



William III, Prince of Orange, King of England (1650-1702)

by Louis Crompton

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King William III.
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Speculations about William III's sexuality have been countered by his English and American biographers, who have been unwilling to entertain the idea that a man of his nobility of character and special historical significance could have loved other men. Dutch writers on the other hand have been much more willing to accept the evidence that William was, indeed, bisexual.

William was born at the Hague in 1650, the posthumous son of William II, who died a few days before he was born, and Mary Stuart, daughter of the late King Charles I of England, who had been deposed by English Parliamentarians. William was thus an important figure in European politics from the day of his birth, since he not only inherited his Dutch titles, but was fourth in line to inherit the British throne should it be restored.

His claim to the British throne was reinforced in 1677, when he married the daughter of James, Duke of York, who was to succeed to the British monarchy in 1685.

William III acceded to the British throne when the English ousted James II in the "Glorious Revolution" of 1688. He and his wife, Mary II, ruled together until her death in 1694. After her death, he ruled alone until he died in 1702. The couple was childless, so he was succeeded by Mary's sister Anne.

As "stadholder" (military commander) of the Dutch Republic, William had opposed the aggressions of Louis XIV that threatened the Netherlands and neighboring states. For this he was hailed by the Dutch as the "Redeemer of the Fatherland."

When he brought England into the coalition against France he became the acknowledged champion of Protestant Europe. It is this preeminence as an international hero that has made it hard for Anglophone admirers to candidly assess William's sexual orientation.

William had close and affectionate relations with two notable favorites, William Bentinck, whom he brought to England and made Earl of Portland, and a handsome younger Dutchman, Arnold van Keppel, whom he created Earl of Albemarle.

A spate of political satires accusing William of intimate relations with both men circulated during his reign. These scurrilous poems are quite explicit in their allegations, and are obviously the work of Tory partisans who favored James. For this reason they have been discounted by William's defenders.

One satire begins: "For the case, Sir, is such, / That the people think much, / That your love is Italian, your government Dutch. / Ah! Who would have thought that a Low-Country Stallion, / and a Protestant Prince should prove an Italian?" (Italy was the country most notably associated with sodomy in the seventeenth century.) Jonathan Swift also referred to William's "infamous pleasures" with Keppel in a manuscript note. All this has, however, been dismissed as the malicious gossip of Tory enemies.

Nevertheless, rumors were also rife among those favorable to the king. These include the redoubtable "Madame," Duchess of Orléans, who was married to France's most flamboyantly conspicuous homosexual, "Monsieur," and whose correspondence makes up a veritable encyclopedia of homosexuality in that country and England. Her letters are admiring of the king but speak repeatedly of "men who share King William's inclinations."

Rumors also circulated in the Dutch army, which was fanatically loyal to the house of Orange.

Most telling, however, are the remarks of Bishop Gilbert Burnet, who praised William unstintingly as "a person raised up by God to resist the power of France and the progress of tyranny and persecution." Yet in considering matters that might make it difficult for William to assume the English throne, Burnet refers to one "particular . . . too tender to be put in writing," which under the circumstances can only be interpreted as a reference to William's sexual nature.

To nineteenth-century liberal historians such as Thomas Macaulay, William III ranked as one of England's greatest kings for his fostering of religious and political liberty and for his leadership of the European nations who fought Louis XIV.

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Louis Crompton was Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Nebraska. Co-founder of the Gay and Lesbian Caucus of the Modern Language Association, he authored the highly acclaimed *Byron and Greek Love*, and *Homosexuality and Civilization*, among numerous other works. He died on July 11, 2009.