representation in cinema and other media—exemplified by the critical success of the latest royal biopic *The Young Victoria* (dir. Jean-Marc Valée) released in American theatres at the end of 2009. Ford and Mitchell examine, from various perspectives, the ways in which representations of Christina of Sweden, Catherine the Great of Russia, Cleopatra of Egypt, Mary Stuart of Scotland, Marie Antoinette of France, Elizabeth I of England, and Victoria of the United Kingdom are made manifest and evolve over approximately eighty years.

Ford's and Mitchell's endeavor is inspired by developments in feminist theory and history. Using Carolyn Heilbrun's *Writing a Woman's Life* (1988) as the framework for their investigation, the authors examine the evolution of what might rightfully be called "the queen" biopic: they choose cinematic and televisual examples and discuss whether or not they succeed or fail in adequately "writing" the lives of royal women. Throughout *Royal Portraits in Hollywood*, Ford and Mitchell articulate a guiding concern, the need to evaluate how well these texts articulate "the whole person" behind the crown (6). Citing Heilbrun, the authors argue that "objectivity" or even a "well-rounded" depiction "hardly seems possible when [understood male] biographers routinely delete anger and 'unwomanly ambition,' erase female childhoods, 'mock' or undervalue female friendships, and rarely depict any but the most conventional male/female relationships" (6). Eradicating perceived "irrelevant" or "ungainly" facets of women's lives makes invisible and thus invalidates many of their struggles and successes and, importantly, silences connections that might be forged between historic and contemporary lives, ones that could illuminate the value of certain productive modes of leadership. More complete "[t]exts about the difficult lives of queens," Ford and Mitchell ultimately argue, "allow us to look back as we walk ahead toward new possibilities" (6).

The authors begin by comparing two biopics detailing the life of Sweden's seventeenth-century monarch, Queen Christina: *Queen Christina* (1933), directed by Rouben Mamoulian and starring Greta Garbo, and *The Abdication* (1974), directed by Anthony Harvey and starring Liv Ullman. Ford and Mitchell argue that the first film, a product of the Depression, focuses on establishing a difference between historical accounts of the queen herself and the "queen" of Hollywood, Greta Garbo. The film, in essence, presents a significantly altered version of the real queen and the facts of her life in favor of being a glamorous star vehicle for Garbo and a cinematic respite from everyday life for 1930s viewers. Forty-one years later, however, *The Abdication* (whose release date is coincident with burgeoning American women's movement) presents a much more "realistic" vision of the Swedish queen, examining her private torment as a female ruler and her eventual abdication and move to Rome. Comparatively, the films attempt to address the needs or represent the values of their more modern "publics," but in so doing present opposing views of Christina and her historical significance.

Continuing with an examination of films depicting the lives of Catherine of Russia, Cleopatra of Egypt, and Mary of Scotland, Ford and Mitchell arrive—in the fifth chapter—at their discussion of Queen Victoria, the longest reigning monarch of the United Kingdom. Their analysis begins with a discussion of *Victoria the Great* (1937), directed by Herbert Wilcox and starring Anna Neagle in the leading role. The authors argue that the film turns "away from personal narrative" (despite Neagle's own reading of Victoria's diaries in preparation for the role) and instead encapsulates everything in "neat [historical] vignettes, identified by dates and titles" (161). As such, it undermines the significance of various important influences on Victoria's leadership, including her childhood, her relationship with her mother and worries about her children, and her enduring grief at the death of her husband. Although Wilcox could never have understood the contemporary importance of understanding that "personal" lives are indeed "political" ones, *Victoria the Great* nonetheless points to the fact that cinematic biographies of female rulers in the 1930s tend to toe the patriarchal line. Comparatively speaking, however, John Madden's *Mrs. Brown* (1997), starring Judi Dench as Victoria, presents a very different view. This film privileges the later life of the queen and, particularly, the period of private mourning and seclusion she entered after Prince Albert died of typhoid fever in 1861. *Mrs. Brown*, in short, is "the antithesis of Wilcox's public view" (167). Although it does make reference to political events of the queen's reign, it is nonetheless structured by "Victoria's private, post-Albert hell from the inside" (167). In their final analysis of the chapter, Ford

and Mitchell discuss the BBC/A&E production *Victoria and Albert* (2001), directed by John Erman and starring Victoria Hamilton and Jonathan Firth. Ford and Mitchell indicate that this made for television mini-series depicts, like *Mrs. Brown*, much of Victoria's and Albert's private lives in flashback through the memories of the aged queen. Although Ford and Mitchell do not, disappointingly, pursue the conceptual or historical significance of this shift from public to private—between *Victoria the Great*, and *Mrs. Brown* and *Victoria and Albert*—they do suggest that the films, together, provide a much clearer image of Victoria as queen.

In the final chapters of the book, Ford and Mitchell examine the cinematic representation of Marie Antoinette through W. S. Van Dyke's *Marie Antoinette* (1938) and Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette* (2006) and, finally, the life of Elizabeth I through Michael Curtiz's *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* (1939), George Sydney's *Young Bess* (1953), Henry Koster's *The Virgin Queen* (1955), Shekhar Kapur's *Elizabeth* (1988) and *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (2007), and three television mini-series: *Elizabeth R* (1971), *Elizabeth I: The Virgin Queen* (2005) and *Elizabeth I* (2006). Like the rest of those included in the book, each of these analyses is not only well-written, but also a testament to the vast historical scope of Ford and Mitchell's efforts. As such, their book is generally a highly readable and informative account of how these female figures—queens and empresses, alike—are represented in the royal biopic.

But *Royal Portraits in Hollywood* likewise has its faults, sometimes glaring, including its over-reliance on Heilbrun's text as the foundation for its analysis and an inability to engage with film as a medium having qualities distinct from those of literature. With regard to the latter issue, for example, the authors focus on theme and character development almost entirely through the apparatus of literary analysis, as if filmic conventions were only minimally different from those used in written biography. Yet it has been well demonstrated since the early history of filmmaking that time-based media speaks in a multitude of distinct and very subtle ways, most of which remain invisible if its specific traits are not investigated. As such, one is left to wonder what other perspectives *Royal Portraits in Hollywood* might provide if Ford and Mitchell had conducted their investigation with issues of medium specificity foremost in mind. What new questions might the authors be able to ask about the patterns of portrayal evident in these representations of female protagonists if, for example, they had conducted an in-depth analysis of Mamoulian's framing or use of camera angles in *Queen Christina*? What more might we discover about the construction of gender in representations of Queen Victoria

if Ford and Mitchell had taken into account the interplay of music and editing in Madden's *Mrs. Brown*?

Not approaching film as a distinct medium is an issue that stems, ostensibly, from Ford and Mitchell's dedication to Heilbrun's text. *Writing a Woman's Life* is a work of literary criticism; hence, the authors' sometimes unmerited fidelity to the analytic paradigms set forth by Heilbrun often hinders rather than helps the work in meeting its objective of a thorough analysis of royal representation in a cinematic media. Although Heilbrun's is still a useful study, the authors might have considered works of criticism that address the visual as inspiration for their arguments. For example, Annette Kuhn's autobiographical text, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* (1995), explores film and photography as a mode of "memory work" to make manifest the history of her own life and those of other women. In particular, Kuhn's chapter on Alexander Mackendrick's 1952 film, *Mandy*, elucidates a model of integrating life writing and film, an artful formal analysis that is blended with Kuhn's own memory of seeing *Mandy* as a child and again as an adult and the ways in which these three different readings together inform cinematic meaning. Although not directly transferable to the case studies presented in *Royal Portraits in Hollywood*, Kuhn's work nonetheless provides a useful entrée, particularly in the way that it emphasizes "writing a woman's life" using cinematic languages.

Finally, the authors are not specific as to their use of the term *Hollywood*. It is unclear whether Ford and Mitchell mean Hollywood as the geographic location (and, by implication, "American"), or "Hollywood" as a discursive concept (referencing more generally notions of "stardom," "popular culture," "capital exchange," etc.). Without this clarification, the authors open themselves to question. For example, if Hollywood is understood as a location, Ford and Mitchell leave unaddressed the fact that a British director working in the United Kingdom—the case with many of the films Ford and Mitchell discuss—would have a different perspective on Queen Elizabeth I than would an American director working in the context of Hollywood. The former would be producing as a British subject, primarily for British tastes, thus incorporating socially and culturally specific understandings of gender; the latter would be producing from an outsider's perspective for an audience comprised of people familiar only as outsiders with British culture. Since this difference alone could change Ford and Mitchell's findings significantly, their oversight seems substantial.

Despite its faults, *Royal Portraits in Hollywood* is a much-needed contribution to the field of film studies broadly and genre studies particularly. Ford and Mitchell take many of the necessary first steps

required for future studies that will effectively incorporate the study of gender and its representation in considerations of the biopic.

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