

The Other Royal Scandals

"The Royal Family and Family Values in Late Eighteenth-Century England"
by Marilyn Morris, in *Journal of Family History* (Oct. 1996),
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Charles, Diana, Fergie, and the rest of the royals may seem to be the last word in blue-blood scandal, but the Royal Family has seen worse. In fact, according to Morris, a historian at the University of North Texas, in Denton, the monarchy established its image as a bastion of propriety against a backdrop of scandals some 200 years ago, during the reign of King George III (1760–1820).

In 1785, the king's rowdy son, George, Prince of Wales, secretly and illegally wed Maria Fitzherbert, a Roman Catholic widow. A man with a well-known fondness for the bottle, the prince ran up such huge gambling debts (£630,000 by the end of 1794) that unpaid tradesmen importuned him in the streets. The troubled royal sought solace in the arms of Frances, Countess of Jersey. In 1795, having abandoned Maria, and hoping to force Parliament to raise his annual income and help pay off his debts, he married his cousin, Princess Caroline of Brunswick, "whom he despised at first sight," Morris notes. The prince then coolly appointed Frances as Princess Caroline's first lady of the bedchamber. After the princess gave birth to a daughter in 1796, the press, ceasing to pretend that all was well in the Wales household,

titillated England with the "sordid details," and made much of the infant daughter's plight.

Then there was the prince's brother, Frederick, Duke of York, who married Princess Frederica of Prussia in 1791 in the hope of getting a large dowry to cover his gambling debts. The marriage was a sham, but Frederica kept up appearances, and the press left them alone. Not so the king's third son, William, Duke of Clarence, who shared 20 years of unwedded bliss with Dorothy Jordan, a well-known actress. "The Duke of CLARENCE was seen arm in arm with Mrs. *Jordan* last week at Greenwich," the *Times* reported in 1792, "but they were not noticed by any one. Indeed, there would be an impropriety in addressing his ROYAL HIGHNESS in such company, as it is to be supposed he would not wish to be known."

"Above all this marital mayhem," writes Morris, stood George III and Queen Charlotte, "the picture of conjugal probity." The first British king since Charles I (1625–49) to be faithful to his wife, George III "held firm to his role as dedicated father in spite of the misbehavior of his sons." And as the monarchy's political power waned with the century, Morris observes, its role as moral exemplar grew in importance.



In James Gillray's 1795 satirical print, the sleeping Prince of Wales dreams of Princess Caroline and the bigger royal allowance their marriage will bring him.