



*French Royal Women during the
Restoration and July Monarchy:
Redefining Women and Power*

Heta Aali

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021

Review by: Pablo Escalante

French Royal Women during the Restoration and July Monarchy: Redefining Women and Power. By Heta Aali. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. ISBN 978-3-030-59753-5. viii + 261 pp. £89.99.

The first two decades of the new millennium have witnessed a renaissance of studies on French kingship under the Bourbon Restoration and the July Monarchy. Heta Aali's book approaches this topic from a refreshing and stimulating angle: the public representations of the four most prominent royal women of the period. These four women were: the Duchess of Berry, Marie-Caroline of Bourbon-Two Sicilies (1798-1870, daughter-in-law of the King Charles X and mother of the last French Bourbon heir); the Duchess of Angoulême, Marie-Thérèse of France (1778-1851, the only surviving child of the guillotined Marie-Antoinette and Louis XVI and also daughter-in-law of King Charles X); the Queen of the French, Marie-Amélie of Bourbon-Two Sicilies (1782-1866, daughter of Marie-Antoinette's elder sister, Maria Carolina of Austria); and Madame Adélaïde d'Orléans (1777-1847, King Louis-Philippe's politically influential unmarried sister).

Building on John Dunn's idea that opinions about the king and his immediate family play an important political role in modern constitutional monarchies, explored in "The King's Three Bodies: Person, State and Public Opinion" (*History of European Ideas*, 2021), Aali's book analyzes the reception and reactions in public discourse to the different ways in which these four royal women exercised political power. In six chapters organized according to a chronological criterion, the book shows that praising or defaming royal women through their public representations became a way of supporting or attacking the king himself. In this sense, Aali's book provides an enriching and thought-provoking study of how early nineteenth-century men imagined and represented royal women, both contemporary and past, to legitimize or undermine the king.

The tension between the roles assigned to royal women and their real or imagined use of power was a common feature during the first half of the nineteenth century. Changing the centuries-old tradition of excluding royal women from succession to the throne was never on the political agenda of either the Bourbon Restoration or the July Monarchy—although this idea momentarily gained some adherents after the assassination of the Duke of Berry in February 1820 made his father, the soon-to-be Charles X, the last French Bourbon in the line to the throne at that time (69–75). In nineteenth-century France women were expected not to interfere in politics, and royal women were not excluded from this social convention. The book stresses that they were expected to behave according to an idealized image of the royal woman. Aali's analysis shows that the way in which royal women were perceived by the public weighed so heavily on public opinion that the king's supporters sought to underpin his regime by depicting his female relatives with the attributes of this idealized royal woman, while his opponents attempted to undermine it by depicting them in defiance of their gender mandates. For instance, opponents of the House of Bourbon, seeking to promote an image of this family as a dying power, sponsored publications that portrayed its female members as strong and politically involved women and its male members as weak and politically incompetent men (22–27).

Particular attention is paid to the uses of history for political purposes, with an emphasis on how historical characters were capitalized on in public discourse to define, promote, or defame the four royal women studied by Aali. History, she observes, was the most popular source of both legitimization and de-legitimization. All political factions turned to it because it provided a large repertoire of non-fictional characters whose vices and virtues could be used to mirror, distort, or magnify those of the four royal women in question. The analysis reveals that the historical representations used in public discourses relating to them were dynamic and under continuous negotiation. For instance, after the birth of the Duchess of Berry's son in September 1820 renewed the House of Bourbon's hopes of retaining the throne, her supporters associated her with Jeanne d'Albret (1528-1572), the Queen of Navarre and mother of Henri IV (1553-1610), the first Bourbon king of France (51–93). However, after the failure of her coup d'état in 1832 to restore her son as king of France, supporters of the House of Orléans portrayed the Duchess of Berry as a new Napoleon threatening France with civil war, while Marie-Amélie of Bourbon-Two Sicilies became the new Jeanne d'Albret in public discourse (109–157).

One of the most interesting points revealed by Aali's analysis of the political uses of history is the way in which literature and the press romanticized or vilified women of the past in an attempt to shape the female roles of nineteenth-century royal women. The book shows that the gender roles that women of the time were expected to follow were projected by historians and writers onto the women of the past in order to create a precedent. For instance, early medieval queens were portrayed as politically powerless, so that there was some justification for continuing to prevent nineteenth-century royal women from playing a more active role in politics (4–6). Aali's book thus emphasizes that the very narrow roles assigned to royal women—both contemporary and past—by nineteenth-century Bourbon and Orléanist literature have influenced later representations of them and concealed their real political authority (231–235).

Although even royal women were not allowed to participate in politics, the book shows that the four in question managed to do so through their male relatives, patronage, and charity. Moreover, it emphasizes that, in some critical cases, their Houses relied on their public image and on what they symbolized for the French to assert their right to rule France. For instance, Marie-Thérèse was essential at the beginning of the Bourbon Restoration: the only surviving child of the “royal martyrs,” Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette, she was represented by the supporters of Louis XVIII as a saint, who turned her person into an object of veneration that helped to consolidate the House of Bourbon's “sacred right” to rule France (30–36).

A large corpus of newspapers, magazines, biographies, and short treatises published during the first half of the nineteenth century constitutes the main set of primary sources on which Aali based her analysis. This choice certainly adds to the scholarly value of the book, as most of these sources have long been neglected or ignored by historians. References to this very interesting set of primary records are supplemented by a long list of up-to-date secondary sources. The inclusion of an appendix with the family tree of the Bourbon and

Review: *French Royal Women during the Restoration and July Monarchy: Redefining Women and Power*

Orleans families is particularly useful for those unfamiliar with the genealogy of these Houses.

There are very few studies on how historical imagery concerning royal women was used to legitimize or undermine each regime. Aali's book addresses this lacuna in the case of the Bourbon Restoration and the July Monarchy, while displaying a deep knowledge of French kingship and queenship.

PABLO ESCALANTE

The National University of San Martín (Buenos Aires, Argentina)