

The Rule of Women in Early Modern Europe

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The Rule of Women in Early Modern Europe is a collection of papers which originated in a 2005 conference at the University of Miami. The women examined in the essays include queens regnant, consorts and various regents all of whom exercised power either in their own right or through their marital or familial ties. The collection aims to add to the fields of early modern history, gender and queenship studies by bringing 'a transnational and transcultural perspective on a topic that has until now been studied largely through the lens of a single nation' (p. 2). The editors acknowledge that several other 'transnational' works on female rule in early modern Europe do exist, such as Fradenburg's *Women and Sovereignty* or Sharon Jansen's *The Monstrous Regiment of Women; Female Rulers in Early Modern Europe*.⁽¹⁾ What this particular collection has to offer, however, is a focus on constructing images of female rule and modes of representation, both in how female rulers represented themselves and in the way female sovereigns are represented in various works from the period. This representation can be both positive and negative; the self-representation of various female sovereigns is shown as a way to justify and strengthen their rule while criticism of female rulers is discussed as a means of political counsel or attempting to dismiss their influence. Accordingly, the book is split into two sections; the first is titled 'The Rule of Women: Theories and Constructions' and the second 'Sovereignty and Representation'.

The first section begins with a paper by Tracy Adams; 'Notions of Late Medieval Queenship, Christine de Pizan's Isabeau of Bavaria'. The subject seems slightly incongruous with the overarching theme of early modern women, given the fact that it centres on a 14th century queen consort. Nevertheless, the paper does contain an interesting discussion of the 'Black Legend' surrounding Isabeau and the relationship between the queen and eminent authoress Christine de Pizan. Adams challenges the view that Pizan is critical or

disapproving of Isabeau, instead she argues that Christine in fact ‘champions’ the queen. Adams asserts ‘By dedicating the work (i.e. *The Roman de la Rose*) to Isabeau, Christine draws the queen into the group of righteous women slandered by misogynistic discourse, constructing her both as a victim of that discourse and a defender of women’ (p. 22). This reassessment of Christine and Isabeau’s relationship fits in well with later pieces in the collection, such as those by Ketner and Suzuki which also analyze the treatment of female sovereigns by female writers.

The second paper is an evaluation of Jeanne d’Albret’s *Ample déclaration* by Mary C. Ekman. This particular female sovereign is most often seen in the context of her involvement with the Calvinist movement in 16th-century France and in connection with her son, Henri IV. In this essay, Ekman focuses on d’Albret’s writing, arguing that the *Ample déclaration* is a work of self-justification which is both an example of the Protestant assertion of the individual and a defense of her own sovereignty. Ekman stresses the importance of the work in context of both the complex and tumultuous political and religious situation in France and d’Albret’s struggle to preserve her personal rule over her disputed Navarrese realm.

Following on is a paper from Barbara F. Weissburger on the subject of Isabel of Castile entitled ‘Tanto monta; The Catholic Monarchs’ Nuptial Fiction and the power of Isabel I of Castile’. As in her highly praised monograph *Isabel Rules; Constructing Queenship, Wielding Power* (2), Weissburger engages in an in-depth analysis of the symbolism surrounding the representation of the *Reyes Católicos*, including their heraldic shields. Weissburger argues that the royal pair had an almost modern preoccupation and approach to the power of symbolism and visual propaganda. The author particularly highlights the representation of Isabel, who she argues was the more powerful of the monarchical pair and intriguingly discusses the appropriation of Isabelline symbolism in the 20th century.

The next paper discusses one of Isabel’s descendants, Isabel Clara Eugenia, daughter of Philip II of Spain and joint ruler of the Low Countries with her husband Albert in the early seventeenth century. The author, Magdalena S. Sánchez, discusses Isabel’s role in the Low Countries both as co-sovereign with her husband and later as a somewhat reluctant sole Governor for the Spanish crown during her widowhood. Sánchez confronts the dichotomy between Isabel’s image as a placid consort and the influence that she wielded away from public view, stating that Isabel was ‘successful in appearing indifferent to political power while in fact exercising authority’ (p. 75). The author also emphasizes the fact that Isabel was the primary sovereign, as the Low Countries was her dowry. Although Isabel was seemingly content to play the role of consort while her husband exercised the public forms of governance, her subjects were aware of her position of authority and referred to her in oaths and ceremonies as *domina* and *princess proprietaria* (p. 68). Sánchez also examines Isabel’s difficult role as Governor after her husband’s death, as she struggled to maintain Spanish rule during a period of intense political upheaval despite her personal desire to retire to a Franciscan convent.

The last paper in this section, ‘*Princeps non Principissa*’, examines another woman who struggled to maintain her personal rule after the death of her husband, the less familiar Catherine of Brandenburg. Catherine’s situation was highly unusual as she was her husband’s designated heir and is the only woman in this volume to have been formally elected to her position as ‘Prince’ of Transylvania. This paper, written by Éva Deák, highlights the fascinating life of this often overlooked female ruler, discussing her unorthodox martial arrangements (both spouses had numerous extramarital affairs) as well as her brief and disastrous period as sole ruler in 1630. Deák argues that Catherine was hamstrung by her gender, religion, foreign birth and the turbulent political circumstances in the Principality. The author summarizes the situation by stating that ‘Catherine’s reign was characterized by a struggle for power between herself and her followers on one side and the governor and the council on the other’ (p. 86). However unsuccessful Catherine may have been as a sovereign, this survey of her career is a welcome addition to this collection which provides an interesting contrast to the reigns of other more well known figures from the period.

The second section, ‘Sovereignty and Representation’ opens with another Spanish ruler, Juana of Austria, who served as a capable regent between 1554–9. This paper, by one of the editors, Anne J. Cruz, emphasizes the lineage of female rule in Early Modern Spain, from Isabel of Castile and her daughter Juana to Isabel of Portugal, wife of Charles V. However, Cruz notes that Juana of Austria’s position was unusual since it was

not directly linked to a joint rule with a husband or son. Instead, Juana ruled Spain on her brother Philip II's behalf during his marriage to Mary Tudor, leaving behind her own infant son in Portugal in order to perform this important duty. Cruz discusses Juana's role as a patroness and her 'passion for hunting, painting, literature and, especially, music' (p. 105) despite her reputation for being an austere religious fanatic, who habitually dressed in black and was secretly a member of the Jesuit order. After the return of Philip and his subsequent marriage to Isabel of Valois, Juana remained a key figure in the Spanish court and retained her influence as a surrogate mother to Philip's third and fourth wives and the royal children.

The next five papers are all concerned with Elizabeth I or related in some way to her reign. Even the paper on Katherine de Valois, a late medieval queen consort, is placed within the context of Elizabeth's reign and the legacy of Katherine's marriages on the Tudor dynasty. In the introduction to the collection, the editors note with a slight air of exasperation that 'the greater part of feminist scholarship on women's rule in this period has heretofore focused on the most prominent sovereigns, such as Isabel of Castile and Elizabeth Tudor' (p. 1). Given this awareness of the imbalance in previous studies, the decision to include so many papers connected to Elizabeth is somewhat surprising. What is perhaps even more startling is with so many female sovereigns in this age of the 'Monstrous Regiment', figures such as Elizabeth's sister Mary Tudor, Mary Stuart, Mary of Guise, Marie de Medici, Christina of Sweden etc. are entirely missing. Another important early modern queen, Catherine de Medici does receive a sidelong appraisal as a comparative for Elizabeth in one paper, but does not receive a thorough examination in her own right.

The first 'Elizabethan' paper is written by the well known queenship specialist Carole Levin, and examines Elizabeth's often fraught relationships with her siblings and cousins. This survey is very comprehensive, examining not only her well documented relationships with her half-siblings Edward VI and Mary but also explores her relationships with various illegitimate siblings, both those whose paternity was confirmed and those whose paternity was more nebulous, such as her Carey cousins and Sir John Perrot. Overall, Levin demonstrates that Elizabeth's relationships with most of her siblings were 'problematic and dangerous' given the undercurrents of religious divides and the competition for power. This tension is clearly shown both in Elizabeth's imprisonment during Mary's reign and by Elizabeth's later treatment of the Grey sisters and Perrot who died in the Tower in 1592. Levin argues that Elizabeth 'felt deeply threatened by close relatives on her father's side' and that her positive relationship with the Careys indicate that Elizabeth viewed them purely as maternal cousins, not as illegitimate half-siblings despite Henry VIII's relationship with Mary Boleyn.

The next paper is entitled 'Fashioning Monarchy; Women, Dress and Power at the Court of Elizabeth I, 1558-1603' and focuses on the rituals and significance of courtly gift-giving between the monarch and her courtiers as means of establishing political identity. The author, Catherine L. Howey draws on excellent sources such as the New Year's Gift Rolls which track gifts given both from and to the monarch. Howey discusses the gendered nature of the gifts given to Elizabeth, noting that women tended to give dress related items, either clothing, fabric or jewelry. She also notes that gifts to the Queen often reinforced the sovereign's favoured symbolic representations which 'reinforced her public image' such as the Phoenix or the Tudor Rose (p. 148). The author also highlights the role of the women of the privy chamber in recording and distributing these politically charged gifts, arguing that this contradicts the view of many scholars who have dismissed the chamber as an 'apolitical, domestic space' (p. 152).

In the following essay, Sandra Logan examines the representation of Katherine de Valois, the ancestress of the Tudor line in two works written at the end of Elizabeth's reign, Shakespeare's *Henry V* and Drayton's *Heroicall Epistles*. Logan argues that Katherine's key role as 'daughter, sister, wife, widow and mother of kings' (p. 158) is greatly minimized by Elizabethan authors, reducing her to the recalcitrant object of Henry V's affections and a 'Desiring Dowager Queen' in her clandestine relationship with Owen Tudor. Logan engages in extensive examination of the passages concerning Katherine in both texts in an attempt to tease out the queen's rightful place as an important dynastic link, connecting three dynasties and drawing together England, France and Wales through her two marriages. Logan argues that Katherine's near 'erasure' as a Tudor ancestress demonstrate 'anxious reinscriptions of cultural and political heritage in the pursuit of national legitimation and imperialist justification' (p. 158).

The next two papers, by co-editor Mihoko Suzuki and Elizabeth Ketner respectively, focus on the role of female authors in writing works which offer both veiled criticism of monarchs and political counsel in a comparison of the English and French courts. Suzuki's paper 'Warning Elizabeth' looks at the use of Catherine de Medici in Anne Dowriche's *The French Historie* as a means to provide political counsel, instead of a critique of female rule. Ketner's paper takes the opposite perspective, examining the role Elizabeth I plays in a fictional work *La Princesse de Cleves*, written during the reign of Louis XIV. As mentioned previously, there is a strong tie to the first paper on Christine de Pizan's treatment of Isabeau of Bavaria; Suzuki cites Pizan as a possible model of a female writer offering political counsel which Anne Dowriche may have been influenced by. Suzuki also cites the works of Mary Sidney and Elizabeth Cary and argues these authors demonstrate that 'women saw themselves as capable of acting as counselors, especially to female monarchs or consorts' (p. 187). While Elizabeth Tudor generally received a sympathetic treatment from Madame de Lafayette in *La Princesse de Cleves* Ketner claims her allegation of Elizabeth's involvement in the execution of Mary Queen of Scots is used as a means of criticizing absolute monarchy and by extension Louis XIV. Ketner claims that 'by locating (the criticism of Louis XIV) in the historical past, in a different country and in a female ruler', Lafayette was able to safely disguise her critique of the king and his absolutist rule (p. 201).

In summary, the papers contained in this insightful collection are a valuable contribution to the fields of queenship, gender studies, early modern history and in some cases, literature. However, I would argue that this collection would be better served by a different title, as the current one, a remnant of the conference from which these papers originate, does not adequately sum up the admirable contents of the volume. A better title perhaps would be 'The Representation of Female Rule in Pre-Modern Europe' which I think would both highlight the collection's focus and include the clearly medieval sovereigns such as Isabeau of Bavaria. The collection would also benefit from the addition of a few supplementary papers on some of the key female sovereigns of the early modern era, as mentioned previously, which would round out this volume and balance out the surfeit of papers on Elizabeth Tudor. Overall though, this is a worthy collection which adds to our understanding of the lives and careers of these female rulers with particular regard to how they wished to represent themselves and how our current perception of them is influenced by the ways in which others have represented their rule.

The editors have decided not to comment on this review.

Notes

1. *Women and Sovereignty*, ed. Louise Olga Fradenburg (Edinburgh, 1992); Sharon Jansen *The Monstrous Regiment of Women; Female Rulers in Early Modern Europe* (Basingstoke, 2002). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Barbara F. Weissburger, *Isabel Rules; Constructing Queenship, Wielding Power* (Minneapolis, MN, 2004). [Back to \(2\)](#)

Other reviews:
scholarship

