

## BOOK REVIEW

*Love, Madness, and Scandal: The Life of Frances Coke Villiers, Viscountess Purbeck*, by Johanna Luthman (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2017; pp. xxi + 208. £20).

While the fields of gender and women's history continue to flourish for the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, unique stories such as that of Frances Coke Villiers (1602–45) have a special part to play in enriching our understanding of the collective female experience through a study of the individual. In nine, relatively short, chronologically organised chapters, Frances Coke Villiers's life is reconstructed here by Johanna Luthman, through the careful stitching together of archival material with printed primary sources and select secondary literature. The result is a largely engaging narrative of an elite early modern woman, whose path intersected with some of the most prominent legal, political and ecclesiastical careers of Jacobean and Caroline England, but whose turbulent history has almost entirely escaped the attention of modern scholars.

The book opens in August 1598 with a vignette of the funeral of William Cecil (Elizabethan Secretary-of-State and great-grandfather of Coke Villiers) and the first chapter does a good job of charting Frances' 'contentious origins', from her parents' marriage in late 1598 to the eve of her own wedding in 1617. The colourful account of the toxic union of her parents, Edward Coke, Chief Justice of the King's Bench, and the much younger Elizabeth Cecil, Lady Hatton, is not only entertaining but also perhaps explains why their younger daughter did not conform to contemporary expectations of gendered behaviour.

Chapter Two is dominated by the wrangle between Frances's parents over her marriage to John Villiers, brother of the rising royal favourite George, later Duke of Buckingham. The prelude to the September 1617 nuptials could scarcely have been more tempestuous, with both parents vying for control of the bride-to-be and the latter, at one stage, fearing that her future husband might break into her lodgings and rape her, in order to ensure that the marriage actually took place (the female dishonour associated with premarital sex—even if non-consensual—being nullified if both parties to the 'liaison' were betrothed at the time of the event and later married). It did, and it was another unhappy one, as shown in Chapter Three, since John Villiers suffered from bouts of what was probably mental illness and also, possibly, impotence. Frances spent long spells of time apart from her husband and as a result, the Villiers family, especially Buckingham, increasingly came to control the considerable assets which she brought to the marriage, to her detriment.

Given this background of mental instability and financial difficulty, few modern readers would excoriate Coke Villiers for having taken a lover, but contemporaries were less tolerant of her illicit relationship with Sir Robert Howard. The affair, already underway by 1623, forms the subject of the book's fourth chapter. Since early modern women had few viable options for preventing unwanted pregnancies, it is not surprising that within a year of the affair, Frances was expecting Howard's child. That she managed to give

*EHR*

birth in secret in late 1624 attests to her considerable skill, as well as her estrangement from her husband and his family. She spent most of the rest of her life trying to get her son, Robert, acknowledged as a Villiers, and the legal wrangle which ensued once the affair (and, particularly, the birth of the illegitimate child) became public knowledge is described in Chapters Five and Six. When the adultery case was brought before High Commission—the most senior ecclesiastical court in England—by Buckingham, Frances was sentenced to do public penance, a punishment to which she refused to submit, only avoiding capture by escaping and going into hiding. She also refused to give up her relationship with Howard.

The closing chapters of the book (chs. 7, 8 and 9) trace how Coke Villiers managed the feat—impressive for any woman, in any age—of evading the authorities and vowing to continue her relationship with Howard, while also remaining technically married to John Villiers. When her case reached High Commission a second time, in 1635, William Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury, took a dim view of her scandalous behaviour, placing her in custody and sentencing her again to do penance. Determined not to bend to the will of the courts, Coke Villiers refused several demands to leave prison to appear before the Commission for further sentencing and, in the end, managed to escape from incarceration dressed as a man. She then made a dramatic flight to France, which separated her from Howard for several years, before finally returning in 1641, newly converted to Catholicism, to be reunited with her former lover. By this time, Laud was himself facing prosecution, and the ecclesiastical authority which he had tried so hard to uphold no longer had any purchase. This enabled Coke Villiers to live the rest of her life in relative peace and quiet, despite the upheaval of civil war.

Throughout this volume, Luthman orients the reader in contemporary social *mores*, explaining briefly the ways in which Coke Villiers's conduct transgressed expected gender norms and referring appropriately and efficiently to conventional attitudes towards female and male behaviour. In so doing, she draws upon her own prior work on love, sex and marriage in this period, as well as other material in the field. This exacts a measure of balance on a book which is otherwise dripping with the rich stuff of scandal. And yet, despite all of the above, one is left feeling a little short-changed. It is perplexing that a book which explores the effects of such powerful phenomena as manipulation, control, passion, adultery, punishment, imprisonment, escape and exile on an early modern woman can still be a little disappointing. Perhaps the only explanation lies in the fact that, while it may be about a very unconventional woman, the work is, ultimately, a rather conventional biography.

LEONIE JAMES

*University of Kent*

doi:10.1093/ehr/cey225