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Queenship in Early Modern Europe

Charles Beem

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Review by: Lynsey Wood

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Queenship in Early Modern Europe. By Charles Beem. London: Red Globe Press, 2020. ISBN 978-1-137-00507-6. viii + 274 pp. £18.99.

In his latest monograph, Charles Beem has produced a valuable survey of the role of queenship in the political, religious, and cultural life of early modern Europe. Although the template of European queenship "possessed certain universal characteristics," Beem argues that the office of queenship was also subject to regional variations that he explores through a series of case studies of early modern female rulers and consorts (3).

Each chapter of Beem's work includes a brief analysis of a queen emblematic of that particular geographical region: Chapter 1 begins with an introduction to early modern queenship and ends with a short survey of Isabella of Castile, who bridged the gap between medieval and early modern forms of power; Chapter 2 concerns queenship in Britain, and focuses on the many queenly identities of Mary, Queen of Scots; Chapter 3, on Franco-Iberian queenship, highlights the consortship of Anne of Austria, wife to Louis XIII of France; Chapter 4 discusses Empress Maria Theresa and queenship in the Holy Roman Empire; Chapter 5 focuses on queenship in the Baltic kingdoms, exemplified by Bona Sforza of Poland; and Chapter 6 discusses female rule in Russia, which reached its apotheosis under Catherine II "The Great."

In his analysis, Beem differentiates between the duties and expectations of kings and queens, and identifies strategies for queenly success and failure. The basic categories for measuring queenly success remained roughly the same for women across the early modern period: to assimilate to the language and culture of their kingdom, to bear children to secure the dynasty, and to achieve a companionate marriage with their husband. Successful queens were also expected to dispense charity, guard their chastity, intercede with the king, demonstrate piety, and play a leading role in the artistic and cultural life of the royal court (74–75). Many queens in early modern Europe achieved popularity and influence by following this traditional model of queenship. For example, Isabel of Portugal, wife to Emperor Charles V, was viewed as a successful consort because of her ability to work "within the bounds of appropriate gender roles" (91).

The traditional path to queenly success in early modern Europe was based on this foundation of piety, marriage, and motherhood. However, the confessional divide in post-Reformation Europe posed problems for many foreign queens consort, who professed a different faith than their adopted subjects. The Catholic queens of early modern Britain, including Anna of Denmark and Henrietta Maria, faced innumerable difficulties as a result of these religious tensions, obscuring their impact as cultural pollinators and artistic patrons (66). Other royal women recognised the incompatibility of their duties and their beliefs: Christina of Sweden, for example, made the decision to abdicate her throne after her conversion from Lutheranism to Catholicism (186).

Beem also highlights the double standards of moral and sexual behaviour for kings and queens throughout the early modern period. Royal wives like Anne Boleyn, for example, did not play by the "well-established rules of queenly conduct," leading to

accusations of infidelity which could lead to divorce, exile, and even death (31). In contrast, numerous queens were expected to tolerate their husband's affairs and maintain the perception of a companionate marriage in the public spaces of the court. In early modern France, women like Catherine de' Medici were even compelled to share certain functions of queenship with their husband's official mistress, including the education of the royal children (93).

Perhaps the most important task for an early modern queen was to produce heirs. Having a large brood of children not only safeguarded the succession, but also allowed royal women to build political capital by arranging matrimonial alliances with other ruling houses. Many queens suffered because of their inability to bear offspring, such as Marie Louise of Orléans and Maria Anna of Neuburg, wives to the impotent Charles II of Spain (107–108). Other queens compensated for their childlessness by cultivating a reputation for piety, such as Elisabeth Christine of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel-Bevern, whose husband, Frederick the Great, preferred the company of men even as he shunned the extravagance of the Prussian court (198–199).

For queens who wielded sovereign power in the early modern period, the path to queenly success was complicated further still. Some found themselves compelled to marry in order to gain regal authority, such as Anna Jagiellon, who became Europe's first elected queen when she was offered the Polish crown alongside her husband Stephen Báthory (166–167). Some queens remained unmarried, including Elizabeth I, who famously ruled England as a virgin queen (45). In contrast, Russian female rulers like Empress Anna Ivanovna were afforded an unprecedented amount of sexual freedom, demonstrating a belief that "their possession of autocracy allowed them the same sexual license as their European contemporaries" (216).

Because of the sheer number of women treated in Beem's work, an annotated timeline would have provided a useful guide for readers, especially in some of the more difficult passages. Beem's prose is also interrupted at times by typographical errors. For example, Isabella of Castile is variously referred to as "Isabella," "Isabela," and "Isabel" in the space of a few short paragraphs (15). This is nonetheless an engaging survey of early modern queenship, establishing a very useful set of criteria for measuring queenly success, as well as highlighting several areas that would benefit from further study by English-language historians.

LYNSEY WOOD
Manchester Metropolitan University