



*Strategic Imaginations: Women and
the Gender of Sovereignty in European
Culture*

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(eds.)**

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Strategic Imaginations brings together a diverse group of junior and senior scholars from across Europe who specialize in different disciplines to offer an interesting and eclectic collection of studies on various aspects of female sovereignty. In this context, the term “sovereignty” has been interpreted in its broadest possible sense concerning women who are at the centre of power in their respective realms, but not necessarily sovereign rulers. One element which pervades the collection is the inherent tension between gender and power, examining how this has been expressed in a variety of ways in different periods, places, and formats. In her introductory chapter, Anke Gilleir articulates these ideas as the connecting thread of the volume which “explores the longue durée scepticism of female leadership and the way female leaders dealt with this essentially gendered imagination of sovereignty” (8).

The papers range chronologically from studies of Eleanor of Aquitaine and high medieval German romances in the twelfth century to the quest for female suffrage in the early twentieth century, with a pronounced emphasis on the early modern period. The structure of the collection groups the chapters into two parts, the first of which focuses on representations of female sovereignty in various forms. This section offers five chapters which reflect on how female authority, influence, and political engagement was represented in various ways. The first two chapters offer studies on the representation of female sovereignty in Germanic literature in two very different contexts—the first by Ann-Kathrin Deininger and Jasmin Leuchtenberg focuses on late twelfth century romances, while Elisabeth Krimmer examines the early modern novels of Benedikte Naubert and Luise Mühlbach. The following chapter by Maha El Hissy examines the retelling and reappropriation of Roman works in the eighteenth century, including the rape of the Sabine women and the story of the maiden Virginia, which inspired Schiller’s 1783 play, *Fiesco’s Conspiracy at Genoa*. In the following chapter, Beatrijs Vanacker turns to another playwright, novelist, diarist, and courtier, Fanny Burney, examining Burney’s portrayal of the English queen Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz in her letters and court journals. The final chapter moves from observations of a queen consort to the voice of a female sovereign with Josephine Hoegaerts’ study of Queen Victoria’s delivery of speeches, starting with praise of her rhetorical efforts as young woman and ending with an attempt to record her voice using new technology at the end of her reign.

The second section is perhaps slightly less cohesive but still offers a strong selection of case studies. The first chapter on Eleanor of Aquitaine by Ayaal Herdam and David J. Smallwood, while interesting, is somewhat of an outlier as the other five chapters are all focused on the seventeenth to early twentieth century. There is also a contrast between Eleanor, one of the most famous medieval queens, and the less well-known early modern royal women in the following chapters. This is particularly true of Jaroslaw Pietrzak’s study of the Polish queens Louise Marie Gonzaga de Nevers and Marie Casimire d’Arquien Sobieska—two fascinating consorts who deserve far greater attention beyond Poland in both queenship studies and European history. Maria Cristina Quintero also takes a more unusual approach to the early modern Spanish consorts by analysing their use of space in both palatial settings, court theatre, and ceremonial, including their bridal journeys and civic receptions. The next two chapters sit very well alongside one another; the first is Joanna Marschner’s study of how the Germanic Hanoverian consorts reframed themselves in the light of the emerging sense of British national identity. Virginia McKendry’s chapter on the Hanoverian heiress Charlotte of Wales follows on perfectly, examining how the princess was attempting to reframe the role of the

monarch in preparation for her reign. While Charlotte's untimely death meant that her feminized, apolitical vision of the sovereign's role was not fully realized in her lifetime, McKendry demonstrates the impact that her ideas had on the reign of her uncle, William IV, and that of her cousin, Queen Victoria. The final chapter moves from consort and regnant queens to wider issues of female suffrage, as Marnix Beyen uses a case study of the enfranchisement of women voters in the Low Countries to compare with wider European and global trends in electoral rights.

In summary, this collection has a great deal to offer both scholars and students of a range of subjects—most particularly queenship and royal studies, but those interested in women's history, gender studies, political science, literature, and European history will also find much of interest here. Given that the book is available Open Access, it should become a valuable resource for research and find a wide audience. While the collection as a whole and the individual studies are generally very strong, the only potential criticism of the volume is that it does lack cohesion due to the wide variety of disciplines, approaches, and topics reflected in the chapters. However, this eclectic mix can also be seen as a strength which potentially gives it a wider appeal—as the work is available Open Access, many readers will likely dip into the collection to read chapters which interest them most, meaning that there is less need perhaps for the volume to read cohesively from cover to cover. The cover itself is striking and unusual—it is a piece of modern art, appropriately titled “*La Reina*” (“The Queen”). However, the relevance of the somewhat abstract piece is not immediately apparent without knowledge of the title of the artwork. It could be said that this very modern design, rather than a premodern illustration or portrait of one of the figures profiled in the volume, signals to the reader that this is a collection which intends to bring twenty-first century concepts and cutting-edge theories of queenship to bear in the case studies within. Indeed, both the editors and contributors should be praised for their efforts, which bring to light new approaches to and perspectives on the topic of female sovereignty and how it was both perceived and exercised in premodern Europe.

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