Dynastic marriages have always featured prominently in accounts of early-modern European diplomacy. In arranging marriages for members of their families, kings and queens almost always sought brides or grooms from other royal dynasties and the final choice was usually made primarily on the basis of policy considerations. So much effort was put into such negotiations at such frequent intervals that these marriages can sometimes seem to have been the main means of international peace-making.

Yet anyone who has read widely on the subject of royal marriages in this period must eventually wonder whether the actual results were worth all the effort. Diplomatic alignments were so fluid that marriages could quickly become an embarrassing reminder of alliances that had since been repudiated. In the worst-case scenario, when in-laws literally went to war, a consort might end up being regarded by their adoptive court as an enemy alien perfectly placed to exercise a malign influence. Even less dramatic outcomes could be unsatisfactory. The couple might not get on. The imported consort might ‘go native.’ Or be too bored by politics to be a sustained influence. Failure to produce an heir could also mean that the wife’s perceived importance was downgraded. All those involved were fully aware that these were the risks.

John Condren’s article considers one such marriage and the resulting diplomatic disappointments. The marriage in question was that in 1673 between the Duke of York (the future James II) and his second wife, Maria Beatrice d’Este, the sister of Francesco II, Duke of Modena. The marriage itself is a well-known one and the importance of its most obvious long-term consequence, the overthrow of the Stuarts, is undeniable. Several aspects of that story have been much studied. Most biographies of the bride and the groom include detailed accounts of the diplomatic complexities of York’s search for a new wife. A lot has also been said about how the Catholicism of the duke and his new duchess did so much to destabilise British domestic politics for the next decade-and-a-half. Condren’s focus, however, is on other consequences almost unknown to Anglophone readers. Based on a thorough examination of the relevant archives in Modena and Paris, he considers the various ramifications as seen by the two other parties involved in the 1673 agreement. His principal point is that any advantages that the marriage brought to Modena and to France also proved to be very slight indeed.
The shifts in policy that overtook the 1673 Este-Stuart alliance began almost immediately. The Modenese marriage had been promoted by the French. With no suitable French princess to offer, King Louis XIV had hoped to strengthen his own alliance with Modena by acting as matchmaker. The Modenese were clearly expected to view a marriage into the British royal house as a huge favour for which they ought to be permanently grateful to Louis. Yet the Duke, the fourteen-year-old Francesco II, used his mother’s absence when she accompanied Maria Beatrice to London, to assert himself in Modena. Under the influence of his favourite, Cesare Ignazio, Marquis of Montecchio, he attempted to take a more independent line in foreign policy. Twice over the next decade he managed to displease the French.

The first occasion was in 1678 when he tried to claim the duchy of Guastalla. This was a direct challenge to the Este family’s arch rivals, the Gonzaga Dukes of Mantua. Francesco’s claim was a very weak one anyway but, worse, it was, in political terms, exceptionally maladroit. The Holy Roman Emperor, Leopold I, was always likely to find in favour of the Duke of Mantua, Ferdinando Carlo, as Leopold’s stepmother, the Dowager Empress, Eleonora Gonzaga, was the Duke’s aunt. That is therefore a counterexample of how a dynastic marriage could work to one family’s advantage after all. The aspect of this that is most relevant to Condren’s argument is, however, the British response. Charles II bluntly rejected Francesco II’s request for assistance. The efforts by Maria Beatrice to influence Charles were ignored. No British interests at all were at stake and, from London, the dispute appeared to be utterly irrelevant.

It took another marriage to bring relations between Modena and France to breaking point. In 1684 Emanuele Filiberto, Prince of Carignano, married Montecchio’s sister, Angela Maria Caterina d’Este. Carignano thereby seemed to be aligning himself with Modena. What made this significant was that Carignano was first-in-line to succeed his distant kinsman, Vittorio Amedeo II, as Duke of Savoy. The French were furious. They had hoped to see Carignano marry their own candidate to increase the chances that he would be safely pro-French if he did ever become Duke of Savoy. This time Charles II did side with Modena and British diplomats made attempts to restore relations between Francesco II and Louis XIV, but suggestions that Francesco might repair the damage by himself marrying a French bride came to nothing.

From a French perspective, any benefits from the marriage between the Duke of York and his Modenese bride had been equally slight. Earlier French monarchs, such as François I and Louis XIII, had intervened militarily in northern Italy and Louis XIV was only too happy to invade other territories adjacent to France. But Louis’s Italian policy during the 1670s and 1680s came down to a wish that Italy should not become a distraction. He just wanted it to remain quiet. Yet instead of remaining a loyal and grateful ally, Francesco II insisted on irritating him. The Este-Stuart alliance made him too confident for Louis’s liking, even if that confidence was more over-confidence. Nor did Louis gain much gratitude from the Stuarts. Modena hardly figured at all in British thinking so long as Charles II remained king. More immediately, Charles had made peace with the Dutch as early as 1674 and in 1677 he concluded an even more significant dynastic marriage when he married off York’s eldest daughter, Mary, to the Prince of Orange.

It is difficult not to feel that much of the diplomatic negotiations so ably discussed by Condren were based on assumptions that even at the time were obviously unreal. Did anyone ever really think that Charles II might become a significant player in the politics of central Italy? In fairness to the Modenese, British influence in Europe and the Mediterranean was slightly more real than Condren seems to allow. One consequence of Charles II’s marriage to Catherine of Braganza was that British troops had fought with some distinction in the Portuguese Restoration War in the 1660s and British mediation had brokered the 1668 treaty of Lisbon. A more obvious legacy of that marriage was that Britain had a (not very secure) toehold at the entrance to the
Mediterranean in the form of Tangier. The Royal Navy was already able to operate in the western Mediterranean. But intervention in Italy? That was surely just fantasy.

That may be to miss the point. There was a dimension to these marriages that Condren perhaps underplays. Hopes that royal marriages might have diplomatic benefits might usually have been disappointed, even if they were worth exploring on the off-chance that they might not. But, oddly enough, the more tangible benefit could involve the more abstract considerations of prestige. Lesser dynasties who married up into grander ones gained the immediate satisfaction of outshining their equals and rivals. For all their limitless sense of the impressiveness of their own lineage, the Este must have known that the Stuarts were in a higher league and that a marriage to the heir to the British throne was as glittering a prize as any other that they could reasonably aspire to attain. Overnight they gained an extra reason to look down on their neighbours. Perhaps in the end it therefore did not matter much if Britain was most unlikely to be of practical assistance to them. The chance to name-drop the in-laws was enough.

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