

A Royal Affair -- Behavior

King Christian VII's behavior was an extremely prominent part of his rule. Due to his mental illness he was often manipulated by the people who surrounded him. This page offers an analysis of some of those people and their effect on King Christian VII and his reign. It also addresses the historical accuracy of King Christian VII's depiction in the film.

King Christian VII

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Alexander Roslin, Portrait of King Christian VII of Denmark. 1772, Wikimedia Commons.

(https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/3b/Christian_VII_1772_by_Roslin.jpg) was born to Queen Louise of Great Britain and King Frederick V of Denmark. When Christian VII was only two years old, his mother died, and his father was an alcoholic for the remainder of his childhood, often neglecting him.(1) Much of his time was spent with Ditlev Reventlow, his teacher. According to author Hester Chapman, Reventlow subjected Christian to his 'hardening' treatment which included flogging, threatening, mocking and terrifying Christian. These beatings would leave Christian foaming at the mouth and convulsing.(2) Some historians argue that his difficult childhood led to his childish and

unstable behavior throughout his life.

During his reign, Christian was actually mentally ill. Scholars have hypothesized that he was schizophrenic and bipolar, or suffered from porphyria, a genetic disorder, that parallels the symptoms he had, as well as those of some other members of the royal family. He had sudden outbursts and often the people around him could not control him, except for his personal physician, Struensee. A diary was kept by Struensee recording Christian's behavior and highlighting his "inconsistency, indifferences to and disgust for all things." He also wrote about Christian laughing uncontrollably at inappropriate times. Struensee diagnosed Christian's problems with that of 'a bad habit' (frequent masturbation), and cold baths were described as a remedy.(3)

In the movie *A Royal Affair*, Christian VII was portrayed more as an ill-behaved child than a person with severe mental illness. He seemed to have very little respect for others and especially his family members. The film did not depict Christian suffering from sudden outbursts, but rather he would use irrational thinking skills or come to bizarre conclusions. This does not reflect the historical record that Struensee wrote as discussed above. The behavior of the king in the movie was a very watered down version of what the historical sources suggest he was actually like. The film creators did not use the historical record of Struensee's diagnosis of excessive masturbation. Instead they showed him going to brothels, or infrequently having sex with Caroline, instead of pleasuring himself. In one scene he is shown in a bathtub talking to Struensee, which would be accurate to the historical record about a prescribed remedy for Christian. It must be said that though many believe he had schizophrenia it is hard to determine what exactly he suffered from, since there is no doctor today that could correctly analyze his behavior back then. Scholars agree, however, that he had severe mental and emotional issues that greatly impacted his life and made him a prime target of manipulation. Johan Struensee was vital in helping King Christian VII do the best he could with the situation he was presented with.

Johan Struensee

Johan Struensee was a very bright, intelligent doctor from Germany. The council of advisors for King Christian VII thought he would benefit by having a personal doctor on his tour across Europe, and the connection between these two was so strong that Struensee was appointed as Christian's royal physician. Struensee and Christian grew quite close, and he became one of the only people the King trusted. Their bond strengthened and Christian consulted him on government matters.(4) It is almost as if Struensee played the role that a queen, or present-day First Lady to the president of the United States might play. King Christian trusted Struensee and that displayed a positive relationship occurred in Christian's life.

Caroline Matilda

Caroline Matilda was the daughter of Frederick Prince of Wales and Augusta of Saxe-Gotha. While growing up the greatest grief Caroline felt was when she left her sister Louisa to become Queen of Denmark. When Caroline left England for her future in Denmark as queen she was homesick and depressed. Once serving as queen she encountered a variety of challenges.(5)

When Caroline reached the meeting point with the king the first person to greet her was Madame de Plessen, her appointed lady-in-waiting. Once she met Plessen most of her homesickness was forgotten about because of the introduction to someone and something new, and the development of a close friendship with de Plessen.

Christian sometimes sent a messenger to Caroline to ask whether she was undressed and waiting for him to join her. When Madam de Plessen learned about this she was shocked and had Caroline tell him that she had to finish her game of chess before she went to bed. Christian was not happy with de Plessen, since she frequently had Caroline tell him that they needed to finish their game of chess. de Plessen had Caroline do this to wait to see if Christian would change. She wanted Christian to know that Caroline wasn't just another whore for him but his wife. Christian did not like this situation. On a trip to Charlottenlund Christian had asked Madam de Plessen to ride in the same carriage as him. During the ride something happened that made the carriage tip over. Since this was Christian's plan he knew what was coming. Christian was able to jump off the carriage into a nearby snowdrift before the carriage crashed. Christian's attempt to "save" de Plessen included rolling her in the snow, pulling her dress up and throwing snow in her face. He did all of this while many of his friends watched.(6)

Throughout the film Caroline Matilda's is depicted with frequent mood changes. First she was happy to be with her husband. Then many of her books were taken away and she started to fall into a deep depression. This was caused by both her books being taken away and by the challenges of adjusting to a new culture.(7) She also had to deal with the erratic behavior of her husband. In the film Christian is seen shoveling snow into Madame de Plessen's face while on a walk with Caroline and a few other ladies and telling her that he never wanted to see her again. The film accurately depicts Caroline's moodiness. In the beginning she is depressed because of the books being taken away but then when Struensee eventually gives her some books, and later as her relationship with Struensee developed, her depression decreases and her mood becomes happier.

The Council and Juliane Marie

The film portrays the council under Christian VII as taking advantage of him. It is known that Christian had a mental illness that required the council to take over some of his

duties. Since Christian was the king he was the final one to sign all the documents in order to have them approved. The council sometimes took advantage of Christian's love of just signing documents to sometimes slide documents past him that they wanted to implement. Christian liked to sign the orders because it made him feel important and that he was doing something for the country.

The night that Brandt, Struensee and Caroline were arrested the council and Queen Juliane went to the king to ask him to sign for their arrest. At first Christian was hesitant because Struensee was his former physician and friend. But when Juliane said that Brandt would be a part of the group that was arrested he decided to sign it because Brandt had never treated him well.(8) In the film the council is shown trying to convince Christian to sign the document while he is in his bedchambers. Christian yells at them that he will not sign the document. The council tried very hard to get him to sign the document and finally succeeded. This is one of the strongest examples in the film of the court's power over Christian and their ultimate influence on the country.

- (1) Alberto Cavanna, Andrea E. Cavanna "Christian VII of Denmark and Tourette Syndrome: fact or fiction?" *Neurological Sciences* (October, 2014):1611. DOI: 10.1007/s10072-014-1804-7.
- (2) Hester W. Chapman, *Caroline Matilda: Queen of Denmark* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, inc, 1972): 47.
- (3) Johan Schioldann, Villa Awang Awang, Melayang-Pejeng Kaja, "Struensee's Memoir on the situation of the King (1772): Christian VII of Denmark." *History of Psychiatry* (May 2013): 230-33. DOI: 10.1177/0957154X13476199.
- (4) Ibid., 228.
- (5) Hester W. Chapman, *Caroline Matilda: Queen of Denmark*, 40,42,45.
- (6) Ibid., 56-58.
- (7) Ibid., 55.
- (8) Ibid., 136.

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