

“The Right Trusty Lord Cornbury”: Stripping an Historical Figure

Patricia U. Bonomi, *The Lord Cornbury Scandal: The Politics of Reputation in British America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

Unlike some recent revisionist biographies, *The Lord Cornbury Scandal* pieces together evidence and separates historical rumour from reality with the intent of resurrecting rather than dismantling. Bonomi’s work focuses on Edward Hyde (Lord Cornbury), the royal governor of New York and New Jersey from 1702-1708, and persuasively argues that by putting political barbs in their historical context, Lord Cornbury’s vilified reputation can be explained away. Indeed, in Bonomi’s hands, Cornbury appears as more of a victim of his contemporaries’ political strategies and the decades of Whig histories that followed. For Bonomi, the scandal of Lord Cornbury’s story is not his behavior as royal governor, but the shoddy work of historians who have not, until now, taken the care to examine the wider context in which his story must be portrayed. His historiography is scandalous. Cornbury, himself, was not.

The basis of Cornbury’s alleged corruption was essentially two-fold. Historians have pointed to the comments of his political enemies to establish that he was both professionally and personally corrupt. Charges of financial misconduct made up the professional side, while stories about his habit of wearing women’s clothing portrayed him as bizarre and decadent.¹ Bonomi explains that she stumbled onto the topic somewhat accidentally while researching in London, where, to her surprise, she found praise for Hyde rather than the vilification, characteristic of the nineteenth and twentieth-century tales with which she was already familiar. Deftly she argues, one by one, against traditional explanations of his behavior and conduct and with seeming ease collapses what was once a cast iron pedestal, revealing it to be merely a house of cards.

In finding that Cornbury was the victim of the early-eighteenth-century rumour mill, political in-fighting, and sloppy history, Bonomi argues that “context — social, political, cultural, even linguistic — has been the ingredient missing from his story.” (11) To this end, her work, she explains, is not only about Cornbury himself, but also the impact of London’s Grub Street press on the eighteenth-century Anglo-American political scene, about notions of imperial corruption, and the “sexual culture” of England and North America. Bonomi’s work argues that some of the weight against Cornbury relied on the image of the “bad” royal governor, a stereotype which stemmed from the simplistic notion of the colonists as on the side of freedom and the British on the side of “aristocratic privilege and control.” To Bonomi, Cornbury was accomplished at balancing his obligation to both colonial

culture and its subjects and to imperial demands. Thus, her examination of Lord Cornbury raises questions about the portrayals of other royal governors.

The book follows her article on a portrait, said to be of Lord Cornbury in women's clothing, that hangs in the New York Historical Society.² Dressed in a brilliant blue gown and poised with an air of dignity, the figure in the picture has indeed been worth a thousand words, but Bonomi can undo that effect in less than some fifteen pages. Through a careful investigation of the picture's history, Bonomi concludes that the portrait is not of Cornbury, but rather of an as-yet-unidentified eighteenth-century woman. She discovers that Cornbury's name, for example, was not associated with the painting until 1796, and even then it was only by "a thread spun by three merry gentlemen on a bibulous evening seven decades after Cornbury's death." (15) An actual physical labelling of the portrait, moreover, did not occur until 1867. Bonomi rightly feels it unlikely that the Governor, as the first cousin of Queen Anne, could have cross-dressed and somehow managed to escape the pages of satirical print pouring out of London, and to some extent, the colonies as well, at this time. Bonomi strips the legend of its credibility in a manner that comes across as having an insider's knowledge that the myth-makers/myth-repeaters had lacked. She explains with the ease of a native explaining home-country cultural aspects that strike the visitor as perplexing and open to misinterpretation, while to a local as understandable as the clothing they wear.

Her weakest moments in this particular debate come when trying to find a suitable likeness with which to compare the visage of the mysterious portrait. The figure she considers the most likely candidate is evidentiary as weakly supportable as the portrait itself, yet the face, in profile, opens every chapter of this book as if to say, here is the real Cornbury, read on. Bonomi irritatingly throws away lines at times that undermine her otherwise brilliant powers of explanation. For example, towards the end of a persuasive and painstakingly thorough discussion on the portrait and Cornbury's unlikely penchant for cross-dressing, she adds that George Washington "himself" was "mocked" for cross-dressing, but does so without any explanation, as if, despite our utter ignorance on the meaning or incidence of cross-dressing in early America, we are to simply accept Washington's heroic (read: non cross-dressing or masquerading) status on its own terms — something Bonomi has so artfully been convincing us not to do in the case of Cornbury.

Throughout the book, Bonomi maintains a victim narrative for Cornbury all the while enlightening and revealing cultural, social, and political aspects of importance. Her discussion of the Grub Street press is an example of this, but also of where she falls short of her stated intentions. In 1659 the English law that gave Parliament the power to license all presses "lapsed" and thus the presses and hack journalism flourished. Bonomi tells us she is examining the press to show "what was done to Cornbury" (99) and promises a look at the press's impact on colonial politics. It is on this last claim that she is weakest.

As with her examination of sex and gender, she is left without the historical scholarship to back up her own synthetic look at Cornbury's context. Once again we are reminded that despite the historical charges against Cornbury, and the popularity of sexually-charged pot-shots at both royalty and political figures, Cornbury remained free of any description or satirization as a cross-dresser. The only logical explanation that Bonomi finds, is simply that he was not one.

In Bonomi's portrait, Cornbury, as governor, was competent indeed. "One of Cornbury's achievements, often overlooked, is that he actually managed to lower the temperature in politically feverish New York." (59) Bonomi has written extensively on New York politics, although in her earlier work Cornbury received a scant one line, and his policies were attributed to following how "his own self-interest would best be served."³ Nonetheless, she explains that those who disliked Cornbury and left written record of his scandalous behavior were categorically opposed to royal government and thus, so motivated. When compared to the administrations that fell before and after Cornbury's, this does not stand out as corrupt. Thus, Bonomi is left with a political explanation for his wrongful historical portrayal — one she attributes to the "prejudices of Whig historians" against Tory loyalists and in favor of Whig governors. (9) Even Cornbury's personal debt, which landed him in prison, Bonomi finds to be comparatively normal and the result of the New Jersey Assembly's mean-spirited withholding of his pay. Political context, Bonomi argues, explains a great many eighteenth-century political and cultural oddities.

Not limiting her focus to his term in the colonies, Bonomi extensively researched Cornbury's life in England in order to present a forgiving image of the beleaguered man. Cornbury we learn, was the first defector and the "prime leader" in the army's defection from James II to Prince William of Orange. This move she claims is what ultimately led to the Cornbury family's financial hard times. His gubernatorial appointment itself, for Bonomi, attests to his competence. New York was a "strategically situated" colony and his time of appointment a particularly important one. How, Bonomi asks us, could a man with a reputation as tarnished as his allegedly was, be given such a post? Further, Bonomi examined the reports of Cornbury after his return and finds that the respect he received in England "contradicts" the reports from colonists that began around 1707. Indeed, we are told, the Queen in one letter referred to him as the "Right Trusty and Right Entirely Beloved Cousin and Councillor." (51) Yet, was this language *proforma*? Was it necessary in a letter that was lifting his pension restrictions? Bonomi does not say.

To be fair, Bonomi's approach, although utterly convincing, raises the problem of sources in such political situations. No stranger to this "age of calumny" as she terms it, Bonomi's earlier works have dealt with the factions of New York. However, in sifting through and determining whom to believe

and whom to disregard as politically motivated we run into a problem that faces our contemporary reporters of political scandals almost daily. The supporters and detractors both have political motives and both will invariably make a point of having their say. To this end, Bonomi at one point attempts to enlist the aid of a “neutral observer,” and to her credit she finds Philadelphia Quaker James Logan, but he is only one of this type of source. In this regard, it seems at times almost too easy for her to dismiss Cornbury’s critics as politically tainted sources.

Bonomi’s examination of England’s sexual culture reminds us that to date we have little scholarship to directly provide us with an American context in which to situate Cornbury’s charges. Instead, Bonomi relies on Randolph Trumbach’s scholarship on early eighteenth-century London as well as, somewhat anachronistically and bizarrely, modern clinical interpretations of transvestism, suggesting that Bonomi sees a transhistorical phenomenon partially at work here. Bonomi’s work does not explain exactly what a charge of cross-dressing in colonial New York would have meant. Although she contends that *this charge was a common one for politicians*, we find, buried in a footnote, references to only four other examples, two of them seventeenth-century, and none of them either English or American. (238, n.1) As with the Grub Street examination, here she is decidedly without a strong context in which to situate Cornbury. And in these areas her work may spur on future research.

Presumably Bonomi has fired the first and last shots in the battle to present the true Lord Cornbury. Although quantitatively more works may exist portraying him as a transvestite, Bonomi leaves few questions unanswered and it will be harder to convincingly pass him off, for example, as one of America’s earliest cross-dressers. Nonetheless, her article about the portrait has been out for years now and as I wrote this I received a postcard from a friend working at the New York Historical Society. It was of one “Edward Hyde,” poised in a blue dress. It is unlikely the postcard will be reprinted bearing some caption like “unidentified woman, formerly believed to be Edward Hyde.” It seems more likely the card will simply drop out of circulation. Indeed, if Bonomi’s work is read widely enough, the Historical Society should pull it out of embarrassment.

Criticisms notwithstanding, Bonomi frantically covers almost all conceivable bases from as many angles with varying degrees of success. The work is readable, stimulating, and presents an important example of the connections between traditional fields of history, such as politics and reputation, with newer ones like sexuality and gender. In addition, her revisions on Cornbury should serve as a wake-up call to those in the history of sexuality who have so blindly embraced Cornbury as the first Anglo-American transvestite. Whether or not those historians will be convinced by Bonomi’s arguments is unclear, but what we can all learn from her approach is that basic

historical premise, that understanding contexts — social, political, cultural, and sexual, — is the key to accurately interpreting what it means when a man wears a dress or when politically motivated figures charge a royal governor with conduct unbecoming.

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¹ More recently, historians have pointed to his cross-dressing not as another sign of his corruption, but rather his individual strength and courage. See for example, Richard Davenport-Hines, *Sex, Death and Punishment: Attitudes to Sex and Sexuality in Britain Since the Renaissance* (London 1990), 74, plate between pp. 32-3. Hines describes Cornbury as the “earliest identified male transvestite,” and explains “he was undeniably, though, a man who felt false when he dressed and behaved as men were expected to do.”

² Patricia U. Bonomi, “Lord Cornbury Redressed: The Governor and the Problem Portrait,” in *William and Mary Quarterly* 51 (January 1994).

³ Patricia U. Bonomi, *A Factious People: Politics and Society in Colonial New York* (New York 1971), 78. See also Michael Kammen, *Colonial New York: A History* (New York 1975), 156; Others make no mention of his cross-dressing in an extended discussion of his political policy. See, for example, Mary Lou Lustig, *Privilege and Prerogative: New York's Provincial Elite, 1710-1776* (Madison, Wisc. 1995), 9, 25-26; and Thomas L. Purvis, *Proprietors, Patronage, and Paper Money: Legislative Politics in New Jersey, 1703-1776* (New Brunswick, N.J. 1986), 1, 2, 77-86, 89, 114, 128, 244.