The British Crown in the Spotlight of Literary and Cultural Studies: Analyzing Past and Present 'Myths of the Monarchy'

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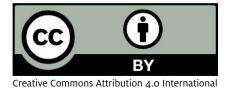
Abstract:

Anette Pankratz and Claus-Ulrich Viol's edited volume *(Un)making the Monarchy* comprises eleven articles that aim at analyzing (contemporary) phenomena surrounding the British monarchy in cultural fields as varied as fashion, literature, satire, or anti-monarchist political tendencies. With its prevailing cultural and literary studies perspectives, the volume addresses in an innovative way timely and pressing questions in the field of royal studies, among them the question for the reason of the unrelenting appeal of this ancient institution. Despite an overall constructivist stance, the articles in the volume draw on very concrete socio-cultural, socio-political, and even psychological effects that the "myths of monarchy" (p. 17) have on contemporary British society.

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The collected volume *(Un)making the Monarchy*, edited by Anette Pankratz and Claus-Ulrich Viol, sets out to give an extensive account of the British monarchy through historicizing, contextualizing, and politicizing this institution as well as the narratives and myths surrounding it. By applying a cultural and literary studies perspective to various cultural phenomena that revolve around the Crown – as varied as Hilary Mantel's novels, fashion, Charles Dickens' books for children, and republican movements – the book succeeds in providing a "kaleidoscopic view" (p. 11) in its endeavor to *(un)make*, i.e. to question, unravel, and highlight the constructedness of this ancient British institution. Core questions raised in the volume concern people's ongoing fascination with the monarchy, the endurance of the seemingly

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54 / 2018
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old-fashioned state form of the constitutional monarchy in connection with the essential question of the very function of a monarchy in the 21st century. With its constructivist stance and literary as well as cultural analyses, Pankratz and Viol's book adds a valuable perspective and contributes to addressing various under-researched topics in the field of royal studies.

In his "Reflections on the Popular Appeal of the British Monarchy", Jürgen Kramer firstly outlines the historical role of the British monarchy, the transformation of power relations, and its functions with particular focus on the reconfiguration of the monarchy as a "symbolic force" (p. 21) in the 19th century. Secondly, he draws on notions of leaders and leadership, especially Freud's concept of the "secondary leader", in order to discuss the monarchy's attraction. Lastly, he examines the major influence of the media and its amplifying functions, both as regards the emotional engagement of the people and production of the "hype about the monarchy" (p. 37). Kramer's article considers the interplay between people's emotional ties to and the symbolic politics and appeal of the British monarchy, asking how far the queen may be regarded as a secondary leader in Freud's sense. By linking his theoretical insights to Walter Bagehot's well-known musings on the role and appeal of the monarchy, he successfully outlines the diachronic development of the popular attraction of this ancient institution. His situating the discussion within approaches of leadership studies can be regarded as opening up innovative perspectives and thus shedding a new light upon some of the dynamics already being discussed in the field in various ways.

Anette Pankratz' article "'That's Entertainment': Monarchy as Performance" is a joy to read as it is characterized by an unpretentious style while at the same time being absolutely rich in content. Starting off with the questions of why people should "admire British royals for their waving from balconies, bearing children, and wearing colorful clothes" (p. 41), she addresses a pressing concern lying at the heart of current research on monarchies: Why should people still accept a (constitutional) monarchy as their political system? Pankratz makes use of theater studies to approach this question by analyzing British rulers as actors performing their monarchical role. A special emphasis is placed upon the duality existing between "royal magic" and a "royal ordinariness" (p. 42): It is mirrored in the divide between the sovereign's private and public role(s) and the increasing revelation of private details in e.g. documentaries, which construct the public image of the monarch. Her discussion of this circular logic (alternating and reciprocal effects of private and public images) offers innovative insights and is a highly productive approach.

Viola Hofmann's article "Fashioning Monarchy. Vestimentary Representations between Tradition and Modernity" addresses the "royal politics of mediating culture through fashion and dress" (p. 68) by focusing on historical as well as contemporary examples ranging from Queen Victoria's iconic

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54 / 2018
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mourning attire to how the Duchess of Cambridge dresses her children. Especially the latter example, including its online ramifications, such as fashion blogs instructing the public in how to copy the royal dress style, offers highly interesting insights into contemporary public relations, engagement, and interaction with the monarchy. The article might have benefitted from a clear focus on one period or group of royal personae as well as a more detailed analysis of these latest trends in public reactions towards royal fashion. Moreover, the productivity of the materiality concept for the present case study remains – in parts – vague and could have been explored in more detail.

The book's last two chapters shed light on anti-monarchist and republican tendencies in Britain. Although these two articles seem to differ from the other chapters in their rather essayistic approaches, their respective foci are a valuable addition and do justice to the book's overall aim. Especially in the face of growing nationalist, populist, and right-wing movements all over Europe, Olechnowicz' article "'For the Many May Be Better than the Few': Republicans and Anti-Monarchism in Contemporary Britain" is timely, as it theoretically and practically differentiates anti-monarchist and republican tendencies. Sebastian Berg focuses on the eponymous question "Would Britain Be More Democratic If It Became a Republic?", and thereby discusses the relationship between monarchy and political institutions in the 21st century. In doing so, Berg looks into the monarch's role in political processes and uncovers where Britain's political power lies nowadays. The article can be read as both a straightforward analysis as well as a comment on the system's workings and deficits, in which "the monarchy is by no means the only problem of Britain's democracy" (p. 239). The article queries that a 'simple' abolition of the monarchy would create a constitutional vacuum, which needs to be meaningfully filled by any republican endeavors. However, the article itself thus seems to replicate the very thing it problematizes – it regards the monarchy as a supporting actor rather than as the protagonist.

To conclude, one has to praise both the articles' overall high academic quality and the comprehensive approach to the topic and mediations of the British monarchy. Although the articles use a constructivist approach, their enlightening results are not only valid for fictional depictions but reveal meaning-making processes in British society. However, some of the case studies get side-tracked in detailed analyses, which are interesting but nevertheless move away from the emphasis on monarchy. An even stronger focus on recent developments and the current state of the monarchy as well as (fictional) representations of it would have added much to current debates at the intersection of literary, cultural, and royal studies. In general, we wholeheartedly recommend this volume to everyone doing research on or teaching about royal history, former and current representations of British sovereigns, or the intricate relationship between monarchy and politics.

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German Abstract:

Das britische Königshaus im Fokus von Literatur- und Kulturwissenschaften: Die Analyse von ‚Mythen der Monarchie' aus Vergangenheit und Gegenwart

Die insgesamt elf Artikel des von Anette Pankratz und Claus-Ulrich Viol herausgegebenen Sammelbands *(Un)making the Monarchy* analysieren ein breites Spektrum an kulturellen Phänomenen, die auf vielfältige Weisen mit der britischen Monarchie in Zusammenhang stehen. Die Fallstudien beschäftigen sich unter anderem mit Mode, Literatur, Satire und monarchiekritischen politischen Tendenzen. Durch seine dezidiert literatur- und kulturwissenschaftlichen Herangehensweisen eröffnet der Band neue Sichtweisen auf zentrale Anliegen der Monarchieforschung, allen voran die Frage nach den Gründen für die anhaltende Attraktivität der britischen Monarchie. Trotz des konstruktivistischen Ansatzes der Artikel beleuchten die einzelnen Texte konkrete soziokulturelle, soziopolitische und sogar psychologische Auswirkungen der „myths of monarchy" (S. 17) auf die britische Gegenwartsgesellschaft.

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