Princesses as Exiles? Foreign Consorts at European Courts 1550–1750

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Abstract

Until very recent times it was usual for kings and princes to take their consorts from a foreign territory. The young woman who was chosen left home, often as young as thirteen or fourteen years of age, and never laid eyes on her homeland or on her family again. She often spoke a different language to her husband and her new court, and she sometimes professed a different religious denomination. This article asks how apposite is the term ‘exiles’ to describe these women. It asks whether the consort had a choice in the matter of her new abode or not; whether her departure was traumatic and her reception in her new homeland pleasant; what her life and circumstances were in her new domicile; whether she could take valued possessions and people with her; whether she was able to maintain contact with her homeland and family; and whether she felt herself to the end of her days to be ‘in exile’.

One of the primary meanings assigned by The Oxford English Dictionary to the word ‘exile’ is “enforced residence in some foreign land.” Whether or not this is the result of “penal expatriation or banishment,” the exiled person is not living abroad by choice and is debarred from returning home.1 The Roman poet Ovid (Publius Ovidius Naso), dying in 17 CE in Tomis2 on the Black Sea, banished there by Emperor Augustus nine years previously, counts as an exile according to this definition; James Joyce, choosing to live in Zürich and Trieste between 1904 and 1920 and constantly to-ing and fro-ing between these cities and Ireland during this time, does not.

There is a large literature on the subject of exile, a considerable proportion of which concerns itself with the huge displacements of people during

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2 Nowadays Constanța in Romania.
the twentieth century, particularly during the Shoah. Standard works on the subject have been written and edited by, among others, J.M. Ritchie himself\(^3\) and by Ian Wallace and his colleagues.\(^4\) This article considers a very different group of people who have never, to my knowledge, been considered as exiles before. These are those women who went abroad as the foreign consorts of kings and princes during the period 1550–1750. Whether the compulsory sojourn of any exile in a foreign land is bearable or not is influenced by a number of factors: whether the exile has a choice in the matter of his or her new abode; whether the departure is traumatic and the reception in the new homeland pleasant; what the life and the circumstances of the exile are in the new domicile; whether the exile can take valued possessions and people with him or her; whether the exile is able to maintain contact with the homeland and with loved ones who remain behind and, finally, whether the person concerned always has the feeling of being ‘in exile’. This article will consider whether foreign consorts can be regarded as exiles or not and whether the factors mentioned above impinged on their lives in their new homes.

Princesses were sent as brides to foreign courts for dynastic reasons. A king or a prince had to marry in order to produce an heir and thereby secure the future of his house, and this meant that he had to take a bride from a different territory to his own. Only by going outside his own borders could he find a young woman of sufficiently high rank to become his consort, for the only women of equal rank to his own at home would be too nearly related to him to be considered. As a general rule, the higher the status of the bridegroom, the more certain it was that he must marry a foreign bride, so that a sovereign virtually always married a king’s daughter from another country. What determined the choice of bride was the political or territorial gains that the marriage would bring. An example of the former is the double union forged in 1615 between Louis XIII of France (1601–1643) and his sister Elisabeth of France (1602–1644) with another brother and sister, namely, Anne of Austria (1601–1666) and Philip IV of Spain (1605–1665).\(^5\) These four royal persons were


\(^4\) *Aliens – Uneingebürgerte: German and Austrian Writers in Exile*. Ed. by Ian Wallace. Amsterdam: Rodopi 1994 (Amsterdamer Beiträge zur neueren Germanistik 37); *German-speaking Exiles in Great Britain*. Ed. by Ian Wallace. Amsterdam: Rodopi 1999 (Yearbook of the Research Centre for German and Austrian Exile Studies Vol. 1); *Fractured Biographies*. Ed. by Ian Wallace. Amsterdam: Rodopi 2003 (German Monitor 57); *Dislocation and Reorientation: Exile, Division, and the End of Communism in German Culture and Politics: In Honour of Ian Wallace*. Ed. by Axel Goodbody, Pól Ó Dochartaigh, Dennis Tate. Amsterdam: Rodopi 2009 (German Monitor 71).