

2017

## To Paint a Queen

Anne-Taylor Cahill  
*Old Dominion University*, [acahill@odu.edu](mailto:acahill@odu.edu)

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### Original Publication Citation

Cahill, A.-T. (2017). To paint a queen. *Nineteenth Century*, 37(2), 47. <http://victoriansociety.org/upload/NC-37-2.pdf>

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# Milestones

## To Paint a Queen

Anne-Taylor Cahill

Perhaps one of the loveliest portraits of Queen Victoria is that painted by the American portraitist Thomas Sully of Philadelphia. In true American fashion, Sully did not pose the Queen in the traditional royal portrait pose. No sitting on a throne looking serious and imperial for Sully. Rather he portrayed Victoria from the rear, a youthful monarch approaching the steps up to her throne. Victoria glances back at the viewer as if responding to a call. It was both daring and dramatic. The portrait was a takeoff on a picture of the famous British actress Fanny Kemble whom Sully has painted many times. The prototype was a picture of Fanny as Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing*.

Kemble had been a family friend of the Sully family for some time both in England and in America. She married Pierce Butler of Philadelphia and settled there, hence cementing her relationship with the Sullys. Sully equated Fanny with enchantment and loved to paint her. He described her as having a unique charm spiked with “impertinence and vivacity.”

While Fanny and Victoria’s physical appearances were quite different, their personalities were similar according to Sully. Sully’s daughter Blanche who accompanied him to London described Victoria as “good natured, fat face, ugly likeness of (Fanny) Mrs. Butler.” Sully was kinder to Victoria, describing her as “short...and plump but not fat.” In conversation with Sully, Victoria solemnly pronounced the famous actress as a bit too thin!

By showing Victoria ascending the steps to her throne rather than sitting upon it, Sully depicts the formidable future awaiting this very young monarch. It should be noted that Victoria had difficulty with steps. Sully says “It gives her pain to ascend and descend steps from something wrong in the knees, and perhaps this may take something from grace and ease in her walking.” He goes on to elaborate the assistance she needed from Baroness Lehzen just to get in and out of the portrait chair. Nevertheless, the finished portrait presents a taller, slim graceful Victoria gliding up the steps to her throne. Sully was kind to all his female subjects but was especially so to Victoria. It appears that he was always mindful that indeed Victoria was just a young eighteen-year-old. He often refers to the Queen and her ladies as typical teenage girls, laughing and chatting with little constraint. His personal diary injects a note of sadness as he declares, “long may she feel so light of heart.”

Sully was most cognizant of young girls and their ways. His daughter Blanche had traveled to England with him and they lived in 3 rooms for nearly 10 months.

Moreover, young Blanche assisted Sully as a stand-in for Victoria during the painting process. Blanche even agreed to model the Queen’s crown for her father. However, fearful that Victoria would be offended at the sight of an American wearing

her crown, Blanche made her father promise not to let the Queen see her. But the Queen did see and she was most amused. Immediately, Blanche and Victoria bonded and proceeded to chat and laugh like old friends. Further, Victoria even allowed Blanche to don her coronation robes and pose in her stead. Sully’s journal indicates a very light and happy atmosphere pervading the palace room when painting Victoria. He really seemed to enjoy the experience.

Sully’s last encounter with the young Victoria was quite by chance. His diary notes it was a Sunday and he was going to attend services in St. James Palace Chapel. He could not get in as there was a great crowd at the door. Dispirited, he turned to take a walk in the park and he reports there was Victoria “in an open carriage on her way...she bowed as though she remembered me.” And why would not Victoria remember Sully? Maybe because prior to her coronation Victoria sat for more than 15 artists. Oftentimes she sat twice a day with 2

artists working at the same time!

Sully sums up his experience with Victoria thusly: “I should be gratified if I were able to give an idea of the sweet tone of voice and the gentle manner of Queen Victoria.” Her manner he said was “impressive of dignity and mildness. I felt quite at my ease as tho’ in company with merely a well-bred lady.”



For further reading:

Carrie B. Barratt  
*Queen Victoria and Thomas Sully* (2016).

Caroly Erickson, *Her Little Majesty* (1997).



Thomas Sully (1783-1872), *Queen Victoria*, 1838.  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art.