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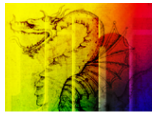

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What Remains of Manhood

The Reshaping of Female Power and Leadership in the Early Modern Age

by
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What Remains of Manhood

The Reshaping of Female Power and Leadership in the Early Modern Age

Eleonora Belligni *

Between the late Middle Ages and the Early Modern period, the emergence of the European territorial state was accompanied by a change in the gender balance, as women gained new and increased opportunities for leadership. In the sixteenth century, the new political anthropology, in the light of the socio-political, religious and cultural phenomena that changed the dynamics of the various European regions, elaborated theoretical constructions of government, the state, the distribution of functions, legitimacy and the foundations of consensus. It is a cultural operation to define a masculine power that considers women as the embodiment of an exception or an aberration. The consequence is that this masculinization of power is typical of the Renaissance and does not belong to the political culture of previous centuries. By extension, the so-called "paradigm of exceptionalism" (in the modern state, women in power are the exception that proves the rule) is an invention, or rather a recreation, of modern political philosophy, which reflects on the relationship between sovereignty and power and assigns it a masculine identity value (whose non-feminine character is emphasised). The hypothesis will be tested in the relationship between different types of textual sources in Early Modern Italy: namely, the reports of ambassadors and nuncios in a period stretching from Isabella of Castile to Elizabeth I Tudor; political treatises; travelogues.

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1. Introduction

The following pages present a series of reflections on the transformation that occurred between the Middle Ages and the modern age, whereby influential women, particularly queens, were culturally and symbolically ascribed certain attributes that Western culture defined as distinctly masculine. The phenomenon is described in detail by a plethora of Italian sources, which provide a comprehensive account of changes and oscillations in the female sovereignty in the courts of the early modern age. This study aims to explore mainly the sixteenth -century traces of what appeared to be a transformation in the ideas and practices of power, as observed by Italians who, by trade or by vocation, kept a close watch on developments in Europe, recording their observations in letters, histories, treaties, and reports. Although most of the sources used here date back to the last quarter of the fifteenth century and the sixteenth century, the time span taken into consideration is broader, as it corresponds to the unfolding of the processes that took place during the so-called 'Long European Renaissance'.[1]

Any shift in the representation of power, particularly in relation to royal authority, is a topic that falls within the field of political thought, but also has broader implications for the history of culture. During the early modern period, this was a highly contentious area of debate. The prevailing view at the time—especially from the second half of the sixteenth century—was that the value system underpinning the domain of sovereign governance, which could be considered the foundation and core of this system, had to remain unaltered. Any change, it was thought, could potentially jeopardise the integrity and stability of kingdoms. Power had to be as constant in its identity as in its attributes. This is a principle advocated by some of the most important theorists of sovereignty, above all Jean Bodin, who also preached the indivisibility, perpetuity and inalienability of power and, between the lines, the idea of the indestructible masculinity of power.[2] Nevertheless, in both practice and political

[1] Gordon Campbell, "Introduction", in *The Oxford History of the Renaissance*, ed. Gordon Campbell (Oxford: online edn, Oxford Academic, 22 June 2023), https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780192886699.003.0012, accessed 30 July 2024

[2] On Jean Bodin's view of women and power see Rebecca M. Wilkin, *Women, Imagination and the Search for Truth in Early Modern France* (London: Routledge, 2008), 53-97.

culture, this transfer of qualities from kings to queens was accepted until the latter became vessels of masculine values or something vaguely similar. This process occurred gradually and in various ways in different geographical areas from the thirteenth century onwards, reaching a significant turning point in the sixteenth century with the masculinisation of royal power, but went well beyond the age of Jean Bodin. This paper will examine through the eyes of Italian writers the factors that contributed to this imperfect exchange of attributes and assess the consequences it had for European political history, as well as for the history of ideas and, of course, for gender history and the history of gender.

My reflections follow Joan Scott's ideas about gender as a useful category of analysis for historiography.[1] However, I reverse her perspective by using European history (and historiography) to examine a transformation concerning the very concept of gender and its stereotypes. I maintain that this cultural transformation took place between the Middle Ages and the Modern Age and coincided with wider changes that developed gradually over these centuries. This approach, while acknowledging the value of 'neocontinuist' perspectives that have recently illuminated the long-term persistence of certain power-related phenomena, identifies the sixteenth century as a pivotal point not only in European history but also in the evolution of political culture. My position is informed by, and indebted to, a recent historiographical literature that encompasses both the medieval and modern periods. This scholarship does not deny the changes in political culture that occurred in the sixteenth century; rather, it analyses them in the context of specific historical circumstances[2] and consid-

[1] Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis", *The American Historical Review* 91 (1986): 1053-75. See also the more recent Middle Age historian Judith Bennett, *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism* (Boston: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

[2] See Merry Wiesner-Hanks, "Do Women Need the Renaissance?", *Gender & History* 20(M.E. (2008): 539-557, and the essays in *Gender, Change and Periodisation*, in *Gender and Change: Agency, Chronology and Periodisation*, ed. Alexandra Shepard and Garthine Walker (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009). Cfr. Wiesner-Hanks, "Women's Agency: Then and Now." *Parergon* 40, no. 2 (2023): 9-25. In the last twenty years, numerous innovative studies have been produced on women of power and female sovereignty between the Middle Ages and the early modern. For example, see Theresa Earenfight, "Medieval Queenship", *History Compass* 2017 (`https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12372`); "Where do we go from here? Some Thoughts on Power and Gender in the Middle Ages." Medieval Feminist Forum 51:2 (2016). `http://ir.uiowa.edu/mff/vol51/iss2/12`; Theresa Earenfight and Kristen Geaman, "Neither Heir nor Spare: Childless Queens and the Practice of Monarchy in Pre-Modern

ers the ways in which questions of female power transcend the divide between the medieval and early modern periods. For the sake of my theme, however, I will focus primarily on the significant and profound changes that occurred between the two periods of European history. While female sovereignty remained a relatively intact institution in the long term, some of its elements underwent notable transformations in the early modern period.[1]

Over a few centuries, the genesis of the European territorial state was accompanied by a change in the gender balance, as women gained new and more numerous leadership opportunities.[2] The tip of the iceberg, visible to all, was the spread, especially from the late Middle Ages onwards, of experiences of female sovereignty, even though the cases of reigning queens were substantially rare and geographically delimited. The political innovations of this medium-long period are not so much to be found in the legal form that defined women's legitimate access to the throne—an endless galaxy of regulatory solutions that

Europe", *in Routledge History of Monarchy*, edited by Elena Woodacre, Lucinda H.S. Dean, Chris Jones, Zita Rohr, Russell Martin (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 518–33; Theresa Earenfight, *Queenship in Medieval Europe* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 183-258; and her chapter "A Lifetime of Power: Beyond Binaries of Gender", in *Medieval elite women and the exercise of power, 1100-1400: Beyond the Exceptionalist Debate*, ed. Heather J. Tanner (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 271-93; Elena Woodacre, "Contemplating Royal Women's Access to Power and the Transition Between the Middle Ages and the 'Monstrous Regiment' of the Early Modern Era", *Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality* 51 (2016): 61-68.

[1] The first landmark in the historiography of the power of women in medieval and early modern times came from Joan Kelly, *Did Women have a Renaissance?* in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, ed. Renate Bridenthal, Claudia Koonz, & S. Mosher Stuard, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. Kettering, 1977), 137-164. The topic of the article is discussed for instance in Sophie Cassagnes-Brouquet, Christiane Klapisch-Zuber and Sylvie Steinberg, "Sur les traces de Joan Kelly", *Clio. Femmes, Genre, Histoire* [En ligne] 32 (2011): 17-52.

[2] On women of power in Italy see Serena Ferente, "Women and the State", in *The Italian Renaissance State*, eds. Andrea Gamberini and Isabella Lazzarini (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012), 345-67. See Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1985] 1987); Julius Kirshner, " 'Women married elsewhere': gender and citizenship in Italy", in *Time, Space, and Women's Lives in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Anne Jacobson Schutte, Thomas Kuehn and Silvana Seidel Menchi (Kirksville, MO: Truman State UP, 2001), 117–49. See also Julius Kirshner, *Marriage, Dowry, and Citizenship in Late Medieval and Renaissance Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015) and Thomas Kuehn, *Law, Family and Women: Toward a Legal Anthropology of Renaissance Italy*, University of Chicago Press, 1991. See also the essays in *Donne di potere nel Rinascimento*, ed. Letizia Arcangeli and Susanna Peyronel (Roma: Viella, 2008); or, more recently, *Donne Gonzaga a corte*, ed. Chiara Continisio and Raffaele Tamalio (Roma: Bulzoni, 2018).

would remain in chaos well beyond the early modern age.[1] What changed was the presence of women in the decision-making mechanisms and regency practices that had begun to flourish with the multiplication of wars and territorial aggregations.[2] Royal government is but the most obvious aspect, therefore, of a more articulated phenomenon. Beyond the sphere of sovereignty, the increase in female power took on heterogeneous and unprecedented versions, which in turn declined into new social, political and economic (and consequently cultural and religious) practices.[3] This transformation was slow, non-linear, but undeniably one of the hallmarks of the Long European Renaissance.

As many factors led European political actors to fight, interact and compete more frequently, ambassadors became the most sensitive spectators of this pro-

[1] In most European kingdoms, the re-emergence of Salic Law made it impossible for women to succeed to the throne, but between 1274 and 1512 five queens ruled the Pyrenean kingdom of Navarre: Elena Woodacre, "The She-Wolves of Navarre"„ *History Today* 62 (2012), 47-51. See also Fanny Cosandey, *La Reine de France. Symbole et pouvoir, XVe-XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000) and more recently *Dynastic Change: Legitimacy and Gender in Medieval and Early Modern Monarchy*, ed. Ana Maria Seabra Rodrigues de Almeida, Manuela Santos Silva, and Jonathan Spangler (London: Routledge, 2020).

[2] See for example the policies of gift-giving Tracy Adams, "Anne de France and Gift-Giving: The Exercise of Female Power*" in Women and Power at the French Court, 1483-1563*, ed. Susan Broomhall (Amsterdam: University Press, 2018), 65-84; Allyson M. Poska, "The Case for Agentic Gender Norms for Women in Early Modern Europe", *Gender & History* 30 (2018), 354-365.

[3] My analysis is based on many recent studies—actually over three decades old: see Huneycutt, Lois, "Queenship Studies Comes of Age", *Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality*, 51 (2016): 9-16. About the relationship between women and power, as well as the representation and imagination of female power. They can be divided into three main research strands, which are represented and summarized in Merry Wiesner-Hanks, "Forum Introduction: Reconsidering Patriarchy in Early Modern Europe and the Middle East: Reconsidering Patriarchy in Early Modern Europe and the Middle East", *Gender & History* 30.2 (2018), 320-30; *Medieval Elite Women and the Exercise of Power, 1100-1400: Moving beyond the Exceptionalist Debate*, ed. Heather J. Tanner (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019). See also Martha Howell, "The Problem of Women's Agency in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe", in *Women and Gender in the Early Modern Low Countries*, ed. Sarah Joan Moran and Amanda Pipkin (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 21-31. Anke Gilleir, "On Gender, Sovereignty and Imagination: An Introduction", in *Strategic Imaginations: Women and the Gender of Sovereignty in European Culture*, ed. Anke Gilleir and Aude Defurne (Leuven: Leuven UP, 2021), 7-26. See also the presentation of a groundbreaking series of books, Charles Beem, "Queenship and Power: The Heart and Stomach of a Book Series", in *Queens Matter in Early Modern Studies. Queenship and Power*, ed. Anna R. Bertolet (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2018), 19-52; Earenfight, *Queenship in Medieval Europe*, p. 185; Lisa Mansfield, "Portraits of Eleanor of Austria: From

cess and between the 15th and 17th centuries the volume of missions gradually but considerably increased. Travelers mingled with diplomats. While individuals crossed borders for educational, recreational, economic or religious purposes, for states, travel became an opportunity to forge diplomatic alliances or spy on enemies, but also to express mutual appreciation and engage in cultural competition. Italians were mobile and culturally receptive. From the 14th to the 17th century, a multitude of instructions, dispatches, missive and reply letters, memoirs and recollections, end-of-mission or final reports, sometimes accompanied by private diaries or travel journals, testifies to the attention of the small Italian states and the Holy See towards the rest of Europe. As a result, with the rise of an unprecedented number of women to high political and social positions, the description and analysis of their lives and characteristics became a permanent feature of diplomatic literature and a frequent *topos* of travel diaries written by Italians.

On the other hand, there were observers of the European situation of the nascent territorial states who used the account of others' experiences, or their own if they had been ambassadors some time before: treatise writers for whom the journey—in time and geopolitical space—was aimed at finding criteria for interpretation and behaviour. "The lesson of the ancients and the experience of the moderns" were the two directions of the speculative itinerary of the former Legate ouise, who, having reluctantly shed the robes of civil servant and ambassador, explained to his friend Francesco Vettori in the famous letter of 10 December 1513 that he had begun to wear "curial" robes, that is, essentially those of the writer of historical-political treatises. Intellectuals like him were part of a long-term phenomenon that characterised the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in particular: a transmutation of the ideas and categories of the political and in short of the theories of power.

From this point of view, treatises represent a territory that is not only very vast, with blurred borders, but also full of pitfalls: a territory, however, that it is impossible not to cross somehow. In this period, the analysis of political

Invisible to Inimitable French Queen Consort", in *Women and Power at the French Court*, 173–206. See also Carole Levin, and Alicia Meyer, "Women and political power in early modern Europe", in *Ashgate Research Companion to Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Allyson Poska, Katherine McIver, Jane Couchman, Farnham: Ashgate, 2013, 341-57.

spaces through historical times was confronted with new practices of female leadership. It is reasonable to think that some kind of interaction took place between the doctrines of the political and the theories defining male and female gender diversity in nature and in society. It is reasonable: but in this area the reason is disappointing. Indeed, the link between the genesis of the Europe of modern territorial states and the new political science is well known, but the weight of gender issues in its elaboration and, consequently, the relationship between political anthropology and gender anthropology has yet to be investigated. Between governmental practice and political philosophy, in the light of the socio-political, religious and cultural phenomena that changed, if not disrupted, the dynamics of the various European regions, it is not easy to trace either persistence or change from this point of view. The intersections between political anthropology and gender anthropology are barely visible in intellectual production, but they exist and produce speculative, albeit niche, formulations. Obviously, the reconsideration of Aristotelianism and the Hippocratic school had a great impact beginning with Humanism and throughout modern European times, but the ancient philosophical matrix is not the only one. While, between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, the philosophical and juridical foundations were being laid in Europe for a new anthropology of power, the one on which modern political theory was founded from the early sixteenth century onwards, at the margins of this anthropology, and in an apparently independent manner, a long-lived phenomenon, known as the *Querelle des Femmes,* spread and developed in the courts, among urban elites and in the intellectual networks that crisscrossed Europe.

The *Querelle* was a discussion on the nature of women, which evolved from ancient paradigms and placed their social and political function in relation to that of men at the center of the debate, in a close and often very participatory dialectic. It is an anthropological dispute that touches on literary topoi, philosophical and legal categories, ethical and aesthetic norms, religion, education, the concept of society, hierarchy and behaviour. Alongside the purely descriptive debate on the nature of women—letters, treatises and pamphlets—there was also a vast prescriptive 'conduct' literature, concerned with the roles, values and behaviour of the ideal woman, regardless of status or social differences.[1] This

[1] On this literature in the Italian context, see *Donna, disciplina, creanza cristiana dal XV al XVII*

literature flourished in the European Renaissance and developed independently of the *Querelle*, from which it seems to have emerged.[1]

Alongside this trend, which we could call 'polygraphic', there is little evidence in the mainstream political treatises of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries of the existence of powerful women and the change in their weight in the government of European territorial states. Witnessing the change, one finds instead institutional sources (such as state registers and diplomatic correspondence) and private sources (diaries, personal letters, family memoirs), which record the presence of women (even groups of women) in the courts, the roles they held, their actual exercise of power or mediation, their political and cultural initiatives, and their relationship with the male component of the various spheres of sovereign power. As is easy to expect for those who, prejudiced or not, had to observe the actual reality of the places of European government and write an account of it, it is mainly the diplomatic literature that dwells on gender-related political roles.

One thing is certain: both in correspondence and in *historiae* packaged for political patrons—real or presumed—interest in these subjects began to grow, rather gradually, from the fifteenth century onward. This growth was accompanied by an awareness of the female component of the political world which was, to say the least, bizarre, and which seems to have resulted from the frenzied mixing of a series of whimsical adaptations of perspectives on government and ideas about the nature of women. Not to mention the substance and attributes of femininity and masculinity in the body politic.

secolo. Studi e testi a stampa, ed. Gabriella Zarri (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1996) and Helena Sanson, "Introduction. Women and Conduct in the Italian Tradition, 1470–1900. An Overview", *Conduct Literature for and about Women in Italy: 1470-1900: Prescribing and Describing Life*, ed. Helena Sanson and Francesco Lucioli (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2016), 9-38.

[1] On the *Querelle des Femmes*, an extensive bibliography can be found in *Revisiter la Querelle des femmes. Discours sur l'égalité/inégalité des sexes, de 1400 à 1600*, ed. Armel Dubois-Nayt, Nicole Dufournaud, and Anne Paupert (Saint-Etienne: Publications de l'Université de Saint-Etienne, 2013) and *Revisiter la Querelle des femmes. Discours sur l'égalité/inégalité des sexes en Europe, de 1400 aux lendemains de la Révolution,* ed. Armel Dubois-Nayt, Marie-Elisabeth Henneau, and Rotraud von Kulessa (Saint-Etienne: Publications de l'Université de Saint-Etienne, 2015). See also about the Italian and Spanish contribution to the Querelle "Voces masculinas en la Querella de las mujeres (siglos XIII-XVIII). Número Monográfico", ed. Francisco José Rodríguez-Mesa and Cristina Rodríguez-Faneca, *LaborHistórico* 8 (2022).

On the other hand, powerful women could rely on the work of ambassadors or the help of occasional travellers and foreign guests to consolidate spheres of influence, patronage networks, and to reinforce direct intervention in domestic politics. Embassies involved the display of community virtues—moral, cultural, aesthetic and relational—which often (but not always) served to conceal a threat of aggression or war or to forge new alliances with enemies. Guests could be called upon to contribute to veritable propaganda campaigns in support of military operations, such as the Granada campaign for the Catholic kings, or to act as cultural agents for the benefit of the court, as happened to many Italians in England during the sixteenth century.

However, beyond the political-diplomatic praxis and the increase in female agency, he representation of female power is not a story with a happy ending: at least not in the sixteenth century and even less so in the seventeenth century. It is true that in this period the very concept of sovereignty begins to mix male and female characteristics as never before. Within a few decades, however, this phenomenon—which has paradoxical aspects—begins to decline towards new frontiers of misogyny. We can observe this mid-term trajectory mainly in diplomatic and travel sources. As female figures gained political, cultural and economic space, however, it became increasingly difficult to justify their presence, their indispensability and their actual power. It was particularly difficult because, in those years, Europe was sinking into what has been called the 'Iron Age', a period of increased conflict in which religious clashes (mixed with political disputes) were reshaping political factions. In this context, women in government were seen, in the best cases, as agents of chaos, and therefore indefensible. The *Querelle des femmes*, born as a philogynist defense of women's role in society, became the cultural and literary expression of the arguments against the idea of the substantial harmfulness of feminine nature.[1] The more women labored to defend themselves as authors, the more philogynist male writers labored to defend them, the more their cause lost ground and their reputation required further doses of legitimisation, which gradually gave way to demands for

[1] One of the most famous pioneer text on the *Querelle* is Joan Kelly, "Early Feminist Theory and the 'Querelle des Femmes', 1400-1789", *Signs* 8 (1982): 4-28. Now, one of the most comprehensive bibliography can be found in the recent essay by Rebecca Wilkin, "The Querelle des Femmes", in *The Cambridge History of French Thought*, eds. Michael Moriarty and Jeremy Jennings (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2019).

absolution and veils to disguise their uncomfortable presence. Although misogynistic arguments had ancient origins, they reaffirmed themselves vehemently from the second half of the sixteenth century, when France, Spain, the Empire, the Netherlands and England - not to mention Italy—were torn apart by radical politico-religious conflicts that found solutions, perhaps precarious, only after a few decades. Some women—and among them regents, queens, female members of noble lineages without their own male leaders—found themselves to be a belligerent, but more often a mediator, party to conflicts with which they were soon identified. The change in perception was implacable: the *communal* component of their power was substantially disregarded. In the opinion of many intellectuals, women were no longer what they used to be, but they ruled more than before. What had sovereignty become?

In 1558, the Scottish Calvinist theologian John Knox—a collaborator of Edward VI in shaping Anglican doctrine according to new criteria - thought he could rightly venture an analysis, or at least make *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstruous Regiment of Women.*[1] He knew, of course, some women more monstruous than other queens.

2. New voices from the sources

The Italian sources—travelogues, historical-political treatises, diplomatic literature—are vivid and sensitive witnesses to these turbulent decades, and are

[1] The context of Knox's work is crucial: his work was a reaction to the power of Catholic queens (Mary I, Mary of Guise, Mary Queen of Scots) as much as a misogynistic treatise. See on Knox the edition by Sharon L. Jansen, *The Monstrous Regiment of Women: Female Rulers in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Palgrave/Macmillan 2002).

regarded not only by current historians, but also by their contemporaries, as heralds of a particularly reliable perspective.

Italians had long enjoyed a special reputation as international observers. Whatever small principality or republic they came from, they could count on their prestige as representatives of a strong and long political tradition based on diplomacy and law, the legacy of the Roman Empire and the presence of the Curia. When they moved, they were not only neglected by foreign courts, but they were certainly well received. They were also regarded as cultural experts for their multidisciplinary approach to *humanae litterae* and their innovative approach to history, philology and political treatises. They could be recruited, to put it mildly, as intellectuals, perhaps in newly founded countries where Italian culture was considered important (such as England) or where, to tell the truth, any kind of foreign culture seemed welcome, as opposed to a supposed weakness of the native one (the case of Castile). Given the instability of their countries of origin—which increased dramatically over the sixteenth century—and the consequent difficulty of finding patrons and sponsors in a rapidly changing world of alliances, Italians could easily be persuaded to move and be imported (sometimes, later, exported) as propaganda agents. These cultured men, whose reputation as humanists and teachers was sometimes undeserved, could in fact become the main protagonists in a staging of cultural restyling through which not only some kings but also some queens sought to structure and strengthen their image as rulers.

In the early sixteenth century, however, only those who were employed by a woman had any incentive to show any interest in female leadership. In international correspondence, whether diplomatic or private, and especially in end-of-mission reports, powerful women were mentioned, but sparingly. The reason for this reticence, apart from the caution that any figures that concealed news and details could easily be circumvented, is that they were probably a double exception. Meanwhile, female leaders were an anomaly in themselves: few of them—essentially only regents, queens' lieutenants and those rare specimens of queens suo iure—had any real room for maneuver in the government of states, and so few merited any analytical consideration. The exception was when they were given the dignity, not of supporting roles, but of actual characters (if not protagonists) in the political history of a country, because writing the history of a woman and her status (as queen, heroine or illustrious woman) was a cul-

tural choice that undoubtedly required considerable intentionality. The female (gender) became, so to speak, a literary genre, independent of canons, registers and styles.

The classical models and *mulieres clarae* of Petrarch and Boccaccio became fragile, even embarrassing *auctoritates*. By the time of Italian civil humanism, when the first female humanists entered the debate, the question of women's education and the public role they could theoretically play (under very restrictive conditions) could no longer be ignored. But the step from education to politics was for the humanist gentlemen hopefully a long one.[1] Therefore, the exception of women was reluctantly addressed especially in political literature, and particularly if the aim was to draw from *exempla* laws for history and politics: an aim that the best writers in sixteenth century Italy began to pursue in diplomatic writing as a parallel activity and preparation for treatises. The "legations" and "commissarie", which led to "reports" and "portraits", among the most interesting products of the season of Florentine civil humanism, are not exactly *peana* on female government, even when they describe states and principalities that owed their birth, the extension of territories, dynastic solidity and ultimately survival to the leadership of one or more women. The issue of women in government is simply, sometimes very cleverly, sidestepped. Italy was full of powerful women, and, in previous centuries, the south of the peninsula had given government to queens much loved by the people, such as Joan of Anjou. But at the beginning of the 17th century, Italian political analysts preferred, at least for the time allotted to them, to hope for a virtuous prince than to look to what seemed to be a fallback, a substitute, at any rate an anomaly. If the diplomatic writings of Machiavelli and Guicciardini, whose legations are among the most famous of that season, are shot through with a significant awareness of the state process of territorial aggregation, of a new attitude of European sovereigns towards jurisdictional powers and privileges exercised in their territories, of new practices of negotiation between royalty, social orders and peripheral realities, there is, however, no significant mention of female power. Women are absent from *De natura Gallorum*, *Ritracto delle cose di Francia* (1510) and *Ritracto delle cose della Magna* (1512). There is not a single comment in the *Prince* on the role

[1] Stephen Kolsky, *The Ghost of Boccaccio: Writings on Famous Women in Renaissance Italy* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005).

played by the late Isabella of Castile in Ferdinand of Aragon's state-building—and maintenance—enterprise. This is in fact incomprehensible when one considers how many political calculations Ferdinand reserved for women, wife and daughter, throughout his existence.

In Niccolò Machiavelli's work, Caterina Sforza is certainly an exception, described in his *Discorsi*, *Arte della guerra* and *Istorie fiorentine* as an admirable example of female virility. The image of the *virago* is obviously a *topos* above all else: an oxymoron of classical derivation, much practised between the Middle Ages and the modern age. Here, however, the *topos is* diluted into a totally Machiavellian figure, all politics, made up of courage, the ability to seize an opportunity, resistance and female genitalia to be unleashed, in the most classic *anasyrma*, against enemies.[1] In the case of Caterina, countess-regent-of-Forlì in place of her son Ottaviano Riario—the reproductive organs put on display in Machiavelli's tale were intended not so much as the display of dynastic weapons—the mould for other heirs of the contado - but as a way of interpreting the virtue of the prince: deceiving the people, cynicism about family affections, rule at any cost. Or women could acquire a small space in the reports of missions, as shown in the hasty, anodyne portrait of Germaine de Foix sketched by the young Francesco Guicciardini, who visited the court of Ferdinand of Aragon in 1512 (*Diario di Spagna, Carteggio di legazione, Relazione di Spagna*).[2] Is it possible, one wonders, that the novice Florentine legate (more or less) did not consider the role of Ferdinand's marriages, and in general that of his politics with the female component of the family, of any importance?

[1] "Some of the conspirators from Forlì killed Count Girolamo, their lord, and took his wife and his children, who were young. Since they could not live in safety without the fortress, and since the lord of the castle would not give it to them, Our Lady Catherine promised the conspirators that if they let her enter the fortress, she would be handed over to them, and that they would keep her children close to them as guests. They, under this faith, allowed her to enter; who, when she was inside, from the walls reproached them for the death of her husband, and threatened them with all kinds of vengeance. And to show that she did not care for her children, she showed them her genitals, saying that she still had a way to make them." Niccolò Machiavelli mentions her in chapter 20 of the Prince (*An arces et multa alia, quae quotidie a principibus fiunt utilia an inutilia* sint); in chapter VI of book III of the *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio* (here the episode of the anàsyrma, 'denudamento'; in book VII of the *Arte della guerra* (1521), and finally she is mentioned in books VII-VIII of the *Istorie fiorentine* (1525).

[2] Vincent Luciani, "Il Guicciardini e la Spagna", *PMLA* (*Publications of the Modern Language Association*) 56 (1941): 992-1006.

The inattention of the great writers and Italian legates and travellers in general, however, was destined to wane. In the following decades, sources indicate a growing awareness of the power women could wield over the government of a state: this is evident, for example, in the gradual succession of end-of-mission reports, especially those of the Venetian legates. Over the years, the *Querelle des femmes* (at the same time both witness to and driver of cultural change) experienced an unforeseen expansion, both in the broadening of its audience and in the multiplication of authors and female authors throughout Europe, just as the political and religious conflicts between (and within) the new territorial states were spiralling. If in the past there had been no reason to question the role or right of women to rule in certain regions, now this right was being challenged by heated debates, in part encouraged by the increasing number of regent and lieutenant queens due to constant wars. Looking at mid- sixteenth century Europe, even Machiavelli would have recognised more than one Caterina Sforza: perhaps an exceptional Florentine like Caterina de' Medici.

At the same time, travellers and ambassadors—who in some cases, Florentines apart, devoted themselves to historical-political writing - were themselves protagonists of a process of transformation. From the fourteenth century onwards, it had become easier and more frequent for distinguished or well-referenced gentlemen who had been assigned to a diplomatic mission or travelled for pleasure and thirst for knowledge beyond the borders of their homeland to have contact with foreign women. By the early modern age, not only had diplomats been legally legitimised figures for centuries, but they were also an institutional presence in all parts of the continent and its border areas, from Cyprus to Jerusalem and the Ottoman Empire, albeit in different ways. The institution of diplomacy acquired an increasingly residential character - although this was not always the norm—and missions often involved a large staff, in which each member could have a distinct operational task.[1] Being ritually received by powerful women—the king's family, for instance—became a custom for diplomats and their entourage.[2] Likewise, travellers of a certain rank or prestige were

[1] For diplomatic personnel at subordinate levels and the functioning of the diplomatic house, see Catherine Fletcher, *Diplomacy in Renaissance Rome. The Rise of the Resident Ambassador* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2015), 81-89.

[2] On the importance of women in the diplomatic sphere and their ability to include foreigners, especially ambassadors, in court life, see Fletcher, *Diplomacy in Renaissance Rome*, 97-102.

sooner or later also called upon to frequent the female part of the court. It must be considered that even the latter sometimes ended up performing a specific diplomatic task on behalf of the host country or their sovereigns of choice: they could become impromptu ambassadors, sometimes military observers.

Treaties, official diplomatic correspondence, but also accounts written by people who were involved on *a one-off* or few occasions in diplomatic missions, as well as travel diaries and hybrid forms, are valuable sources for analysing the share of power reserved for the female component. For those who came from abroad to a country that was not their own, the image of women participating to some extent in the government of that country or having a prominent role at court was the result of a combination of elements. In addition to applying what might be termed an anthropological-ethnographic method of observation, one has to consider that the authors of court portraits—male and female—were often motivated by an apologetic will or were in some way incentivized to adhere to the representative structures of their patrons, or those of the host country. Ambassadors, especially resident ones, were not immune to prejudice[1]: often the strongest influences were positive ones, because it was not uncommon for them to become attached to the country they were visiting or in which they had decided to put down roots. The expectations of one's own country and hosts, plus sometimes individual opportunism, made it difficult to juggle judgement and the desire to please.[2] In addition, diplomatic correspondence and end-of-mission reports, from the sixteenth century onwards, became a genre of text, more and more rigidly codified as the decades passed. This genre, as is easy to surmise, quickly introjected a few, precise ways of portraying influential ladies in the courts, according to categories, stylistic, emblematic topoi and metaphors that risked throwing the, shall we say, naturalistic observation into a cauldron of literary clichés. However, thanks to the intertextual comparison of the various testimonies and the reading of the different contexts of production, it is also possible to grasp at least the reflections of interpretations of female power and the speed with which these changed in the transition from the late Middle Ages to the early modern age.[3]

[1] See Lazzarini, *Communication and Conflict*, 1-8, 189-262.

[2] Donald E. Queller, "How to Succeed as an Ambassador: A Sixteenth Century Venetian Document", *Studia Gratiana* 15 (1972): 655-666.

[3] See a pioneer study as *Femmes de pouvoir, femmes politiques durant les derniers siècles du Moyen*

A comparative analysis of the manuscript and printed sources attesting to the admission of women to the government of European states, along with the observations and comments of those, primarily men, who write about European queens and regents of this period, reveals an uneven set of elements concerning the substance and qualities of female power. The main one proposed here is that, from the fifteenth century and throughout the sixteenth century, as more and more women found themselves—sometimes 'by chance'[1]—in governmental roles in many regions of Europe, the idea of sovereignty was transformed from a binary gender concept (the sovereign could have male or female attributes, alternatively) to a gender-neutral concept (actually a mixture of male and female attributes), and rather rapidly moved towards a progressive masculinization of the function of the sovereign, i.e. the stigmatization of female attributes and the glorification of male ones. This transformation lasted decades, not centuries, and it is difficult to separate it, at least ideally, not only from the intellectual effort (historical, juridical, anthropological) to redefine the idea of politics, but also from the literary and philosophical effort to redefine the constitutive traits and boundaries of femininity that we call, precisely, *Querelle des femmes*.

In the following pages we will look at some examples of these different types. In the period between the reign of Isabella of Castile and that of the English queens of the second half of the sixteenth century, Mary and Elizabeth Tudor, several Italian travellers or official envoys began to describe their hosts in their writings: sometimes with flattery, sometimes with wit and severity, and often with a mixture of both. These included Pietro Martire d'Anghiera, a humanist at the court of Trastámara; the popular writer of a bizarre travelogue in Central Europe during the events of Wittemberg, Antonio de Beatis; and a series of learned Venetian ambassadors such as Marino Cavalli, Girolamo Lippomano and Giovanni Michieli, who portrayed Catherine de Medici and Maria Tudor. Alongside these sources, the'end-of-mission reports' of Venetian ambassadors, however abused, manipulated and even misinterpreted from their earliest editions, allow us to trace the evolution of the representation of powerful women

Age et au cours de la première Renaissance, eds. Eric Bousmar, Jonathan Dumont, Alain Marchandisse, Bertrand Schnerb (Bruxelles: de Boeck, 2012): the book analyzes thirty case studies of feminine power in the West.

[1] See on this matter Cesarina Casanova, *Regine per caso. Donne al governo, in età moderna* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 2014), 67-70.

in rapidly changing contexts of production and reception.[1] Of course, whoever wrote about queens and ruling women was tributary to a vast geo-historical literature and a knowledge of the art of diplomacy that often came from the written accounts of others. Behind these men of different generations and social and intellectual backgrounds were many writers who analyzed the female component of society, especially in relation to power.

3. The Queen's Bodies: from the Middle Ages to the Early Modern Age

Certain rites of passage marked Isabella of Trastámara's relationship with political power, making it visible to the public.[2] Despite the image conveyed by the myth of the *Reyes Católicos* couple, her marriage was not one of these rites.[3] On the contrary. The judicious choice of groom—made by Isabella herself, but especially by her mother Isabella of Portugal—was certainly decisive in determining the destiny of Spain, and would one day serve to effectively unite the two crowns under her great-grandson Philip II, but Isabella's marriage to the young Fernando heir to the crown and to the enormous political problems of John II of Aragon, was celebrated at a distance and without fanfare, after a drafting of lengthy premarital *capitulaciones* aimed at keeping the government in the hands of the bride if, which was not a foregone conclusion, she obtained the crown of Castile.[4]

[1] See Ioanna Iordanou, *Venice's Secret Service: Organizing Intelligence in the Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2019), 158-89. For a brief bibliography and a list of key issues in Venetian end-of-mission reports see Paola Volpini, "I dispacci degli ambasciatori in età moderna: edizioni di fonti e cantieri aperti", *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome—Italie et Méditerranée modernes et contemporaines* 132 (2020): 257-268.

[2] Elizabeth A. Lehfeldt, "The Political Legitimacy of Isabel of Castile", *Renaissance Quarterly* 53 (2000): 31-56. Theresa Earenfight, "Trastámara Kings, Queens, and the Gender Dynamics of Monarchy." In *The Emergence of León-Castile, c. 1065–1500: Essays Presented to J. F.* O'Callaghan, ed. James Todesca (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2015), 141-60.

[3] See for example Álvaro Fernández de Córdova, "The Political Funeral of Isabella the Catholic in Rome (1505): Liturgical Hybridity and Succession Tension in a Celebration *Misere a la Italiana et Ceremoniose a la Spagnola*", *Religions* 13 (2022): 228.

[4] See Núria Silleras-Fernández, "Iberian Queenship: Theory and practice", In *The Routledge Hispanic Studies Companion to Medieval Iberia: Unity in Diversity*, ed. Michael Gerli and Ryan D. Giles (London: Routledge, 2021).

The difficulties encountered by Isabella were not related to her gender. She ascended the throne after the death of Henry IV of Castile, defeating the dynastic claims of his daughter, Juana de Trastámara, known as the *Beltraneja*, but also the weaker claims (because they were less founded on the hereditary axis) of her husband Fernando of Aragon. In the war for the succession to the throne of Castile, the thirteen-year-old *Beltraneja* had lost the kingdom through her parents' divorce, and not because she was a young woman: so was her cousin, who, as a married woman, had barely a better chance. Fernando—heir by right to John II, but de facto heir to a series of Aragonese lieutenant queens who had ruled the kingdom in place of their male relatives—tried in vain to appeal to an uncertain Salic model law (little used and badly dusted off by his own father to ensure a male succession). The point is that in much of Christian Spain, from Navarre downwards, it was neither strange nor unusual that a woman should reign *suo iure*. The groom himself was not convinced of the success of his appeal: Castile[1] could legitimately have a queen. On the death of Henry IV, thanks to a strategically late communication, Fernando arrived in Segovia on 13 December 1474, certainly not to participate in a negotiation, but to witness, with no say in the matter, the apotheosis of his bride's power. Marriage or not, she and not he would rule Castile. He was left with Aragon: empty coffers, a difficult land, an uncomfortable neighbour with whom he was in business, sometimes, but more often at war.

And, of course, Ferdinand still had a new bride: a wife who reigned over the far more prosperous Castile. Whether she wanted to reign as king or queen, however, was not immediately clear to him upon arrival in Segovia. For Isabella de Trastámara, crowned Queen of Castile in December 1474, was indeed a woman in the flesh, and thus an embodiment of conjugal duties and motherhood. But she was perhaps the first to interpret her 'royal gift' as the acquisition

[1] Patricia Humphrey, "Ermessenda of Barcelona: the status of her authority", in *Queens, Regents, and Potentates,* ed. Theresa Vann (Denton, TX: Academia Press, 1993), 15- 35; William Clay Stalls, "Queenship and the Royal Patrimony in Twelfth-century Iberia: the example of Petronila of Aragon", in Vann, *Queens, Regents, and Potentates,* 49-61; Donald Kagay, "Countess Almodis: "Illustrious and Distinguished Queen" or "Woman of Sad, Unbridled Lewdness'", in Vann, *Queens, Regents, and Potentates,* 37-47; Maria Isabel Lopez Diaz, "Arras y dote en Espana. Resumen historico", in *Nuevas perspectivas sobre la mujer,* ed. Maria Angeles Duran, 2 voll. (Madrid: Universidad Autonoma de Madrid, 1982), 1:83-106.

of two mystical sovereign bodies, one male and one female, which she wanted to be unquestionable until her death and in the dynastic transmission of her kingdom to her descendants.[1] Somehow, however, Isabella abandoned forever the specificity of being a female sovereign, and did so, symbolically, in the name of other reigning and ruling queens who would come later.

In the following decades, in many regions of Europe, the idea of government over the people would acquire a new gender, that of the neuter.[2] Hitherto divided into male and female, sovereignty would fuse the two components to create an unprecedented hybrid, confirmed later when, through a series of coincidences favoured by the context, some women found themselves at the head of a state. The traces of this gender-neutral representation of sovereignty as interpreted by Isabella of Castile can be found in the work and letters of the Italian Pietro Martire d'Anghiera, whose considerable intellectual resources and sincere affection for the *Reyes Católicos* led him to combine political interest with historical and ethnographic passion.[3]

In fact, the whole story began more than ten years before the arrival of the young and learned Pietro Martyr. There is no written testimony from Italian eyewitnesses about Isabella de Trastámara's entry into Segovia on 13 December 1474 and her coronation as Queen of Castile and Leon: we only have Spanish chronicles. Upon entering the city, Isabella's ride to the church of San Martin, a few moments after her proclamation as queen of Castile, was intended to display the symbols of the masculinity of sovereignty. Above all, preceding her on

[1] I am referring here to the classic study on monarchy and government by Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957). See also Cary J. Nederman and N. Elaine Lawson, "The Frivolities of Courtiers Follow in the Footsteps of Women: Public Women and the Crisis of Virility in John of Salisbury", in *Ambiguous Realities: Women in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, ed. Carole Levin and J. Watson (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1987), pp. 82-98.

[2] On female models of leadership see Núria Silleras-Fernandez, *Chariots of ladies: Francesc Eiximenis and the court culture of medieval and early modern Iberia* (Ithaca-Londres: Cornell UP, 2015); Thomas Devaney, "Virtue, Virility, and History in Fifteenth-Century Castile", *Speculum* 88: 3 (2013), pp. 721-49. Marian Rothstein, *Androgyne in Early Modern France: Contextualizing the Power of Gender* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2015), 1-52.

[3] About the rituals on coronations and deaths, see Álvaro Fernández de Córdova, "The Political Funeral of Isabella the Catholic in Rome (1505): Liturgical Hybridity and Succession Tension in a Celebration *Misere a la Italiana et Ceremoniose a la Spagnola*'", *Religions* 13 (2022), `https://comisionisabellacatolica.com/Funeral%20de%20Isabel%20la%20Catolica%20en%20Roma.pdf`

horseback, Gutierre de Cardenas, one of Segovia's leading citizens, held aloft a naked sword by the tip, an archetype of royal justice and sovereignty, commonly associated with kings. Ferdinand's secretary, Luis Gonzalez, suggested that there was 'no precedent in all antiquity for a queen to be preceded by this symbol (...) Everyone knows that these are granted to kings; there has never been a queen who has usurped this male attribute'. The naked sword did not only speak to the city of Segovia but was intended to affirm before the whole of Spain, and also to foreign observers, both the inevitability of a female succession and the queen's ability to assume a dual gender identity, male and female at the same time.

This first act was clear enough: from here on, the attributes began to blur. Isabella's coronation marked the beginning of a new season for European monarchies and ruling oligarchies. The heiress of Trastámara was crowned mother of her subjects according to the classical Western model (bride-mother-giver of life) attributed to reigning queens, as to any woman, but then brandished before the city authorities a symbol attributed to warrior kings, defenders of the people and the faith. From then on, Isabella began trying to recruit people who could convey her message: sovereignty was sovereignty, whatever the cost. And, of course, one of the highest prices she paid was with that naked sword, as a king: it was a significant part of her gender identity, the attributes her culture had chosen for the female sex. Being a queen could mean being a 'mujer varonil', a virago, a familiar spectre in misogynist literature of all times, even when diluted in the figure of the androgynous warrior. Her people would have praised her: if not for this new and challenging identity, at least despite it.[1]

It is difficult to define Pietro Martire d'Anghiera as a diplomat or traveller: certainly, his trip to Spain became a definitive choice and thus changed his existence. From a family originally from Anghiera, in the Milan area, he had begun his career as an intellectual by moving to Rome, following the future Cardinal Ascanio Sforza and the Archbishop of Milan Giovanni Arcimboldi. Here he had

[1] On the chronicles (such as Fernando de Pulgar and Alfonso de Palencia's *Crónica*) see Marvin Lunenfeld, "Isabella I of Castile and the Company of Women in Power", *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 4:2 (1977), 57-79 (exp. 59). A posthumous Italian report of Isabella's power was Gasparo Contarini, ambasciatore a Carlo V, 1521-25 in *Relazioni degli ambasciatori veneti al Senato,* Serie I: *Comprende le relazioni degli stati europei, tranne l'Italia,* a cura di Eugenio Alberi, vol. II (All'insegna di Clio: Firenze 1840), 36.

come into fruitful contact with the leading exponents of the Roman Academy (including Pomponius Leto and Platina). It was here that he had met the Spanish ambassador Iñigo Lopez de Mendoza, Count of Tendilla, and had followed him to Spain in 1486, despite the contrary opinion of his protectors and friends. Ascanio Sforza had made him promise to send frequent reports on everything that happened at the Spanish court. The promise, which was kept, resulted in a correspondence of over 810 letters (from 1488 to 1525). Considered in the chronological order in which they were published, they can be read as a travel diary or a series of diplomatic reports.

From the beginning, he felt that Spain would be his new homeland, much preferable to Italian soil. The homeland, in fact, was the court, and the court was Isabella. The author showed no interest in analysing and describing people of low rank, as he explicitly declared: 'I have no desire to talk about the common people, who have never interested me' ('De populo quem semper floccifaciendum censui, nihil ad me'). He liked high-ranking people and especially the royal couple, whom he probably tried to impress from the very beginning. Pietro Martire's Latin epistles are full of valuable information on Spanish marriage, which he described, with an eye on Granada, as the only hope for European Christianity in difficult times.

In many letters, it is recounted that Isabella had welcomed him as her protégé and would have gladly kept him closer to her than she was willing, on balance, to keep her husband. In 1488, writing to the queen, Pietro Martire expressed his admiration for her 'extraordinaria mujer', who 'sub humano isto tegmine' demonstrated 'divinas latere virtues'. But, attracted by what was happening in Andalusia, the same year he asked permission to leave the court to participate, with the Count of Tendilla, in the last campaigns against the Arabs, as a soldier and historian at the same time. After all, the *Reyes Católic* needed people *to* praise the success of their war against the Arabs: above all, they needed people who could write and had correspondents in the high ecclesiastical spheres of Rome.

Pietro Martire's image of the ideal ruler, as many of the letters he wrote in those early years testify, was more clearly modelled on the queen than on her husband. From the beginning, he knew that there was something truly extraordinary about a woman ruling with a king, but independently. It was a model of sovereignty that was certainly possible, but uncommon: two branches of a

single dynasty ruling two countries with separate administrative and representative institutions, two people so united in the symbolism of kingship despite the different jurisdictions and considerable socio-economic diversity of their countries.

About him, the king, he is not surprisingly admirable (...) for we read in the *historiae* countless examples of just, strong men, endowed with every virtue, and even wise. But her, who would you find me among the ancients, among those who have wielded the sceptre who has brought together these three things in high undertakings: a great courage to undertake them, constancy to finish them, and together the decorum of purity? In fact, this woman is stronger than the strongest man, more constant than any other human soul, a marvellous example of purity and honesty. Nature has never produced a woman like her; is it not worthy of admiration the fact that what was always foreign and alien to woman, could be found in her profusely and as if it were connatural to her?[1]

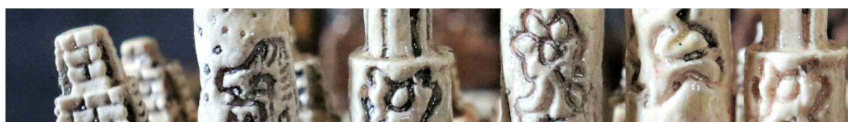
The comment "Foreign and alien to a woman" was his way of justifying Isabella's superiority: a rather classical way, with a twist. The equation was clear: if there are two people holding the sceptre, and the woman is the more important of the two, there must be something manly about her. It would be better to have two men, so to speak, than one woman and half a man. Pietro Martire was aware from the beginning of his career as a court intellectual that the real power and wealth of both kingdoms resided in the hands of Isabella:

There are many more kingdoms in the queen's dowry than in her husband's, and much more powerful ones, in which one does what she commands, but she rules in such a way that it seems as if they both rule the same way. They both live in Castile and from Castile comes the organisation and expense of war. It is these unprecedented virtues and the magnanimity and strength of her heart that have justly earned her this name.[2]

[1] Pietro Martire d'Anghiera, *Opus epistolarum*, CCLXXIX, 159-60 (Letter to the Archbishop of Granada and the Count of Tendilla, 1 December 1504), cited in English in Cristina Galván, "Mujer, poder y legitimidad: discursos y representaciones en las crónicas a fines del siglo XV", *Actas de las XII Jornadas Interescuelas/Departamentos de Historia. Departamento de Historia, Facultad de Humanidades y Centro Regional Universitario Bariloche. Universidad Nacional del Comahue, San Carlos de Bariloche, Argentina 28-31 October 2009*, https://cdsa.aacademica.org/000-008/34.pdf (last accessed 25 May 2024).

[2] Pietro Martire d'Anghiera, *Opus epistolarum*, XXXI, 12-13 (Letter to Ascanio Sforza, 1 August 1488), cited in Rodriguez Valencia, *Isabel la Católica*, 177).

His vocation was not that of a soldier. Pietro Martire returned to court and in 1492 was appointed gentleman of the queen's chamber ('contino de su casa'). It was then that he took an important step towards Isabella's cultural propaganda project, starting from a generic job as cultural agent, as domestic humanist. He was asked to follow Isabella's court as it moved from city to city, to act as a teacher, to instruct young nobles and to import a more philologically correct humanism into Spain with his books and teaching. His pedagogical sensitivity was accompanied by his reputation as a wise man, forged by his experience and his readings of ancient authors. As a teacher and humanist, he essentially transmitted a way of learning and some moral values that matched those of his employer.[1]



Testifying to his interest in politics, history and geography, letters continued to flow from his pen to Ascanio Sforza and other important Italian and Spanish personalities explaining the world, commenting on the past, asking questions on how to govern a country, even a New World. Until after his death, however, the echo of his reflections on sovereignty almost exclusively concerned Isabella. As is clear from her letters, the reign of the *Reyes Católicos* was based on a wise balance between the cardinal virtues (justice, prudence, temperance, fortitude) and the cardinal virtues (faith, hope and charity), which often supported each other. If one of them faltered, the kingdom was in danger. Occasionally, to be

[1] He was not always happy to meet Isabella's cultural goals and expectations and at times he found the work somewhat demeaning and boring. See for example Pietro Martire d'Anghiera, *Opus epistolarum*, CXV, 64-65 (Letter to the Archbishop of Braga and the Duke of Pamplona, 1 September 1492), cited in Rodriguez Valencia, *Isabel la Católica*, 179: "I have all day long a house full of noisy young men of the nobility (...) So much has this academy of ours pleased the Queen—a living exemplar on the throne of every kind of virtue—that she has commanded her cousin-brother, the Duke of Gueraes, and the Duke of Villahermosa, the King's nephew, to frequent my house and to stay there all day long, only going out when urgent reasons require it. All the young heirs of the potentates of both Spains have come after them".

fair, Isabella faltered. She was despotic, capricious, obsessed with the fear of her children dying, not unjustly, moreover. Every now and then, even to Pietro Martire, the queen appeared more and more in human form and the earthly traits of her character turned into faults unbecoming of a man, let alone a woman: 'The queen does not listen and is obstinate in her *feminine* decisions. She has become a different woman than we have ever seen before. I have always said she is constant; I don't want to call her stubborn; she is too sure of herself'.[1]

Slipping towards the end of her reign, while ill, Isabella—as depicted by Pietro Martire—gradually lost her feminine attributes 'not only emulating a man, but in strength of mind, prudence and perseverance, qualities not found in women, she can be compared to any of the most illustrious and famous heroes'.[2] Isabella, losing her queenly body piece by piece to her illness, in the words of her court historiographers made herself a king. After her death, her Italian apologist Pietro Martire was not the only one to eulogise her in the words of a man, indeed, as a man, "because underneath her woman's body she always carried with her a virile spirit".[3]

As mentioned above, the descriptions of women in government dating from these years are unsatisfactory: very few references to the environment in which they lived and the people around them; a few hasty allusions to their figure, character, emotional ties with male relatives; almost no reference to the way they dressed and behaved. In some accounts, women are, if not completely ignored, at least inserted into the narrative rather anonymously, treated as bland and subordinate figures. All equal to national characters, which in any case were not those of the country to which they had arrived as brides: in the eyes of foreign observers, they were just women, generally not worthy of attention, except for a few who differed from the others in having made themselves indispensable to a man, and thus to the state.

[1] Pietro Martire d'Anghiera, *Opus epistolarum*, CXV, 100 (Letter to the Cardinal of Santa Cruz, 13 June 1497), cited in Rodriguez Valencia, *Isabel la Católica*, 181.

[2] Pietro Martire d'Anghiera, *Opus epistolarum*, CCXLIX, 141-42 (Letter to the Archbishop of Granada and to the Count of Tendilla, 13 September 1502), cited in Rodriguez Valencia, *Isabel la Católica*, 184.

[3] Pietro Martire d'Anghiera, *Opus epistolarum*, CCLXXIX, 159-60 (Letter to the Archbishop of Granada and the Count of Tendilla, 1 December 1504), cited in Rodriguez Valencia, *Isabel la Católica*, 191: "Sub foemineo namque tegmine, id est, sub corpore muliebri virilem semper animum gestavit".

For some decades, Isabella continued to be the exception par excellence, if not the only one. The most famous Florentine historian, political writer and statesman Francesco Guicciardini—one of the main figures of civic humanism—in his reports on the diplomatic mission of Ferdinand the Catholic,[1] while taking very little interest in the king's second wife, Germaine de Foix, tried to explain why his first wife had exercised such great power over her husband:

> Nor was the queen's glory deemed lesser in so many actions, indeed by consensus most of these things were attributed to her; for all things that concerned Castile came through her. It was she who gave the main orders and in common matters it was no less useful to persuade her than her husband. Nor can this be attributed to the king's lack of valour, counting that the things he did afterwards proved how virtuous he was; but it must be said either that the queen was so particular that even the king yielded to her; or that, since these kingdoms of Castile belonged to her, he allowed it for a higher purpose.[2]

But after some time, the queen's image began to disappear along with that of King Ferdinand of Aragon. In his book *The Prince*, Niccolò Machiavelli chose Ferdinand as an example of the male model of a condottiere who conquered and maintained power through 'virtue and fortune': a man who had nothing divine about him, but who, despite his flaws and weaknesses, was politically aware.[3] Caterina Sforza represented in Machiavelli's writings an unattainable exception of masculine princely virtues embedded in a female body. However,

[1] The *Discorso di Logrogno* is an early political work from 1512 by the historian Francesco Guicciardini. It is part of a series of *Discorsi* that Guicciardini wrote after he was appointed ambassador of the Republic of Florence to the Crown of Aragon, ruled at the time by Ferdinand the Catholic, in 1511. During the same period, he wrote the *Relazione di Spagna* (1514) and the *Diario di viaggio in Spagna* (1512) and began the first draft of the *Ricordi.* His diplomatic experience provided him with a comparative perspective to evaluate Florentine politics, which he analysed in these works. The speech takes its name from the city where it was composed, which in the modern period was called Logroño. On *Il Discorso di Logrogno* see Roberto Palmarocchi, "L'ambasceria del Guicciardini in Spagna", *Archivio Storico Italiano* 97.2 (1939), 145-69.

[2] Francesco Guicciardini, *La Legazione di Spagna, ossia carteggio tenuto dal Guicciardini ambasciatore della Repubblica Fiorentina a Ferdinando Il Cattolico: 1512-1513*, vol. 6 of *Opere inedite di Francesco Guicciardini*, ed. Piero Guicciardini and Luigi Guicciardini (Firenze: Presso M. Cellini, 1864), 284.

[3] See on this Edward Andrew, "The Foxy Prophet: Machiavelli versus Machiavelli on Ferdinand the Catholic", *History of Political Thought* 2.3 (1990): 409-22; Leandro Perini, "Machiavelli e Guicciardini diplomatici", *Archivio Storico Italiano* 155.4 (1997): 649-78: 673-74.

Caterina had also asserted her femininity, claiming, while insulting her enemies, that she would use her as an instrument of government.[1] Quite a paradox, just as Isabella had brandished the sword of the male warrior, while proclaiming herself pious mother of her people, according to the classical Western model of bride-girl-giving life.

4. The first decades of the sixteenth century

After Isabella's death, the definition of what was feminine and what was typically masculine in a sovereign entity became less certain. The character of kingship and power acquired an unprecedented mixture of masculine and feminine attributes. In other words, the idea of sovereignty, which had previously been divided into male and female power, merged into a single gender model. In the face of these changes, how should one deal with queens, ladies in leadership roles or women in prominent positions in view of an impending war, negotiation or treaty?

At the turn of the sixteenth century, the question was almost more of interest to ambassadors and travellers than to their governors or patrons. While for pleasure travellers the gender dilemma was less serious, for diplomats the stakes were high and the answers could vary widely depending on the specific composition of each court. It was no longer just a question of how to approach

[1] About Machiavelli's portrait of Caterina in *Discorsi sulla prima deca di Tito Livio*, III 6, and in *Istorie Fiorentine,* VIII 34, see Francesco Bausi, "*Machiavelli e Caterina Sforza", Archivio storico italiano* 149 (1991), 887-92; Marco Pellegrini, *Congiure di Romagna. Lorenzo de' Medici e il duplice tirannicidio a Forlì e a Faenza nel 1488* (Florence: Olschki, 1999), *ad indicem*; Frédérique Verrier, *Caterina Sforza et Machiavel, ou L'origine d'un monde* (Manziana: Vecchiarelli, 2010); Elizabeth Lev, *The Tigress of Forlì: Renaissance Italy's Most Courageous and Notorious Countess, Caterina Riario Sforza de' Medici* (Boston, MA: Mariner Books, 2011).

the female part of the royal family for information and support: it was about recognising a certain symmetry in the status, roles and functions of men and women, their cultural resources and their ability to rule. The strategic role of the women of the royal family in missions to foreign courts is a recurring (and progressively increasing) element in the very detailed letters of instructions that ambassadors received from their masters. In France between the late Middle Ages and the early modern age, for instance, the very structure of the court and the queen's household made it impossible to ignore women, even if their rule acted de facto, not de jure, according to the basic laws of dynastic succession (as in France, parts of Spain and Flanders, the Empire and England). They had a very long tradition of strong and educated queen consorts.[1] and queen lieutenants dating back to at least the 14th century. Indeed, the French beginnings of the *Querelle des femmes* and its close relationship to cultural politics and the reputation of Isabella of Bavaria shaped the role of women in government, both foreign and domestic.[2]

A well-known description of a queen consort comes from the first of the Venetian ambassadors' end-of-mission reports to the Senate, that of Zaccaria Contarini, who in 1492 accompanied Francesco Cappello to attend the marriage of the young French king Charles VIII to Anne, duchess of Brittany.[3] His words to the Senate, in which he described the royal couple, implicitly confirmed what were to become the two basic principles of subsequent Italian accounts. The first was to provide information already filtered through the verification of sources. The second was to provide as accurate a description as possible of those who held the state in their hands, taking into account the relative importance of the family, native or acquired, in the lives of male rulers; or, in the case of women, the reasons for their power or autonomy. Thanks to the medieval tradition of

[1] See for queens consort's formal and informal power, their religious role, and cultural patronage (seventeenth-eighteenth century) *Queenship in Europe 1660-1815: The Role of the Consort*, ed. Clarissa Campbell Orr (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004).
[2] Tracy Adams. *The Life and Afterlife of Isabeau of Bavaria, Rethinking Theory* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2010).
[3] On Zaccaria Contarini's life, see the bibliography in Giuseppe Gullino, "Contarini, Zaccaria", *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, vol. 28 (Rome: Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, 1983), `https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/zaccaria-contarini_(Dizionario-Biografico)/` (last accessed 26 May 2024).

European travelogues, these two elements became the hallmark of Italian diplomatic reports, later imitated by ambassadors from other countries. Zaccarini Contarini may have been wrong about Charles VIII, whom he considered an unpleasant, inexperienced and untalented young man, but he was certainly able to recognise in a short time the manipulative vocation and political astuteness of Anne of Brittany, duchess and twice queen, the future great administrator of her own territories and interests in general:

> The queen is seventeen years old. She is also small and of petite build. She is noticeably lame on one foot, although she wears platform shoes to hide it. She is brunette, has a very attractive face and, for her age, is very clever, so much so that she manages to get everything she likes either by laughing or crying. She is jealous and overly attached to His Majesty the King, so much so that since she has been his wife, she rarely goes a night without sleeping with His Majesty and has managed it so well that she is eight months pregnant.[1]

Zaccaria Contarini did not know it at the time, but it was the young Charles VIII, albeit 'tardo in locutione', who was to inaugurate a long season of frenetic diplomatic activity between the Italian principalities and the European courts, and who would also animate his life from then on. The descent of the French king to Naples in 1494-1495 marked the beginning of the series of conflicts known as the Wars of Italy. They stimulated the work of the ambassadors, but did not put an end to leisure travel; however, Italians abroad had to be very careful, especially if they wanted to visit courts and high-ranking people.

But there were also those who moved with enviable ease in any agitated situation, as the protagonist of *The Travel Diary* of Antonio de Beatis demonstrates, a bizarre itinerary written by an obscure canon from Molfetta in Apulia, secretary/chaplain to Louis of Aragon, and composed on commission from his master. The latter was the illegitimate nephew of King Ferrante (Ferdinand I) of Naples and one of the wealthiest and most well-connected cardinals of his time, who travelled with the author and many other men of his household.[2]

[1] *Le relazioni degli ambasciatori veneti al Senato*, ed. Eugenio Alberi, 15 vols, series 1 (Florence: Tipografia all'insegna di Clio, 1839-1863), vol. 4, 3-26: 18. On the embassies of 1492 and 1496, see also Francesco Foscari, *"Dispacci al Senato veneto di Francesco Foscari e di altri oratori all'imperatore Massimiliano I nel 1496"*, *Archivio storico italiano* 7.2 (1844), 721-948. 721-948

[2] The journey cost the cardinal 15,000 ducats. He had to provide for an entourage of thirty-five

from May 1517 to January 1518 through Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands and France.[1] De Beatis' obscure Apulian vernacular describes the day-to-day events of this strange undertaking. What appeared to be a 'Grand Tour' was strangely disguised as a diplomatic mission (perhaps to meet Charles V and secure his family's interests in southern Italy). There was, however, the possibility of things going the other way round: a real diplomatic mission in the guise of a cultural journey.[2]

It is known that De Beatis' work impressed one of the most powerful women in Italy, Isabella d'Este, Marchioness of Mantua, who was determined to secure a copy for her library. Isabella, herself a traveller and ambassador on behalf of her duchy, was probably seduced by De Beatis' sharp and concise language, his brilliant descriptions of different environments, and his mixture of personal opinions and banal stereotypes. De Beatis was a collector of many literary traditions of 15th century Europe, of which travel diaries or diplomatic documents are only a small part. In terms of its approach to gender history, however, the text is surprisingly dense: it is full of comments on the customs of the female population of the places visited, and at the same time offers several succinct and concise portraits of the women who occupied positions of power at the time.

Compared to his predecessors, in fact, his attention to the female element is exceptional because it is systematic and creative, it is directed at women as ethnographic subjects but also, in the case of court women, as individuals with precise specificities. His portraits reveal a passion and curiosity for human behaviour that can only be found in the great writers of the Italian Renaissance.

courtiers, household officials and servants, John Hale, "Introduction", Antonio de Beatis, *The Travel Journal of Antonio de Beatis through Germany, Switzerland, the Low Countries, France and Italy, 1517-1518*, ed. John Hale and John M. A. Lindon (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1979), 6-57: 32

[1] It was first published by the German papal historian Ludwig Pastor (1905) and then edited by John Hale (1979) in English. I am quoting directly from the English version edited by Hale, Antonio de Beatis, *The Travel Journal.*

[2] De Beatis, *The Travel Journal*, 146: "My most reverend and illustrious master the Cardinal of Aragon of immortal memory (as you are aware) having resolved, under the cover and excuse of meeting Our Lord the Catholic King, his kinsman and lately elected invincible King of the Romans, that not being satisfied with having several times seen the greater part of Italy, nearly all Baetica and the furthest parts of Spain he would also get to know Germany, France and all those other regions bordering the northern and western ocean and make himself known to so great a variety of people".

The first are those of Anna (of Bohemia and) of Hungary and Maria of Habsburg at the court of Emperor Maximilian I: two very young girls, surrounded by ladies-in-waiting and linked to a family that was about to rule more than half of Europe:[1]

Here the Cardinal met the two queens in the emperor's quarters, which are very beautiful and contain many suites built in the German manner. The queens gave us an audience in a room one side of which was entirely occupied by court ladies numbering over fifty, beautiful and well dressed in the German fashion. One of these queens, named Anne, is the sister of the king of Hungary and is fourteen or fifteen years old; she is about to marry Ferdinand, brother of the Catholic king. She is very beautiful and very amiable, with lively eyes and such a complexion that she seems to be all milk and blood. She was dressed in black velvet and wore a velvet cap of the same colour on her head. The other one, sister of the Catholic King and betrothed to the King of Hungary, is 10 or 11 years old, is brunette and does not look good in my eyes. She was dressed in the same way, but in silk of another colour than black, though she wore a black velvet cap.[2]

We do not know much about De Beatis, except that he was educated in Latin and talented, and that he somehow satisfied his master's high demands. He performed the same duties as many ambassadors, or more precisely, embassy secretaries. Although he was aware that the purpose of the trip was ambiguous, his intention must have been to imitate the method of the Venetian 'reports' at the end of the mission, to which he added his own method of colourful observations on people and places. His diary demonstrates that diplomatic reports could be indistinguishable from travel journals, as Italian travellers and ambassadors learnt a lesson from humanist historians: observing otherness is a matter of knowledge of space and geography, but also of awareness of the passage of years and centuries and of the current season, the processes underway and

[1] David S. Chambers, "Isabella d'Este and the Travel Diary of Antonio de Beatis", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 64.1 (2001), 296-308.

[2] As Hale suggests, "De Beatis cites no models. His aim, he says in the *Dedication*, is to provide a 'true account of things, either seen by me or reported by persons of great authority and worthy of all trust and belief', and in the text, apologizing for spending so short a time in Cremona that he cannot provide an adequate description of it, he makes it clear that he wishes his account to be not merely a record of the Cardinal's movements and meetings but to be as informative as possible": De Beatis, *The Travel Journal*, 112.

the cultural, political and economic transformations affecting every part of the known world.

And indeed, if we pay attention to what he wrote, the canon of Molfetta learned some lessons about women in foreign countries. In his pages, common and plebeian women—both peasants and townswomen—differ from country to country in dress, habits and even in character and sexual behaviour. One element makes De Beatis's descriptions quite peculiar: while lower-class women are clearly distinguished by place of residence, the women in power in the countries visited—nobles and members of royal families—are all the same, apart from a few hasty considerations on clothing and physical appearance. They do not have national characters, namely they do not even have those proper to their place of origin.[1] Rather—and this is extremely relevant—they are divided into strong and weak, i.e. women who are important for the fate of the kingdom or completely irrelevant. In fact, according to De Beatis, aesthetic qualities do not influence their attitude to leadership or the role they are destined to play. Both the beautiful and the unattractive are capable of ruling if they want to. You cannot judge a leader by her look.

In the pages devoted to France, for example, we have one of the best descriptions of a chain of power clearly represented by two women who did not carry equal weight in the royal family. One was the daughter of King Louis XII, Claude de France, and the other was the powerful and all-powerful mother-in-law, Louise of Savoy, who really ran the court and, as de Beatis suggests, often made the political decisions:

> The Queen is young, and although she is small in stature, simple and severely lame in both hips, she is said to be very cultured, generous and pious. And although the King, her husband, is a great womanizer and easily intrudes into other people's gardens and drinks to excess, it is common opinion that he holds the Queen his wife in such honour and respect that, when in France and with her, he has never failed to sleep with her every night. And every time His Majesty says he intends to visit his duchy of Brittany, a place of great importance whose inhabitants are formidable men and natural enemies of the French, the King trembles and fears him. His mother is an unusually tall woman, with a still fine complexion, very ruddy and vivacious, and seems to me to be about forty years

[1] De Beatis, *The Travel Journal*, 199-208; 247; 398; 395.

old but more than good, one would say, for at least another ten. She always accompanies her son and the Queen and is a housekeeper without restraint.[1]

Although it is debatable as to Claude's actual incapacity, at least in some areas of court life[2] that he handled with great competence, the characteristics attributed to Louise, and her actual power, have been confirmed by all other contemporary sources.[3] There seems to be no clear reference in the Travel Diary to the symbolism that the Valois-Angoulême family, namely François I, his mother and his sister Margaret, had adopted from the earliest years of their reign and that constituted the emblem of their royal union: the Royal Trinity. However, it was clear to all outside observers that, if the propaganda intended to show the unity of the family strategy, Louise was the real mastermind, director and strategist of the government of her young son, who would not have reigned were it not for the inability of Anne of Brittany—the only real inability of the political strategy monster that was the duchess—to produce living male heirs.

The canon of Molfetta De Beatis was probably self-taught in the diplomatic report and probably also in the travelogue. But, for writers like him, in Italy, the path was a different one. Generation after generation, from the end of the 14th century to the end of the sixteenth century, a considerable number of civil servants or high representatives of the Church, nobility or republics of various Italian states grew to consider diplomatic missions not only an obligatory stage of the *cursus honorum*, but also a civic duty. Officers such as Guicciardini, Machiavelli, Stefano Guazzo, Baldassarre Castiglione and Monsignor Giovanni della Casa were all eminent representatives of civic humanism and the Italian Renaissance, people of great political commitment who professed, directly or otherwise, to need those two elements invoked by Machiavelli himself to interpret the world: reading classical authors and the lessons they could learn from their contemporaries.

Their legacy was a lesson in method. However, it is very difficult to find very close analogies in their descriptions of powerful women. Was there in their

[1] De Beatis, *The Travel Journal*, 262.

[2] See the description of Claude in Aubrée David-Chapy, *Louise de Savoie: Régente et mère du roi* (Paris: Humensis, 2023), *ad indicem.*

[3] Rothstein, *The Androgyne in Early Modern France*, 109-32.

time an Italian way to identify and describe the characteristics of European queens and women leaders? The only common element that can be observed is that in the first decades of the sixteenth century, the image of women in government or close to rulers was essentially organicist, in the sense that it depended on a corporate idea of sovereignty. This, if one looks closely, is quite obvious, because it was confirmed in the theories of the past and in much, much practice in Western monarchies.

Organicist analogies and metaphors aside, the corporate structure of the realm was a given for the two countries that, from the Italian Wars until the middle of the 17th century, vied for dominance over Europe: France and Spain. For almost the entire sixteenth century, after the Peace of Augsburg, it was the Habsburgs and Valois who dominated the courts of eastern and western Europe not only with arms, but also with incredibly powerful family ties. As the Venetian, later cardinal, Gasparo Contarini pointed out,[1] the female contingent of the clan was the backbone of the Habsburg Empire (and of Charles V, in this case) because it helped to keep the centre and peripheries of Europe firmly under imperial rule.[2]

Despite its name, therefore, in the sixteenth century the monarchy was still a corporate institution and the success of a kingdom and the ability to maintain it depended to a large extent on both passive (marriage alliances) and active family strategies. In a period characterised by large-scale land amalgamations, rapid changes in European geopolitics, intensifying wars and the renegotiation of jurisdictions, privileges and the role of classes in relation to royal authority, a solid marriage could not always guarantee the extension of borders or keep a territory safe from attack. However, as the great sovereigns of the sixteenth century, Emperor Charles V of Habsburg and King Francis I of Valois, demonstrate, having female members of the family capable of governing, who

[1] About the experience of Contarini both as a Venetian legate and a "nunzio pontificio", see Gigliola Fragnito, *Gasparo Contarini. Un magistrato veneziano al servizio della cristianità* (Florence: Olschki, 1988) and Elizabeth Gleason, *Gasparo Contarini: Venice, Rome and Reform* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993).

[2] The description of the female component of the imperial family clan written by Gasparo Contarini became a model for later reports: "Gasparo Contarini ambasciatore a Carlo V, 1521", *Le relazioni degli ambasciatori veneti al Senato*, ed. Alberi, series 1, vol. 2, 63-65.

were at the same time military allies, skilled consensus-builders or subtle diplomats, could prove decisive for a king.[1]

Family tradition was of enormous importance to Charles V, both the Habsburgs and Burgundians and his Castilian-Aragonese heritage. The emperor's grandmothers, Isabella of Castile and Maria of Burgundy (respectively queen and duchess suo iure) had been more powerful (at least in life) than his grandfathers, the Catholic king and Habsburg emperor. The male nephew, entrusted with governing a large patchwork of territories and overseeing others, did not hesitate to rely on his aunt and sisters. To some extent, he even relied on his mother Joan, who was still present as the legitimate ruler of Castile, nominally reigning despite having been declared incompetent: "still alive, though melancholy in Tordesilla".[2]

Flanders, ruled exclusively by women at the beginning of the modern age, was the cornerstone of the Habsburg dynasty's investment in women: it was in fact a long line of relatives, aunts and nieces who had managed to fuse the Burgundian tradition of female rule with the institution of the Castilian-origin lieutenant queen. The power of Flemish women—stationed in the Netherlands—was crucial for the construction of the Habsburg Empire, even before the accession of the young Charles. Moreover, in 1551, the ambassador Marino Cavalli reported to the Venetian senate about this system, which at the time of his visit was in the hands of Maria of Habsburg: "these Netherlands are now ruled by the widowed Queen Maria of Hungary, sister of the emperor and a woman of such spirit and valour that would suffice for such a dominion; for she is of indefatigable spirit, and in the practices of both war and peace has shown how much the valour of a woman can add?"[3]

[1] Earenfight, *Queenship in Medieval Europe*, 123-258. See also Charles, Beem, *Queenship in Early Modern Europe* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019) and Susan, Broomhall, "Royal Women and the Habsburg-Valois Wars (1494–1559)", In *The Routledge Handbook of French* History, ed. David Andress (London: Routledge: 2023).

[2] "Ancora vive, ed è melanconica in Tordesilla": "Gasparo Contarini ambasciatore a Carlo V, 1521", *Le relazioni degli ambasciatori veneti al* Senato, ed. Alberi, series 1, vol. 2, 65.

[3] "Questi Paesi Bassi sono governati ora dalla vedova regina Maria d'Ungheria, sorella dell'imperatore e donna di tanto spirito e valore che basteria per altrettanto dominio; perché è d'uno spirito indefesso, e nelle pratiche sì della guerra che della pace ha mostrato fin dove possa aggiungere il valor di una donna" ("Marino Cavalli ambasciatore a Carlo V, 1551", *Le relazioni degli ambasciatori veneti al* Senato, ed. Alberi, series 1, vol. 2, 204-05).

The court of France was no less, and when it could had organised itself as a phalanx of relatives, even before Spain and the Habsburg Empire. An efficient clan, praised in the accounts of travellers such as Federico Gonzaga or Louis of Aragon[1] and the Venetian ambassadors of the period,[2] was certainly the family of François I de Valois. The dynasty was sustained by the tradition of family networks built around the Valois rulers (from other branches of the family) who had preceded François and who had relied heavily on their female members for several decades. Moreover, the extraordinariness of the French case harks back to even earlier centuries, in particular to the rule of Isabeau of Bavaria.[3]

Isabeau was perhaps not the first, but the most famous consort of French kings to be confronted with opinions regarding her own image and regency, at least when she was alive, and to face a highly successful misogynist (and xenophobic, as was often the case) campaign *post mortem*. Under her, and thanks to Christine de Pizan, the *Querelle des femmes* took shape and courage and the seeds of debate were sown far, far ahead. However, publicity was very costly for women, and reputations had to be maintained in much the same way as male rulers did, i.e. far beyond their physical lives. The increase in public ceremonies and the ritual emphasis placed on the funerals of queens across Europe indicates that the campaign of self-promotion—or, more accurately, promotion of female dominance—did not end for their bodies, as it did for those of kings, with death, just as female sovereignty itself evidently lived on. It did not live on

[1] The teenage Federico Gonzaga travelled from Rome to France, formally as a hostage, but openly living the life of a wealthy visitor and friend of the French crown, mostly eager to learn about foreign lands. Luigi d'Aragona's role as a proper ambassador was never confirmed or denied. They both acted more as travellers than as people carrying out a mission.

[2] The best-known reports in the lifetime of Francis I were written and often read before the Senate by Andrea Navagero in 1528; Marino Giustinian in 1535; Francesco Giustinian in 1537; Niccolò Tiepolo (1538); Giovanni Capello in 1541 and 1544; Marino Cavalli in 1546. These are all available in *Relations des Ambassadeurs vénitiens sur les affaires de France au XVIe siècle*, 2 vols, ed. Niccolò Tommaseo (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1838), vol. 1. See also Matteo Dandolo, "Relazione di Francia di Matteo Dandolo ritornato ambasciatore da quella corte il 20 agosto 1542", *Le relazioni degli ambasciatori veneti al* Senato, ed. Alberi, series 1, vol. 4, 27-56.

[3] On this point see Aubrée David-Chapy, "Deux princesses engagées pour le roi et la couronne: Anne de France et Louise de Savoie", *Noblesse oblige*, ed. Nicolas Le Roux and Martin Wrede (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2017); "The Political, Symbolic and Courtly Power of Anne of France and Louise of Savoy: From the Genesis to the Glory of Female Regency", *Women and Power at the French Renaissance Court*, ed. Susan Broomhall (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2017.

as a by-product of male dominance, but was a beating heart embedded in the realm, a heart of flesh that was embalmed and preserved as a relic, according to an earlier tradition, but one made famous by Anne of Brittany.[1]

The powerful and benevolent French sovereignty, which served to protect and govern the people, was undoubtedly a family brand. It involved the extended family, present and past, and passed through the daughters of France. The clan was not only horizontal, but also vertical and ascendant: its verticality was based on the female tradition of power management and was often transmitted from mother to daughter. At the same time, however, as the relationship between Anne of France (of Beaujeu) and Anne of Brittany shows, it was also based on women allied by necessity, illustrious strangers and hypothetical rivals.[2] Thus, Federico Gonzaga, the future Marquis (and later Duke) of Mantua, regarded Anne of France as a central court player and reliable mediator in foreign policy as early as 1516.[3]

Anne and the queens and regents of the following century clearly invested enormous symbolic efforts in constructing and promoting female sovereignty, extolling the interpersonal skills of female rulers and the material and cultural transmission of such rule. These efforts were undoubtedly aimed at the subjects of the kingdom of France, but at the same time, and with particular attention, they also appealed to foreign ambassadors, travellers and dignitaries.[4] Those entrusted with taming enmities and fostering alliances were faced with the continuous display of a femininity that was powerful yet sober, strong yet clement, principled in its customs and spending but capable of intellectual commitment and religious zeal, rich in pedagogical skills and networking abilities

[1] Hélène M. Bloem, "The Processions and Decorations at the Royal Funeral of Anne of Brittany", *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance* 54.1 (1992), 131-60.

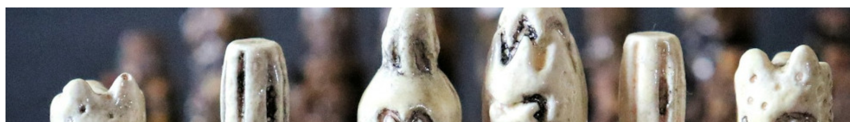
[2] On this point see Aubrée David-Chapy, "Deux princesses engagées pour le roi et la couronne: Anne de France et Louise de Savoie", *Noblesse oblige*, ed. Nicolas Le Roux and Martin Wrede (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2017); "The Political, Symbolic and Courtly Power of Anne of France and Louise of Savoy: From the Genesis to the Glory of Female Regency", *Women and Power at the French Renaissance Court*, ed. Susan Broomhall (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2017).

[3] See Tracy Adams and Glenn Rechtschaffen, "Isabeau of Bavaria, Anne of France, and the History of Female Regency in France", *Early Modern Women: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 8 (2013): 119-47.

[4] See, for example, on Louise de Savoy, Aubrée David-Chapy, "Le gouvernement de Louise de Savoie", in *Louise de Savoie, mère de François Ier*, ed. Murielle Barbier *et al.* (Paris: RMN, 2015), 65-84; Aubrée David-Chapy, *Louise de Savoie: régente et mère du roi* (Paris: Humensis, 2023).

and, above all, endowed with an enviable political prudence but also lively and energetic. The queens, regents, queen mothers and daughters of France were also associated, in the prevailing imagination, with an entourage of ladies who, through shrewd strategies, seemed to embody the values enunciated in Christine de Pizan's *Le Livre de la Cité des* Dames and, at the same time, in a complicated architecture of aesthetics and ceremonial ritualism, delighted foreign visitors.

The earliest admirer of the French ladies was certainly Federico Gonzaga, already mentioned, the teenage son of Francesco II Gonzaga and Isabella d'Este. Alternating between his three secretaries, Giovan Francesco Grossi (known as Grossino), Giovanni Stefano Rozzoni and Stazio Gadio, Federico wrote long and detailed letters to his mother during his stay—when he was basically a very pampered hostage—from 1516 to 1517.[1] In these missives, Frederick reiterated how the number and quality of women at court (which the young man measured more by their elegance than their culture) was an indicator not of a monarchy devoted to amusement and luxury, but above all a powerful monarchy. The following year, 1518, he would return to France for the celebrations in honour of the birth of Francis I's son, with more pride and less fear. We have no idea of his understanding of who was actually in charge of the French court. The time had come when the young Valois king had to concoct for the benefit of his subjects and foreign powers a solid, affection-independent, masculine, virile image with which he could identify. Of course, the paradox is that he would never have been able to do this without the help, so to speak, of his mother and sister, on whom he was extremely dependent. Unlike him, the two women, Louise and Marguerite, apparently knew his stuff better than he did.



[1] Federico's journey and stay in France is evidenced by the letters of the young Gonzaga himself and his secretaries preserved in the State Archives of Man. See *Federico Gonzaga alla corte di Francesco I di Francia nel carteggio privato con Mantova (1515-1517)*, ed. Raffaele Tamalio (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1994).

5. The second half of the century

As is well known, ever since the 13th century, ambassadors of the Serenissima, returning from their missions, had to draw up a *report*, which could vary in length and detail, and which had to contain information about the country to which they had been sent, its government (court and rulers) and its foreign policy inclinations. Throughout the sixteenth century, many other European diplomats and nuncios were called upon to submit a final report, but the Venetians stood out from the rest, not only because the Serenissima had more permanent representations than any other state, from Italy to Syria and Egypt, but also because the *reports* were strictly codified both as a genre and as an institutional procedure.[1] The female presence in Venetian relations at the end of the mission can thus be assessed according to both diachronic and synchronic parameters. It testifies to a growing importance in all European governments and, at the same time, to the process of metamorphosis of kingship and, more generally, of female sovereignty.

Observers were treated to a new season of queens (often as consorts, sometimes as lieutenants or regents) as they travelled east and west across Europe. Initially, in travelogues and reports, these figures represented a more or less harmonious synthesis of feminine and masculine characteristics: the traditional theological virtues, accompanied by the cardinal virtue of temperance (which could be represented as chastity, both virginal and maternal), were combined with masculine virtues (such as fortitude of spirit) and specifically political virtues (justice and prudence). However, these portraits of queens are brief and standardized.

As the sixteenth century progressed, descriptions of powerful women not only gained more space in diplomatic communications, but became true political accounts of anomalies of power, governments of exception, violations of codified standards for the exercise of power. The feminine virtues lose their harmonious concordance with the masculine component: the sovereign or regent becomes the battleground between a uterine, Hippocratic and earthly part, on the one hand, and a masculine part, on the other. In this battle, the male

[1] Filippo De Vivo, "How to Read Venetian *Relazioni*", *Renaissance and Reformation/Renaissance et Réforme* 34 (2011) : 25-59.

part loses the sovereign requirements of justice and moderation, retaining the virtues of prudence and fortitude, but sometimes turning them into cynical political calculation or an overly virile taste for domination. The result is that queens are increasingly described as political *monstra*: in truth, both admirable and terrifying.

Caterina de' Medici—described from the time she was thirteen years old and had joined her uncle Clement VII as pope at court - is the prototype of these *monstra* in Venetian end-of-mission relations.[1] Catherine was approached and portrayed by a long series of ambassadors sent from Venice. The constant attention devoted to her - first as the young wife of the king's second son, then as the potentially barren queen consort, then as the mother of the French heirs, then as widow and regent, finally simply as "the Queen Mother"—testifies to a change in perception and representation even in codified texts such as reports.

In Venetian writings, increasingly masculine, increasingly 'Florentine' and political, the character of Catherine largely overshadowed the anodyne figures of her sons. In this literature, the process of transformation, evidenced by the chronological sequence of the reports, seems to have nothing to do with European political events and Franco-Venetian relations, which throughout the sixteenth century were in flux due to the rapid shifting of alliances during the period of the Italian Wars. If anything, the encirclement of Venice in Europe and its loss of power and territory to the Ottoman Empire heightened the ambassadors' awareness of the real powers of the French court. The descriptions came from men of high rank, great culture and political experience, who usually arrived at the French mission after visiting other European courts. Marino Giustinian (1535), Francesco Giustinian (1537), Niccolò Tiepolo (1538), Giovanni Capello (1541-1544), Matteo Dandolo (1542 and 1547), Marino Cavalli (1546), Giovanni Michiel (1561; 1572; 1575; 1578), Lorenzo Contarini (1551), Michele Soriano (1562), Marcantonio Barbaro (1564), Giovanni Correr (1569),

[1] She was described by Antonio Soriano (Rome, 1531) as having a "very lively nature" and "a gentle spirit" and "well accostumed", "small in person, meagre, and with a non-delicate face" with "large eyes, proper to the house of Medici": Antonio Soriano, "Relazione alla corte di Roma di Antonio Soriano, 1531-33; 1535", in *Le relazioni degli ambasciatori veneti al Senato*, ed. Alberi, series 1:2: 283-84. See also Igor Melani, "Gli ambasciatori veneti nella Francia del primo Cinquecento. Alcune considerazioni", *Archivio Storico Italiano* 162 (2004): 453-505.

Alvise Contarini (1572), Sigismondo Cavalli (1574) and Girolamo Lippomano (1579) provided written evidence of the increasing assumption of a sovereignty with distinctly male characteristics.

At the beginning of the French Wars of Religion, Marcantonio Barbaro wrote that he had "found in [the Queen Mother] a sharp and truly Florentine spirit" and declared that "she shows herself wise and prudent, and one can see greatness of mind in her majesty. She is just and intelligent in her actions. She has shown herself constant in the adversities that have befallen this kingdom".[1] In 1569, Giovanni Correr proclaimed her perfect interchangeability with a male sovereign ("I do not know what prince so prudent has not fallen into so many contradictions (...) and if these rumours should cease, so that she does not need the work of certain people like her, I promise (...) that she will be able to dispose of this kingdom as if she were its natural leader").[2] A few years later, Lippomano, although neatly pro-Spanish, unconditionally admired her political abilities, much less her biological sex:

> The most serene Queen Mother, according to that natural will to command that she has always exercised, even if with many storms (...) she still governs with much authority (...) she never shirks fatigue (...) and finally does as she pleases and seems to acquire new strength and pleasure in fatigue, and to be indefatigable in labours and travels. This is why people have begun to say: if the queen leaves, who will stay? and if she stays, who will leave? since everyone now calls her the mother of the kingdom.[3]

Yet, despite the flattering words of Lippomano and his predecessors, Catherine de' Medici was living proof that as long as female dominance remained a *de facto* condition, and not a right, it was nothing more than a cultural aspiration. An aspiration that often clashed with the fundamental laws of the state, as in France, parts of Spain and Flanders, the Empire and England. The Salic law was in fact a package of rules full of uncertainties and liable to invention and

[1] Marcantonio Barbaro, "Relation sur le Royaume de France (...) après son ambassade de 1563", *Relations des Ambassadeurs vénitiens*, ed. Tommaseo, vol. 2, 7-101: 44.

[2] Giovanni Correr, "Relation de Jean Correro, ambassadeur en France en 1569", *Relations des Ambassadeurs vénitiens*, ed. Tommaseo, vol. 2, 102-202: 156-57.

[3] Girolamo Lippomano, "Relazione di Francia (1579)", in *Le relazioni degli ambasciatori veneti al Senato*, ed. Alberi, vol. 15 (*Appendice*), 32-72: 60. Lippomano's very long description is one of the most comprehensive on Catherine de' Medici and on a woman of power in general.

interpretation, but it enjoyed a very good press, as if it had really been carved in marble.

Throughout the sixteenth century, Italian observers were confronted with this dyscrasia. They were confronted with paradoxical situations that required cautious and detailed instructions from their principals. Women in government were there but, at the same time, they were not, like a Cheshire cat: just as the Salic law itself or the customs that supported European politics by excluding women from government were also, in fact, like grins without a Cheshire cat. Even with regard to the Tudor sisters, Mary and Elizabeth, who also reigned in their own right, the legitimacy of the succession remained unresolved and was still being debated after their deaths.

It was England in the second half of the sixteenth century that represented the turning point in terms of the substance and attributes of royal power. And it was the final report to the senate by the Venetian ambassador Giovanni Michieli (1557) that recognised the full fusion of the male and female sides of sovereignty. Queen Mary Tudor of England, in his eyes, represented the essence of the *monstrum* androgynous, and her pious attitude was but a kind of mild mitigating factor. Mary Tudor is described as a bewildering woman, hybrid in nature, with stern features and a masculine voice. Educated, bold and courageous: a warrior with masculine traits, supported unfortunately by a weak feminine structure. Although strong of spirit, Michieli noted, she had done well to choose to marry Philip of Habsburg, future king of Spain, and to give up ruling alone. Her feminine weaknesses clashed with her masculine virtues, and vice versa. Her competition with her half-sister Elizabeth Tudor, who was as cultured and strong as Mary, but more graceful, had made her vulnerable to female passions: for, to put it bluntly, she was jealous of another woman, who could steal her kingdom the way one steals a husband, or a lover, from other women. Her intensity was aggravated by her so-called 'wandering womb' and constant haemorrhages, uterine pathologies that made her unstable and deprived her of the possibility of being a mother and thus a reproducer of dynasties:

> She naturally suffers from the retention of her menstruation and wandering uterus, to which she has often been subjected for many years, so that, as a remedy, since she cannot vent her feelings by crying, as she often does, as she has been accustomed to do

since childhood, she has to draw blood, sometimes from a foot and sometimes from other parts of her body, which keeps her constantly pale and emaciated.[1]

But the same pathologies prevented her from being king. In Michieli's eyes, Mary Tudor was the perfect embodiment of the queen as a failed man, of 'female' sovereignty succumbing to 'male' sovereignty through heteronomy and sterility. A queen who is an incapable, powerless king loses the virtues that make her worthy of being a great ruler. She is an androgyne, lacking not only temperance but also fortitude and prudence: "her eyes are so lively that they inspire not only reverence but also awe in those to whom she addresses them (…) her voice is big and high, almost like the voice of a man, so that when she speaks it is always heard from afar".[2] A man, then? No, female passions led her away from the throne, which should have been hers rather than her husband's: the queen was constantly "troubled by her public and private thoughts and passions, which often lead her to great melancholy".[3]

When Mary Tudor died in 1558, England's third *de jure* queen, Elizabeth Tudor, embodied a new kind of kingship, the sovereignty of a woman who had deliberately remained unmarried—and therefore barren—by marrying her own country. Yet Italian observers, in deference to papal excommunication, did not tell her story. Venetians returned home, brooding from afar about what the combination of Protestantism and the female gender would bring. A few Italians stayed, of course: the dissidents, the heterodox, the Protestants. Among others, Petruccio Ubaldini, miniaturist, copyist, calligrapher and, above all, polygraphist, who was technically neither a traveller nor an ambassador, even though he had made many journeys from Italy to England and back, and even though he was preparing to be, if not a diplomat, a vehicle of information between the two countries.

Born in Florence around 1524 into the noble Ubaldini family of Urbino,[4] he

[1] Giovanni Michieli, "Relazione di Inghilterra (1557)", *Le relazioni degli ambasciatori veneti al Senato*, ed. Alberi, series 1, vol. 2, 289-380: 325-26. On these portraits of Mary see Glyn Redworth, " 'Matters Impertinent to Women': Male and Female Monarchy under Philip and Mary", *The English Historical Review* 112 (1997): 597-613.

[2] Michieli, "Relazione di Inghilterra (1557)", 323.

[3] Michieli, "Relazione di Inghilterra (1557)", 325.

[4] See Giuliano Pellegrini, *Un fiorentino alla corte d'Inghilterra nel Cinquecento: Petruccio Ubaldini* (Turin: Bottega di Erasmo, 1967); Francesca Bugliani, "La questione ubaldiniana", *Lingua e letter-*

was probably an exile *religionis causa* who, as we read in the *Proem* to *The Lives of Illustrious Women*, "wandered for many years in Europe, most of them in the kingdoms of England and Scotland".[1] On Mary Tudor's accession to the throne, he returned to Italy; in Venice, in the early 1550s, he wrote for the Senate the *Relatione d'Inghilterra* (1551) in the manner of the Venetian ambassadors: an account of Edward VI's reign that was updated several times over the following decades. He returned to England in 1562, after Elizabeth had consolidated her rule, to an environment where the architecture, literature, art and ideals of Humanism and the Italian Renaissance had been in vogue for several decades. When religious and political relations between England and Italy deteriorated from the mid- sixteenth century over religious issues, Ubaldini, who had close connections with prominent people in both England and Italy, was able to fill the void left by the breakdown of official diplomatic and ecclesiastical contacts from 1562. In fact, he was the only Italian chronicler of English affairs in the second half of the sixteenth century, and this brought him close to the queen, who could use some news even after her excommunication and her ban from Italian networks.[2]

Ubaldini wrote books spanning several genres: historical-geographical texts, political chronicles and treatises, ethnographic accounts and narratives of major events. But he is best known for his collections of portraits of illustrious women, dedicated to Elizabeth I: *The Lives and Facts of Six Illustrious Women* and *The Lives of the Illustrious Women of the Kingdom of England and the Kingdom*

atura 17 (1991): 160-74. On the role of Ubaldini at the court of the Tudors, and in particular of Elizabeth I, see Anna Maria Crinò, "Italiani in Inghilterra dal Trecento ai nostri giorni", *Archivio storico italiano* 126 (1968): 459-60; Francesca Bugliani, "Petruccio Ubaldini e la conformity elisabettiana", *Lingua e letteratura* 19 (1992): 66-81; Ead., "Petruccio Ubaldini's Accounts of England", *Renaissance Studies* 8 (1994): 175-97; Ead., "La *Relatione* di Petruccio Ubaldini: tre versioni a confronto", *Archivio di storia della cultura* 8 (1995): 39-54.

[1] "Peregrino di molti anni in qualche parte di Europa, e più nel Regno d'Inghilterra e in quel di Scozia": Petruccio Ubaldini, *Le vite delle donne illustri del Regno d'Inghilterra e del Regno di Scotia e di quelle che d'altri paesi nei due detti regni sono state maritate* (London: John Wolf, 1591), *Proemio*, fol. A1*v*.

[2] See Michael Wyatt, *The Italian Encounter with Tudor England: A cultural Politics of Translation* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005), 13-154. See also Giovanni Iamartino, "Under Italian Eyes: Petruccio Ubaldini's Verbal Portraits of Queen Elizabeth I", in *Representations of Elizabeth I in Early Modern Culture*, ed. Alessandra Petrina and LauraTosi (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 193-209.

of Scotland.[1] These works are both a hybrid of genres: a book of biographical portraits in the manner of Plutarch, a prescriptive treatise on the virtues of the ideal ruler, a collection of pithy aphorisms in the genre of 'conduct literature' for women, and an essay on Florentine civic humanism applied to history. The close connection between these two works and the Pseudo-Diplomatic Report of 1551 (also in its Elizabethan versions) makes them an unusual product of royal propaganda, in which reigning queens and queen consorts are treated as political subjects in the same way as men, "for women have ruled us or are ruling us".[2]

Ubaldini explains to his readers that it is much more honourable for women to devote themselves to politics than to private life, which in essence does not allow them to contribute to the good of the community. This is a substantial reversal of the humanist conception of 15th-century Florentines; those who, like Leonardo Bruni, saw female education as a concession harbinger of some entirely private and familial welfare, certainly not civic.

> Some of them, still alive and directly or indirectly involved in important and complicated affairs of government and state, expect a worthy remembrance of their deeds from the golden pen of the most illustrious writers; and others, who devote themselves to their female pleasures and activities, or to their domestic and family thoughts, seem to care about nothing else, because, with a certain resolute disregard for the future, they seem to have left the worry to others.[3]

Ubaldini's women, who are not always English by birth but are part of a wider European community, are perhaps the first true example of the idea that, in the exercise of personal and political virtues, every queen can truly be said to live up to a king, i.e. not necessarily the bearer of all his attributes, but certainly of his substance. A man in his own right, with feminine qualities: not an androgyne or a hybrid, but a complete male execution of a sovereignty born with different biological characteristics.

[1] Petruccio Ubaldini, *Le vite e i fatti di sei donne Illustri, cioè di Zenobia regina dei Palmireni, Crotilde regina di Francia, Suanhuita regina di Svetia, Jutha figliuola d'Ottone II imperadore, Zarina regina dei Saci, Venda regina di Pollon*ia (London, British Library, Royal 14. A. XIX, 1577); Id., *Le vite delle donne illustri.*

[2] "Havendoci regnato o regnandoci donne": Ubaldini, *Le vite delle donne illustri*, fol. A2*v*.

[3] Ubaldini, *Le vite delle donne illustri*, fol. A2*r*-*v*.

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King and Queen (Caio Delarolle, "Chess in Cancún, México", Unsplash, `https://unsplash.com/photos/MOBgLitbWRo`*)*