William Monter. *The Rise of Female Kings in Europe, 1300–1800.*
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Joan Kelly's famous question, "Did women have a Renaissance?" triggered more than a generation of scholarship showing, pretty much, that they did not: they were subsumed into patriarchal households, squeezed out of guild labor, subjected to sexual monitoring, and hounded, to boot, as witches and infanticides. But it is now apparent that, in at least two areas, women gained prominence in the period 1300 to 1800: in the literary world, as they became authors of treatises, epics, histories, and mountains of letters; and in the political realm, as they became monarchs — rulers in their own right — a status they had not attained before or, surprisingly, until very recently, since. William Monter's *The Rise of Female Kings in Europe, 1300–1800* makes that case definitively, with verve, conviction, and lots of numbers.

Monter identifies thirty female kings who reigned between 1300 and 1800: not queens; definitionally, queens were consorts who did not reign. Not only did these women hold monarchical power, they held the title of *king*, ruling their kingdoms "by the grace of God," utilizing the same formula that kings had always employed. Some of them reigned alone, some jointly with their husbands; some were married, some were widowed, two were single; some were childless, others fertile; several were deposed, one was canonized, and one became a plaything for pornographers. The most effective female kings were those whose names are already familiar to us: Isabel of Castile, Elizabeth I of England, Maria Theresa of Hungary and Bohemia, and Catherine II of Russia. The abundant crop of female regents also included effective rulers — notably Catherine de Medici and three Habsburg princesses who governed the Low Countries — who prepared the way for the culmination of female monarchy in the period after 1550.

Monter lifts these female monarchs out of obscurity, eliciting the patterns and continuities that knit them altogether to construct the phenomenon of early modern female sovereignty. In so doing, he shows a masterful grasp of European politics in languages including Polish, Swedish, and Russian, along with French, English, and Spanish. Nor does he neglect the literary and artistic ramifications of female sovereignty: he notes the patronage activity of his subjects, the monuments

by which they are commemorated, and their own participation in the formation of culture.

Some ironies present themselves. First, as Monter makes clear at the outset, all thirty of the female kings identified came from kingdoms on the periphery of Europe geographically, some of which were also peripheral to the wider domain of European politics. Female kings reigned in Castile, England, and Russia; but just as often in Navarre, Naples, Sicily, and Cyprus. They were excluded from rule in Europe's large central core: France, the Holy Roman Empire, and the Papal States. The consequence is a certain disproportion: the several female kings of Navarre, an exiguous monarchy, for instance, are counted in the sample with the same weight as gigantic figures like Isabella of Castile or Elizabeth I of England.

Second, female kings reign because of their natal and marital relations to men: so that, paradoxically, it is the patriarchal framework that makes female sovereignty possible. As Monter points out, in republics of the Renaissance period, authority is male-only: their assemblies were "as totally masculine as the College of Cardinals" (216). That situation persists into modern times, which helps explains why no woman held sovereign authority in Europe between Maria I of Portugal, pushed aside in 1799, and Margaret Thatcher, first elected Prime Minister of the United Kingdom in 1979.

Third, Monter's precise and comprehensive analysis, which is his great contribution to this problem in European political and gender history, can still not explain the phenomenon he so expertly defines. He elicits patterns, creating categories that usefully group subsets of his female sovereigns: teenage heiresses and mature incumbents; usurpers and legitimate inheritors; women who subordinate or, alternately, yield to their husbands; who have or do not have children; who reigned before 1550 or after. Yet the prominence of female sovereignty from 1300 to 1800 is, nonetheless, contingent on circumstances that defy analysis: on pure accidents of birth and death, the absence of legitimate male heirs, the deaths of fathers and husbands.

Monter closes with a depressing filmography. What a wealth of female achievement is found in the careers of the thirty figures Monter profiles! But filmmakers pass it by. Only Elizabeth I has received full notice, but her career is romanticized. Mary Stuart has received some attention, Christina of Sweden and Maria Theresa a very little, and Catherine II a great deal, because of the opportunity her story provides for sexualization: indeed, she is "Europe's only female ruler to be featured in a pornographic film" (226).

In all, Monter's readable volume, replacing earlier studies of Renaissance queenship, demonstrates that female sovereignty reached its summit in Europe in the period 1300 to 1800, after which, until we come to Margaret Thatcher and Angela Merkel, it faded.

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