

PAUL D. QUINLAN

THE IMPORTANCE OF QUEEN MARIE IN ROMANIAN HISTORY

Who was the real Queen Marie?

When I first thought about writing a brief article on the importance of Queen Marie in Romanian history, at first I thought it would be so obvious I could do it off the top of my head. But after giving the question serious thought it became increasingly clear that there is still a great deal historians do not know about the real Queen Marie. Finally, I had to conclude that she is really as much of an enigma as her equally puzzling son, King Carol II of Romania. Consequently, in this brief article I will present a sketch of this elusive Queen, mention some of her accomplishments, and in the process probably raise more questions than anything else.

Why do I feel Queen Marie is such a puzzle? During her own lifetime she was one of the best known and admired royal figures in Europe, if not the world. She will probably go down in history as one of the most popular queens of the twentieth century. Yet, since her death in 1938, historians have largely overlooked her. This is especially true of contemporary Romanian historians, who occasionally give her a passing glance, if they even bother to mention her at all, in writing about the first three decades of the twentieth century. Western historians have paid more attention to her, but still the elusive Queen seems to have evaded their grasp. Part of this is because until recently it was difficult, if not impossible, to get at the relevant material in the archives in Romania.

But this is only one side of the story. The Queen herself did an excellent job of covering her own tracks over those aspects of her life she did not want known, both in her published and unpublished diary. Moreover, like many people who keep a diary, especially one meant for publication, the Queen portrayed herself as she wanted to be remembered by posterity, regardless of the historical accuracy. The two most recent biographers of the Queen, Terence Elsberry and Hannah Pakula, relied heavily on the Queen's diary in their studies. So it came as no surprise to me that their overall views of the Queen were similar. The Pakula biography, entitled *The Last Romantic*, is clearly the best study done so far of the Queen and the only study to use the

Queen's unpublished diary. Yet, unfortunately, Pakula does not read German or Romanian, so the sources in those languages, both published and unpublished, were virtually ignored. And to make sure that Pakula understood the "truth" about the fairy-tale Queen and prevent her from flirting with heresy, two self-appointed guardians of the sacred legend of Queen Marie, George Duca, an old friend of the Queen, and Princess Ileana, the Queen's youngest daughter, supplied her with information and, at times, worked closely with her. In short, a definitive biography of Queen Marie still waits to be written.

What was Queen Marie really like? Her family credentials were impeccable. Marie Alexandra Victoria, Princess of Great Britain and Ireland, was born in 1875, the eldest daughter of Alfred, the Duke of Edinburgh, the second son of Queen Victoria of England, and Marie Alexandrovna, the only daughter of Tsar Alexander II of Russia. She was brought up under the close supervision of her stubborn, independent, somewhat eccentric Russian mother, who was determined to make her a queen. Her mother's determination resulted in Marie marrying at the early age of seventeen and to a man she hardly knew and did not love. The man was Crown Prince Ferdinand of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen, the heir to the Romanian throne, who himself had been forced to give up a girl he had been madly in love with only shortly before. The uniting of the Romanian throne with those of England and Russia enhanced the prestige of the Romanian royal family and, for better or for worse, set the course of Marie's future life. It is also interesting to note that the reason Marie's mother rushed her daughter into marriage at this time was to head off another suitor, the future King George V of England. In essence, Queen Marie of Romania came within a razor's edge of becoming Queen Marie of England.

As Crown Princess of Romania, Marie was a classic fairy-tale princess. Highly intelligent, charming, outgoing, fluent in several languages, along with a gorgeous figure, golden hair, the bluest of eyes, and a beautiful face, the Crown Princess was considered one of the most beautiful women in the world. If there was one area Marie's critics were in agreement on it was her beauty. "She was the most beautiful woman I ever saw," wrote one acquaintance¹. The Empress Frederick described her as "a dream of beauty. I have seldom seen so lovely a creature. ... She is a perfect picture"².

1. Princess Anne-Marie Callimachi, *Yesterday Was Mine*. (New York: McGraw Hill, 1949), p. 64.

2. Sir Frederick Ponsonby, ed., *The Letters of the Empress Frederick*. (London: Macmillan, 1929), pp. 312-313.

Although when she married she did not even know where Romania was, gradually she developed a deep love for the country and its people. Artistic and hardworking, Marie helped to popularize Romanian folk art, skillfully decorated the interiors and gardens of several Romanian royal palaces, designed her own clothes, and wrote more than fifteen books. Typical of Marie's exotic and provocative interior decorating was her bedroom at Cotroceni, described by one viewer as a "cross between the inside of a church and a harem".

All of this helped to popularize the Romanian royal family both within and outside the country. To millions of poor, illiterate, Romanian peasants she was a living Cinderella. Pakula wrote that it was partly due to Marie's popularity that the peasants "remained faithful" to the dynasty and "did not succumb to the revolutionary frenzy raging around them" during 1918 when it appeared Romania had lost the war³.

Marie once said she wanted to put Romania on the map — a goal she certainly achieved. Undoubtedly, she earned her greatest praise for her tireless and heroic efforts among Romania's sick and wounded during the Balkan Wars and especially during World War I. Wearing the white uniform of a Red Cross nurse, in all kinds of weather and with almost no consideration for her own personal safety, she visited hospitals and cholera camps to pass out cigarettes, to comfort, to encourage, and to console thousands of wounded and dying Romanian soldiers. As R. W. Seton-Watson wrote: "For months she courted danger daily amid the epidemics of the hospitals and the overcrowded city, and set an example of calm and confident endurance which many Romanian women were proud to follow, and which did much to uphold British prestige in South-east Europe"⁴. To the Western Allies she was "the beloved symbol of her country".

Yet, like Cinderella, there was another side to the fairy queen. She was remarkably vain and enraptured with her own beauty. At times she talked about herself as if she was describing the Mona Lisa. In order to have photographs of herself for relatives and friends, she posed for over two straight days, having over four hundred photographs taken from the simple to the sublime. On one occasion, when one of her nephews asked for a portrait, she "signalled to a lady-in-waiting who immediately produced a salver piled with photographs". Marie examined them one by one: "This one is divine. ... Oh!

3. Hannah Pakula, *The Last Romantic*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), p. 230.

4. R. W. Seton-Watson, *A History of the Roumanians*. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1934), p. 505.

those eyes. ..." One relative claimed that "many people (and probably herself included)" believed her "to be a re-incarnation of Theodora, Empress of Byzantium"⁵.

Far more difficult to access was Marie's political influence. From the outbreak of World War I she was an outspoken champion of the Western Allies, especially her beloved England. To the Germans, Marie "represented the Entente in Bucharest". With old King Carol I, Marie had little, if any, influence, and despite what she wrote in her diary, archival material makes it clear the King never really cared for her. It was the opposite, however, with her weak, indecisive husband. No doubt the strong and constant pressure she put on her husband was an important factor in Romania finally joining the Western Allies in 1916.

Highly ambitious, once Marie got a taste of power she could not live without it. At times she found being a queen and not the king extremely frustrating. "If only he could really be a master, our country needs it so much now", she wrote about her husband. "Oh! Why am I not king! I would go everywhere and see everything and talk to the troops. ... They would adore me. ... I would be a reality amongst them not just a name!"⁶.

Shortly after the war broke out in 1914, there was talk that King Carol I might abdicate and take the Crown Prince with him rather than see Romania intervene against his beloved homeland. Marie made it quite clear to the opposition that if this happened she would remain behind to rule with her eldest son, Prince Carol. In the late winter of 1918, as the despondent King Ferdinand was about to sign the humiliating preliminary peace treaty of Buftea and take Romania out of the war, Marie frantically tried to get her husband to abdicate in favor of Carol again. She failed this time, but her overall efforts to bolster the King's morale helped him to persevere as long as he did. Marie herself always claimed that she never lost her confidence in an Allied victory. Pakula claimed that Marie played an important part in pushing her husband into granting universal suffrage and land reform for the peasants. Through her stamina and devotion to Romania, Marie must be counted as one who helped the country win the war and paved the way for a united, modern Romanian state.

But did the Queen really control the King as Pakula asserted? Apparently

5. Infanta Eulalia, *Courts and Countries after the War*. (London: Hutchinson, 1925), pp. 234-235.

6. Marie, Queen of Romania, "Diary", Casa Regala, Dos. III, Nr. 103, Arhivele Statului, București, pp. 69-70.

she did, at least this was the view of those who lived closest to the royal family. Romanian royalists liked to think of Ferdinand and Marie working together as a team. The Queen acted as a liaison with powerful politicians, diplomats, opposition leaders, and with the heads of the Liberal Party, who she was on intimate terms with and shared their ideas. Her outgoing, forceful personality, eloquence and poise, gainfully offset the reticence, shyness, and indecisiveness of the King. Often she worked closely with her husband, listening to his ideas, and providing him with a shoulder to cry on. But it seems the dominant partner of the team was the Queen, especially in the postwar years. She told one visitor to Cotroceni that "it had been 'the throne's salvation' that I had taken the fiddle out of Ferdinand's hands — a habit I could never break once I had tried it"⁷. Eugeniu Buhman, who lived with the royal family for over forty years as secretary to King Carol I, King Ferdinand, Queen Marie, and later King Carol II, said that "in most instances" the King "echoed the ideas of the Queen, and, to a great degree, his actions were determined under her influence. Even in the intimate household of the royal family, measures and decisions once made by the Queen were approved by the King with much or little resistance"⁸. Interesting, powerful, ambitious women acting behind the scenes have become a characteristic of modern Romanian politics. The details of Marie's influence on day to day Romanian politics, however, will have to wait until her definitive biography is written.

Another side of Marie involves her rumored extramarital affairs. Of what interest is a person's love life to history? Should historians even get involved with such a topic? Some say no. Yet, in the case of Queen Marie, her affairs had extensive ramifications and, like a Helen of Troy, helped to change the course of modern Romanian history.

For years contemporaries and later historians have speculated on the juicy topic of Marie's love life. It was common gossip among the European aristocracy of her day that she was unfaithful. Historians, however, such as Elsberry and Pakula, have been more kind, accepting Marie's assertions in her diary that she was completely innocent and simply the victim of slanderous stories. "For many", Marie wrote, "I was 'la Princess Lointaine', living in a country near the Rising Sun; this fired the imagination, and the moment a woman is spoken of as 'pretty' people want to know all about her, she ex-

7. Hamilton Fish Armstrong, *Peace and Counterpeace from Wilson to Hitler*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 286.

8. Eugeniu Buhman, "Diary", Copy of the unpublished manuscript in the possession of the author, p. 170.

cites interest more than anything else and gossip would have it that I was tremendously gay, whilst in reality our life was curiously austere and circumscribed. ... I was innocent and truthful. I saw no evil in anything, nor did I imagine others could do so"⁹. Unfortunately, neither Pakula nor Elsberry read German or Romanian; if they did, they would have discovered a wealth of documents showing just the opposite.

Marie had numerous lovers. As a result, scandal after scandal exploded behind the thick, protective facade of Cotroceni and Castle Peleş. One of the most shocking involved the birth of Marie's third child, Princess Marie (Mignon), at the turn of the century. It was whispered among the crowned heads of Europe that Mignon was not Ferdinand's child. In her diary Marie deftly sidetracked the scandal for posterity by tying it into her quarrel with one of Prince Carol's governesses, a certain Miss Winter. Historians, like Pakula, have simply accepted Marie's explanation, even rallying to the defense of the good Queen's name. But the reality of the situation was quite different. In her diary, Marie described her cousin, the Russian Grand Duke Boris, as being "gay, irresponsible", "carefree", and "full of fun". He certainly was all that, along with apparently being the father of her third child. Never mentioned in her diary was the blowout she had with old King Carol several weeks before Mignon was born. According to Buhman, she told the despondent King, right to his face, that Boris was her lover, that the baby was his, and that if Ferdinand refused to accept the child as his own she would divorce him¹⁰. Poor Ferdinand! In order to save the dynasty from a scandal and to avoid the problem of remarrying and having a second family, he gave in. In the final analysis it was perhaps more luck than anything else that saved the Crown Princess from becoming an ex-Crown Princess. Unfortunately, Prince Carol was not as lucky as his mother.

King Carol I, his Queen, Elisabeth, and numerous other figures at the Romanian court who Marie did not get along with took a sound drubbing in her diary. But what Marie failed to tell her readers was that the chief source of her problems with other members of the royal family was not that she was English and young, or that King Carol I was a Germanic disciplinarian who could not stand to see people having fun, but her own infidelity.

But perhaps the greatest tragedy of Marie's affairs was their ramifications on her son and heir to the throne, Prince Carol. As a young boy Carol

9. Marie, Queen of Roumania, *The Story of My life*. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), p. 439.

10. Buhman, "Diary", p. 172.

greatly admired his mother to the point where it became, as Pakula stated, Oedipal love. Perhaps not surprising, the women Carol fell madly in love with had many of the same personality traits as his mother. As Carol matured and became aware of his mother's lovers, especially Prince Barbu Știrbey, his feelings towards her manifested a sharp dichotomy of love and hate. What was Carol to think? His mother was constantly with Știrbey. Știrbey lived with the royal family. In addition to his official position at court, he was the Queen's special political adviser as well as liaison with the King for the Liberal Party and its leader, Ion Brătianu, who happened to be his brother-in-law. Marie had her own private suite at Bufta, Știrbey's estate, and he had his own apartment at both Cotroceni and the royal palace in Bucharest. Their lengthy affair was so well known among the palace staff that Marie and Știrbey hardly bothered to hide their feelings for each other within the confines of the royal palaces. Certainly a questionable atmosphere for a young, intelligent, highly sensitive boy to be brought up in.

As Crown Prince, Carol came to detest Știrbey and, to a lesser degree, Brătianu. His attitude towards Știrbey, undoubtedly, helped to turn Carol against the Liberal Party.

Interestingly, Marie's attitude towards Carol was also a curious mixture of love and hate. Just after World War I the Queen saved her son from being removed as heir to the throne as a result of his marriage to Zizi Lambrino, a commoner. But six years later she sided with Brătianu in persuading the King to allow him to go to London to attend the funeral of Queen Alexandra, perhaps thinking that he would stay abroad and give up his rights to the throne so he could marry his latest mistress, Elena Lupeșcu. Being denied a seat on the Regency following her husband's death in 1927, she had mixed feelings about the possibility of Carol returning. She hoped to be the power behind the throne once more. But after Carol returned and it became clear that he was not going to allow her to play the same role with him as King that she played with Ferdinand, she angrily turned against him and became involved in several attempts to remove him from power. As Constantin Argetoianu pointed out, during Carol's first year and a half in power, when he had much of the country behind him, instead of trying to solve the serious problems which faced the nation he spent too much time dealing with intrigues within the royal family, especially the schemes of his ambitious mother.

In summary, who was the real Queen Marie? Was she, as Pakula claimed, the "last romantic", or is this just for those who believe in fairy princesses? Was she a twentieth century Catherine the Great, or a Romanian de Medici? Perhaps, when all is said and done, it was Marie's own vision of herself that comes closest to reality — a modern Theodora, Empress of Byzantium.