

A Royal Affair -- Chronology

The film *A Royal Affair* accurately portrayed the historical events surrounding the royal scandal in Denmark during the reign of Christian VII. The film was effective in telling this story in the correct chronological order, and displayed critical dates for main events throughout the film. While the film does show key political events, the story primarily revolves around the relationships of King Christian VII, the Queen Caroline Mathilda, and the king's doctor Johann Frederick Struensee. Though the film uses history as a vessel for this heavily romanticized tale (<http://scalar.usc.edu/works/reel-norden/media/Royal Affair poster.jpg>), the bulk of events are based in fact.

Chronology and Accuracy

The film's narrative starts with Caroline Mathilda and Christian VII meeting in 1766. During this year, Christian became king and the pair were also married. At the time of their marriage, Caroline was fifteen and Christian was seventeen.(1) The film shows that Caroline is shocked by the king's eccentric behavior. This likely was the case; Christian was mentally ill--probably schizophrenic.(2) Despite Christian's apparent



The movie poster for *A Royal Affair* gives a possible viewer an excellent representation of the focus of the film. In the center, in the light, are the three main characters of the film. While Christian VII is technically the middle-man of the relationship, the plot is told through Catherine's eyes. History goes on behind them, and the viewer is primarily focused on their relationship.

reluctance to visit the Queen's bedchamber (he initially appeared slightly more willing in the film than historical record suggests), Caroline bore a son, Fredrick VI in 1768.(3)

A few years after the birth of his son, Christian embarked on a journey to England and France. He was supposed to spend two years abroad, but he returned after eight months, likely because he was tired of showing restraint to make a good impression on his foreign acquaintances. This timeline was not clearly represented in the film. However, the film did note Christian's acquisition of a new physician while traveling. German-native Johann Friedrich Struensee returned with Christian as his permanent doctor in 1769. Struensee had a remarkable influence over the troubled king. However, as the movie accurately portrayed, it took him longer to charm the queen. Finally, after vaccinating young Fredrick VI for smallpox, Caroline finally warmed to the doctor.(4)

Soon, however, Struensee was not just a doctor. In 1771, Christian gave Struensee the title of Privy Cabinet Minister, granting the doctor political power.(5) However, even before that Struensee had been active in Denmark's politics. He gathered together a group of like-minded men, and together they formed a new government administrative system. Between September 1770 and December 1771, Struensee and his group passed over 1,800 new cabinet orders. Among these orders were laws that freed the press of censorship, forbid torture, started public health programs, and ended serfdom.(6) The film shows Struensee's rise to power well; it even portrays Christian signing the Act of Succession, an order Struensee designed that allowed him to pass laws without Christian's signature.(7)

However, Struensee was not just getting involved with politics. By 1770, Struensee and Caroline were lovers, which was one of the main focal points of the film.(8) Likely as a result of this, Queen Caroline had another child, Louise Auguste, three years after Fredrick VI.(9) The film correctly portrays speculation from both the public and the nobility that Christian VII was not the father of Louise Auguste. Although there was no proof that Christian VII was not her father during the time of these accusations, both Queen Caroline and Struensee admitted to having an affair while they were on trial for treason. The film makes Louise's father obviously Struensee because the story is told as if through Caroline's eyes. Most scholars write under the assumption Louise's father is Struensee.(10)

Partially because of the affair, the people soon hated Struensee. Also, he was not Danish; he was a foreigner, and his new laws were enacted suddenly. He did not think how his new legislation would affect the people.(11) The royal censorship of

the press had been discarded under his leadership, so rumors of the affair spread quickly. To prevent more of Struensee's radical plans, the council members and the king's step-mother took action. Their scheme took place on January 16 and 17, 1772 during a masked ball which was portrayed in the film. The conspirators got into the King's bedchamber and made him sign papers warranting Struensee's arrest.(12) In the movie, Christian VII was reluctant to sign the the papers because of his attachment to his doctor. This is not implausible, because Struensee clearly had an influence on the king. Eventually, however, Christian signed the papers; his mental illness made him susceptible to manipulation.

Struensee was taken away from the palace, arrested, and sentenced to death. Both Struensee and fellow conspirator, Enevold Brandt, were executed in 1772, and their bodies were displayed outside Fredrikson Palace.(13) In the movie, Struensee's story ends at the execution block; he sees Caroline's face just before the axe flies. This sequence shows the blend of fiction and fact present in the film-- it shows the historical event while still tying it to the romanticized plot.

Queen Caroline was also taken away. She was brought to Kronborg Castle in Elsinore; however, she only went after being allowed to take her daughter.(14) In the film, her son is taken from her, and she is allowed to keep her daughter with her because the baby was still nursing. Historically and in the film, she eventually had to leave the baby behind and was exiled to Celle, Germany for being an accomplice in Struensee's plan.(15) She died in 1775, a few years into her exile. She was 24.(16)

Historical Divergences



Caroline's daughter is shown reading Caroline's letter. Historians have never proved Louise Augusta is Struensee's and not Christian's. If a letter had existed, its contents would have likely put an end to any debate.

Like many historical films, *A Royal Affair* drifts somewhat from history to simplify the plot, to keep the movie in a reasonable timeframe and to entertain the viewer.

The first divergence is the framing of the movie. It begins and ends with Caroline writing a letter to her children about the events portrayed in the film. In the letter, she addresses her affair with Struensee. While many historians believe Louise Augusta's father is Struensee, she never was declared illegitimate

and is officially Christian VII's daughter (http://scalar.usc.edu/works/reel-norden/media/B_Royal_Affair_letter.png).(17) If Caroline actually wrote a letter like

this and it fell into the wrong hands, Louise Augusta would have been delegitimized; however, it frames the story nicely, and instantly establishes a relationship between the viewer and a kind, motherly depiction of Caroline.

Another example is the treatment of Schack Carl Rantzau, Struensee's friend. The film depicts their falling out as a product of Struensee's new regulations diminishing the value of Rantzau's estate. Historically, the end of their friendship was much more political. Neighboring powers did not approve of Rantzau as a replacement for another key political figure, and Struensee was highly pressured to remove him from that position.⁽¹⁸⁾ The scene where Struensee refuses to clear Rantzau's debt creates an animosity from Rantzau to Struensee. Thus giving Rantzau a reason to hand Struensee over to his political foes and dramatize his capture.

During Struensee's captivity the filmmakers completely omitted the memoir he wrote on Christian VII's condition.⁽¹⁹⁾ Omitting the memoir does not affect the accuracy, but rather the relationship between the king and his physician. Christian is shown excited to pardon his friend, and Struensee faces torture and confession. It creates a stark contrast for one of the final scenes of the movie.

Another simplifying inconsistency was the use of language in the film. The film was entirely in Danish, but most of the upper class typically spoke German, and all government proceedings were performed in German. In actuality, Struensee never learned Danish. It contributed to the public disapproval for Struensee because it made him seem too pretentious to learn the "people's language."⁽²⁰⁾ Keeping the film in one language is easier for the viewer and since the common people rarely are present, it does not take away from the plot very much. Overall, the film depicts the events of Christian VII's reign and his relationships with his doctor and wife. Some events are romanticized to appeal to modern audiences.

The focus of the film is not on the politics of the time, but rather the relationship between the three characters and how the political events of the time fit into their relationship. Viewers can get a good sense of the influence Struensee had over the developments of the time and enjoy the romantic plot of Caroline and Struensee's affair.

(1) Bent Rying, *Danish in the South and the North*, Vol 2 (Copenhagen: Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1981), 212-213.

(2) Johan Schioldann, "'Struensee's memoir on the situation of the king' (1772): Christian VII of Denmark," *History of Psychiatry* 4, no. 2 (2013): 227-247,

Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost (accessed February 4, 2017).

(3) *Rying, Danish*, 213.

(4) *Rying, Danish*, 215.

(5) Schioldann, "Struensee's memoir."

(6) Byron J. Nordstrom, *Scandinavia Since 1500* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 103.

(7) *Rying, Danish*, 217.

(8) *Rying, Danish*, 216.

(9) John Christian Laursen, "Spinoza in Denmark and the Fall of Struensee, 1770-1772," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 61, No. 2 (2000): 190, accessed September 22, 2014, 10.2307/3654024.

(10) Laursen, "Fall of Struensee," 190.

(11) Nordstrom, *Scandinavia Since 1500*, 105.

(12) *Rying, Danish*, 218-219.

(13) *Rying, Danish*, 220.

(14) *Rying, Danish*, 219.

(15) Laursen, "Fall of Struensee," 190.

(16) *Rying, Danish*, 220.

(17) Stella Tillyard, "Heads and Tales," *History Today* 62, no. 8 (August 2015): 54, Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost (accessed February 8, 2017).

(18) Donald Dewey, "The Danish Rasputin." *Scandinavian Review* 100, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 80-87, accessed September 22, 2014. information for this actually drawn from eight pages?

(19) Schioldann, "Struensee's Memoir."

(20) Dewey, "The Danish Rasputin," 84.

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