



***The Lost Queen: The Surprising Life of
Catherine of Braganza, Britain's
Forgotten Monarch***

By Sophie Shorland

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The Lost Queen: The Surprising Life of Catherine of Braganza, Britain's Forgotten Monarch. By Sophie Shorland. London: Atlantic Books, 2024. ISBN 978-1-838956394. x + 339 pp. £20.

Appreciation of Charles II's queen consort, Catherine of Braganza (1638–1705) has been overdue, and in *The Lost Queen: The Surprising Life of Catherine of Braganza, Britain's Forgotten Monarch*, Sophia Shorland makes a valiant attempt to offer just that. The biography begins and ends in Portugal, a timely reminder that queen consorts were political agents of their home kingdoms. The early chapters set up the turn of events that led to Catherine's parents obtaining the Portuguese throne, set against the backdrop of wider European politics—including England's experimental Republic. Once Catherine arrives in Britain, the chapters play out thematically and chronologically, addressing the new queen's adaptation to court life, entanglement with the king's famed mistresses, and her own cultivation of a baroque court and chapel. The biography walks readers through key events like the 1665 plague, 1666 Great Fire, and the Popish Plot of the late 1670s (a false allegation that Catholics would assassinate Charles II and slaughter Protestants). There is also discussion of Queens, New York and Tangier (though Bombay—now Mumbai—does not receive similar treatment). The final two chapters recount Catherine's time as queen dowager in Britain and Portugal, respectively, before an epilogue that revisits modern perceptions of the queen on a more global scale. Throughout it all, Shorland ensures that Catherine of Braganza remains the protagonist of her story.

The Lost Queen shines where it places Catherine in an international perspective. Shorland clearly demonstrates why an Anglo-Portuguese match suited both parties and the ongoing utility of the Iberian kingdom to British policy. Delightful as well are the passages that bring to life the rich court hosted by Catherine, from salons to games and dances, and the value they provided as informal spaces in which to discuss politics. Shorland pushes for Catherine to be seen as a political actor (though this needed stronger emphasis) and highlights her presence at significant events. This biography also does well in remembering the importance of non-elite actors, from soldiers to sailors to merchants. The writing throughout is highly emotive and accessible, though the frequent asides to provide flowery descriptions could have been cut back; Catherine's brother's "rosebud mouth" particularly comes to mind (38). It is occasionally confusing what year the

narrative is at, but overall, the flow and ordering of chapters makes sense and provides a well-rounded telling.

However, for as much as Shorland declares her intention to abandon old tropes, she remains yoked to them. The Catherine of her book is social, fashionable, and informed (all refreshing takes). However, her main traits are still presented as being sad and awkward, a hypochondriac defined in contrast to her husband's mistresses. She receives the standard moniker of "pious," commonly assigned to Catholic queens in British history, without enough acknowledgment of the deep faith of her Protestant contemporaries. Similarly, the repeated (and increasing) jokes about Catherine's possibly feigned illnesses grow wearisome and lack the contextualization of late seventeenth-century medicinal trends of self-diagnosis. At times, the battle between the "old story" and Shoreland's narrative results in her seeming to contradict herself, unable to settle on whether or not Catherine was attractive, sheltered, or well-spoken. For as much as Shoreland's Catherine is present, she is also presented as an observer, despite evidence existing of her taking more explicit action.

Towards this end, a reassessment of Catherine has much farther to go. Much of the struggle with this book comes from the lack of rigorous engagement with recent historiography. While Hayward, Morton, Leech, and Corp do receive mentions (and the narrative becomes stronger for it), others are left out entirely, notably Eilish Gregory. Though Shoreland has a good range of manuscripts and sources in Portuguese, many other cited books are outdated. Most of her references for Mary of Modena (the Duke of York's second wife) come from a 1960s biography, describing the princess's marriage as almost accidental. This would have been improved by consulting John Condren's 2015 article on the match. Meanwhile, for as much as Shoreland references Catherine's Catholicism, the British Catholic community is oddly missing from her narrative. No mention is given to the English College of Lisbon, whose priests undertook teaching Catherine English and traveled with her to her new home—Shoreland even incorrectly claims at the start that Catherine "didn't speak a word of English" upon her marriage (1). Her role as the patroness of the Catholic faith in England, through chapels, books, gifts, and more, is barely referenced. And when it is, it often misrepresents the situation: true, subjects flocked to her chapels, but this was never *allowed* as Shoreland describes; Parliament repeatedly issued statements banning them under threat of imprisonment (117, 198). Certain periphery characters also remain stereotypes, with Anne Hyde, the Duke of York's first wife, being particularly maligned while the Duke himself is framed as grasping for the crown.

Errors also appear throughout the biography. Some small: her birthdate is originally given as 1640, not 1638 (12); Portugal Street was part of Piccadilly, not Jermyn (132). Others more glaring: her age is rendered incorrectly in several passages concerning her fertility (25, 167); her married secretary is described as her confessor (182). Other absences are more worrying. In her discussion of piracy in the Mediterranean, Shorland only describes Algerian corsairs as taking slaves. She does not mention the reciprocal enslavement actions taken by English pirates. In other sections, Shorland advances radical new interpretations, such as a friendship between Barbara Palmer and Catherine, but fails to back them up (116). This theory is particularly frustrating as later, she dismisses the idea of closeness between Catherine and another mistress, Louise de K rouaille, despite more evidence existing for this relationship (186). Nell Gwyn is essentially missing despite Catherine’s care for her children. Absence also effectively describes the final chapter, where Catherine’s turn as regent appears in a blink-and-you’ll-miss-it paragraph, drowned out by more tellings of the dowager queen’s illnesses. Finally, there is a missed opportunity to discuss what the introduction of tea culture did for material objects and customs in Britain, or to engage with Catherine’s role in North African and Indian colonization.

Shorland’s biography successfully departs from the tearful, menstruating, barren queen of twentieth-century narratives but leaves us with a melancholic fashionista with protruding teeth, “smiling when she felt like crying,” resigned to her husband’s affairs, and eternally longing for Portugal (207). A present, but inactive player in a narrative that barely scrapes the surface. Catherine was a beacon of hope for Britain’s Catholic minority, and a symbol of that same threat to many of its Protestant majority. She successfully maintained her crown, and later that of her brother and nephews, against plots, wars, and changing global boundaries. She consistently engaged in politics to protect her various interests. She patronized illegal book trades and various Catholic orders, showed kindness to her husband’s illegitimate children, and served as an esteemed regent of Portugal. Sophie Shorland’s *The Lost Queen*, while a step forward, thus demonstrates that Catherine of Braganza is still waiting to be fully found.

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