Strategic Imaginations

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Published by Leuven University Press

Defurne, Aude and Anke Gilleir.
Strategic Imaginations: Women and the Gender of Sovereignty in European Culture.

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ON GENDER, SOVEREIGNTY AND IMAGINATION

An Introduction

Anke Gilleir

‘Too bad, your royal Highness, that you were not a man so that you might have entered the battlefield in public, instead of, as a woman, having to concern yourself with trifles that lead to nothing’.¹ A cynical courtier speaks to a princess whose talent and ambition would have made her the best political leader of their time, had not the rules of sex and gender barred her from the pinnacles of power. The princess in question is a historical figure, Maria Antonia, electress of Saxony; the scene is set in mid-eighteenth-century Dresden, capital of baroque culture and intact absolutism. The rhetoric of gender that drives women from the main stage of power to the sphere of the trivial sounds familiar, perhaps too familiar. Scholars versed in the history of political power in Europe and particularly in the relationship between men, women and power will frown at such an express public-versus-private statement in a courtly setting. It is more reminiscent of the gendered discourse of modern European society than of the mechanisms of rule from the Ancien Régime. Indeed, the scene between the princess and the courtier comes from a nineteenth-century German historical novel, Amely Bölte’s 1860 Maria Antonia, oder Dresden vor hundert Jahren. In her – well documented – novel, Bölte, who was a prolific writer, feminist and democrat, stages a woman who belonged to the core elite of pre-modern rule. Considering the writer’s political affinities, the book bears an interesting ambiguity: while the female protagonist embodies political sovereignty in the most
convincing manner, the system of autocratic power in which she lives is shown as deficient and outdated. How can it be explained that a liberal woman writer produces a nine-hundred-page story about female agency in a setting that is alien to her own period of surging demands for democracy? In order to give a plausible answer, it is worth recalling Joan Kelly’s iconic essay, ‘Did Women have a Renaissance’, in which she points out that historical phases that are standardly regarded as major steps in the process of human emancipation yield a different image when looked at through the gender lens. Indeed, Amély Bolte’s 1860 novel seems to indicate just that: while the governing assumption of the story is that absolute sovereignty leads to ruin, it also shows the image of a woman whose true talent for rule and politics is wasted by a deeply profound and omnipresent gender prejudice. Rather than conveying a conservative message, the novel invites its readers to acknowledge the inconsistency of their own time, in which the ‘public battlefield’ of politics simultaneously reverberated the cry for popular sovereignty and the systematic exclusion of women. The problem Amélie Bolte’s novel signals has been researched extensively by prominent historians, who have revealed the paradox of the French Revolution (and all those that followed in its footsteps), emphatically proclaiming universal rights while energetically denying women access to collective hegemony. As female political leadership often still has an awkward undertone today, one could conclude that the emphatic exclusion of women from rule in modernity has had a lasting mark, yet the situation is somewhat more complicated. The awkwardness about women and power is much more venerable than modern politics and reaches back to the beginnings of reflection on power and community in European culture, a dark undercurrent that, paradoxically, became a tsunami when consensus grew that all subjects should participate in the governance of society. This book explores the longue durée scepticism of female leadership and the way female leaders dealt with this essentially gendered imagination of sovereignty.

We understand sovereignty in the strict political sense, relating to the exercise of authority or participation in the process of state government. The word ‘sovereignty’ can be used in different contexts with multiple connotations. George Bataille, for example, defines sovereignty as a superior state of mind aloof from the world of practice, labour and fear of death, while its mainstream use in political thought implies the ability to wield power. But already Bataille’s non-political concept reveals how difficult it is to separate ‘life’ and ‘power’, even more so from the point
of view of gender. The historical example of sovereignty Bataille had in mind when coining his idea of superiority over the laws of physical life was that of absolute monarchy and its exuberantly baroque defiance of mortality. In the case of women rulers, whose bodies functioned as vessels for the procreation of the elite species of that sovereign rule, defying bodily existence and ‘labour’ was, to put it mildly, a somewhat different situation in that same culture of glamorous decorum. As this book shows, no matter how political sovereignty reached for the transcendental, the laws of gravitation always seemed to weigh upon women rulers.

The history of female rule is a rich field of study that has provided pertinent insights. In the introduction to their 2019 volume *Medieval Elite Women and the Exercise of Power*, which bears the revealing subtitle *Moving beyond the exceptionalist debate*, Tanner, Gathagan and Huneycutt even express a certain weariness about the fact that ‘after three decades of historical advocacy, producing and teaching excellent books and articles’ on medieval women in positions of authority, these are still routinely presented as ‘exceptions to the rule’.\(^5\) The distortion they diagnose is caused, among other reasons, by the fact that experiences of power that do not meet modern assumptions often remain unrecognized, that medieval paradigms of power, in fact, varied greatly, and that women’s control and influence was at play in nearly every aspect of the medieval world.\(^6\) In her recent *A Companion to Global Queenship* (2018), Elena Woodacre underscores this state of the art, adding that research of female leadership across broad ranges of time and space has amply revealed that ‘no matter what societal framework they operated under, women could be equally effective administrators, patrons, and leaders as their male counterparts’.\(^7\) Against the backdrop of this recent historical scholarship and its fascinating findings, this book is a communicating vessel, acknowledging the importance of context and difference, yet recognizing and underscoring the endless repetition of the cycle of gendered rule.

This needs some preliminary additional remarks. The fact that women did act as sovereign leaders throughout history and that, upon closer scrutiny, they did not yield to male rule in the world of human fallibility is a truism. Yet while this is commonly accepted in the field of queenship studies, we feel it is something that is still worthy of rehearsal in an extended frame. We know today that historical female leadership did not equal feminism and that it did not come with implications of sisterhood. Interesting though this focus on political history could
be, it would lead us into the domain of literary utopia like that of Christine de Pisan’s early fifteenth-century *Cité des dames* rather than, for example, allow us to grasp the realities of the brutal power struggles of the Merovingian court. And finally, while gender as a normative pattern of humanness appears to be something universal, in order to be understood well it needs to be looked at in the complexities of its societal and cultural context, as Theresa Earenfight has explored and revealed convincingly in her work on historical queenship. Indeed, no matter how appealing, for example, the memoirs of Catherine the Great are for contemporary enquiries into gender, sexuality, queerness and power, an exclusive focus on these aspects of Catherine’s feminine self-representation will miss the many other dimensions of this profoundly complex autobiographical narrative of imperial legacy.

Yet, let us return to Amelie Bölte’s staging of Anna Antonia and the sarcastic remark how unfortunate it was that she was not a man. While the rhetoric indeed appears late nineteenth-century rather than fully fledged baroque, it takes no effort to find echoes of this dogma through the entire history of female sovereignty in Europe. Tweaking Elena Woodacre’s earlier quote ‘no matter what societal framework they operated under’ a little: the words ‘no matter’ and ‘framework’ not only indicate that women did wield hegemonic power, they also convey that they never did so outside the fantasmatic normative creed – and experience – that rule of state was a male prerogative. Catherine of Aragon, whose shifting positions of power Earenfight has traced meticulously, is said to have been raised with the idea of power, yet also this woman of sovereign breed ‘knew that power was muted by gender’. The fact that women realized full well that the dominant agents and arbiters of sovereignty were the male subjects did not make them proto-feminists, possibly rather on the contrary, as Derek Baeles notes on Maria Theresa, ‘who showed resentment at being a woman, [asserting] that she could have gone into battle herself if she had not nearly always been pregnant.’

The *truncus communis* of this book consists of case studies of women who wielded hegemony in differently articulated communities in European culture. It reverts to history, literature and the arts, but consciously so on the intersection of politics and imagination. The close relationship between power and fantasy was something Plato was already well aware of. In his third book of the *Republic*, the dialoguing partners reflect on the contagious force of poetry on the virtues of the future citizens of the state. By its poetic power, literature can lure
its listeners into adopting the wrong conduct, as does, for example, Homer’s extensive narration of ‘the weepings and wailings of famous men’, that threatens to ‘effeminate’ the guardians of the state. Classicist Mary Beard has demonstrated how literature from antiquity is rife with templates of ruling women as ‘abusers rather than users of power’, from which ‘civilization had to be protected’.14 No matter how much one reads these classical texts against the grain, as Beard notes, the warning against female rule is as obvious as it is grotesque. Yet often the relationship between the fictional and the real is more subtle, as the two chapters dealing with the Middle Ages in this book reveal. In his opus magnum the Eneasroman (or Eneit), which he probably composed between 1170 and 1190, Heinrich von Veldeke not only staged the notorious Dido, who would become a stock figure in European cultural imagination, but also the more elusive Camilla, queen of the Volscians. In Veldeke’s story, this fictional queen designs her own magnificent tomb, the building of which she supervises herself to preserve her fame posthumously, to reinforce her control and to consolidate her position in courtly society. Eleanor of Aquitaine (1122–1204), historical queen of France and England, did nothing less in the same period. She arranged her own tomb as a last gesture of her sovereignty, surrounding her grave with that of her son King Richard and her husband King Henry II (against his will) and decorating it with life-sized effigies that were rare at the time in Western Europe (probably inspired by Byzantine art). The key words that relate to both the fictional and historical queens are ‘strategy’ and ‘imagination’.

While sovereignty is always and essentially relational and contextual, as mentioned, the core idea of this book is that the male template of sovereignty was a ‘longue durée’ condition in which every case of individual female rule took place.15 To varying degrees and in different tones of urgency, there seems to exist no articulation of women’s sovereignty that does not echo some sense of temporariness and apology. This has the paradoxical effect that the difference between outright rejection and diplomatic endorsement vanishes when looked at from some distance. Whether a woman ruler is hailed as harbinger of ‘a gentle and tempered style of government’16 or called a ‘monstrous’ creature appears as two sides of a coin that remained valid for a very long time. Using Fernand Braudel’s ‘longue durée’ time frame has the advantage that it creates distance from the jumble of immediate events and allows for a long-term analysis. This is particularly important in a field of study that has been productive in providing so much context in order to
counter outmoded conceptions of rule. While we are fully aware that the imagination of sovereignty is not a straightforward narrative, our book insists on the remarkably consistent embattlement with gender in discourses of state rule. No matter what political covenant became dominant, the reality of women’s state rule always appears to have been in need of a rhetoric of apology and, in other words, endorsement, here too, of strategic imagination.

The geographical scope of our volume stretches across the European continent from Poland and Lithuania to Britain, from Tacitus’ Northern Germanic world to the Occitan culture of Aquitaine and the Iberian peninsula. Historically it ranges from the Middle Ages and its sovereignty principle ‘dei gratia’ to negotiated leadership under pressure of the ideas of popular sovereignty that set in from the eighteenth century onwards. Against the backdrop of the long history of latent scepticism or straight antagonism, it makes the imaginative practices and political strategies surrounding female sovereignty more concrete and comparable. Accordingly, the book is not set up in a standard chronological manner, but is structured across times and places in a way that allows for the comparison of strategies and images relating to very different women in very different contexts.

Turning temporality upside down, we start the introduction of the volume with its concluding chapter, which is a global comparative analysis of the situation of female governance in transitions from autocratic rule to modern democracy and national sovereignty. Systematic exclusion of women from suffrage, let alone from participation in matters of state in Europe and across the globe, explains why a liberal female thinker such as Amely Bölte had to reach back to disavowed forms of rule to make plausible that women have political brains. While in principle popular sovereignty had the potential to change the place of women in the economy of power in dramatic ways, even the most basic element of democracy, suffrage, was denied to them. Marnix Beyen pursues the paradox of the universalist democratic rhetoric in his comparison between nations with a long republican or democratic tradition and the many new ones that arose in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. One of his findings is, somewhat counterintuitively, that while feminist movements put pressure on women’s political exclusion, sheer feminist agency cannot account for the fact that countries that had virtually no suffrage movement were the first to enfranchise women. Beyen further explores how discourses of popular sovereignty functioned as obstacles for women, because they hinged on conceptions of ‘the people’ that
had been coined in all-male unions that featured as ‘the nation’. Remarkably consistent with the long history of pragmatism and apology surrounding women and power, it was only when a ‘national revolution’ was launched in a ‘new nation’ that national elites were eager to include women in ‘their nation’.

While concluding with a reflection on the gendered strategies of early democracy, the volume starts in the High Middle Ages with a chapter that gives a good impression of the wild fantasies that made the fibre of narratives of women in power, which, in spite of changing patterns, proved remarkably wearproof. In a joint contribution, Ann-Kathrin Deininger and Jasmin Leuchtenberg offer a profound reading of two pieces of courtly literature: Heinrich von Veldeke’s *Eneasroman* and Lamprecht’s *Strasbourg Alexander*, which each display female rulers, Queen Camilla in *Eneas* and Queen Candacis in the *Strasbourg Alexander*. Exploring the narrative and rhetorical devices that shape these images of ruling queens reveals a remarkable use of elements of visuality: in one case particularly related to the queenly body; in the other focused on the queen’s surrounding spaces. These textual strategies of visuality are used to different ends. While descriptions of Queen Camilla’s physical beauty in the *Eneas* underline her exceptionality and fix her in a conventional gender rhetoric, in the *Strasbourg Alexander*, on the other hand, Queen Candacis’s physical body is remarkably absent. Cadacis, whose rule is described as exceptionally successful in comparison to her male counterparts, is not described in the coded protocol of physical perfection. Instead, her court is presented in an abundant evocation of extreme magnificence, and every object related to the representation of her sovereignty is evoked in the greatest detail of its splendour. Veldeke’s Camilla unites the qualifications of charismatic leadership according to the symbolic standards of her time, yet his narrative also reveals the performative impact of imagination and projection: the inapproachable queen and her Amazons lose their battle against Eneas when one of her women soldiers is struck down and their enemies realize they are not facing mythological warriors but a ‘mere’ army of women. Candacis of Merove, who outsmarts the great Alexander, does not enter the battleground and its masculine laws, but rules according to her own principles of political prudence and strategy. Her land, however, is literally otherworldly.

Wild phantasmagorias of women rulers transform into more realist fictional modes during the Enlightenment. Yet, as Elisabeth Krimmer shows in her contribution, a recalibration of images according to the
mundane expectations of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century readers leads to even more complicated tensions in the minds of women writers, their narrators and protagonists. Krimmer’s analysis turns to literary representations of female sovereignty in the fiction work of two German women writers on the threshold from the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries: Benedikte Naubert (1752–1819) and Luise Mühlbach (1814–1873). Naubert, who produced about one-fifth of all German historical novels published between 1780 and 1788, frequently highlighted women’s roles in history in her fiction, yet often framed these women in the conservative gendered patterns of her time that reduced women to their private roles. Some of Naubert’s texts appear highly ambivalent in their representations of women in power all the same, offering glimpses of female empowerment while struggling to sustain this progressive impetus, as in her 1795 novel *Voadicea and Velleda*. This novel amalgamates the British folk heroine Boudica, Queen of the Celtic tribe of the Iceni, who, in 60 BCE, led a revolt against the Roman occupiers, and the Germanic prophetess Velleda, whom Tacitus describes as having predicted the victory of the Batavians. While Voadicea is described as defending her country heroically and successfully, readers are informed that she was an ‘unhappy, joyless victor’, who could not enjoy her triumph. While the novel tells that female prowess comes at the cost of domestic happiness and seems to reproduce a common sense of how women function best in society, its degree of consolidation is intriguingly disturbed by its show of that female power. Luise Mühlbach was an equally prolific writer as her predecessor Naubert. But while Naubert lived to see the defeat of the emperor that had ‘stretched for the world’ in the wake of a revolution that had shaken it, Mühlbach was a witness to the volatile decades of failed uprisings to sustain the liberal ideals of the revolution that ended in an era of resignation. In tune with her time and place, Mühlbach changed her initially progressive political ideas after the lost revolution of 1848 and became an adherent to monarchical sovereignty. This political conviction allowed Mühlbach to stage women in prominent roles of power without contradicting the dominant rhetoric of female domesticity. In her 1858 novel *Napoleon in Germany*, she features the Prussian Queen Louise as the French emperor’s most formidable antagonist, be it in identifiable feminine terms as a ‘mater dolorosa’ who draws strength from her suffering. Though Queen Louise inspires resistance among the people of her nation, her role is predominantly that of a symbol, not an agent, and her power derives from her pain. Turning to the question of consensus
again, it appears that Mühlbach manages to reconcile female sovereignty with the bourgeois gender roles that had become standard, but only by portraying a heroine whose resistance will result in her death.

The inversion, or perversion, of female leadership into sacrifice in the name of national sovereignty is also at stake in Maha El Hissy’s contribution ‘Of Maidens and Virgins, or Sparking Military Alliance’. In Veldeke’s courtly epic Eneit, the power status of the Amazon queen Camilla is that of the virgo militans. Though this untouchability functions in a male-dominated and heterosexual code of culture, the Queen’s self-commitment to virginity is a strategy of legitimization that amplifies her charisma for both followers and enemies. Maha El Hissy, on the other hand, analyzes the symbolic value of the virgin body as an object of affect in masculine discourses of popular insurrection. From the Roman republic until modern revolution, narratives and visual aesthetic representations of the female virginal body are staged to arouse affect among the – male – members of a revolutionary community that sparks military action and political upheaval. In his historical narrative Ab urbe condita, for example, Roman historian Livy embeds various stories of virgins who set in motion popular revolts that led to the foundation or the restoration of the Roman republic. A notorious case is the story of the ‘abduction’ of the Sabine women, in which female virginity is the object of desire and the means for the biopolitical foundation of the Roman empire, which is established without their participation in its rule. The myth has fascinated artists from different periods and traditions throughout European history as a field of experiment for the representation of superior male prowess against female passion. A famous and intriguing example is Jacques-Louis David’s Les Sabines, which addresses the issue of female power. David took up this Roman story at a crucial phase in the French Revolution, when civil strife threatened to flood every sense of order, and pictured the Sabine women as the embodiment of political terror that needed to be curbed and overcome by male strength. Livy’s history of the restoration of the Roman Republic in 449 BCE, which contains the story of Virginia, the plebeian daughter sacrificed for the new nation, is another example of a virgin story that was rehearsed and rehashed in modern fictional constellations, reaching into the present-day French right-wing discourse and its homage to the figure of Joan of Arc. Thus, though women can be said to have important, even catalytic functions in political processes and transformations, a closer look reveals that in the republican covenant, this primarily symbolic role is the affirmation of the public-political
arena as a masculine territory. Marnix Beyen’s chapter on women’s suffrage does not explore such dramatic aesthetics of female passion and threat, yet it is clear that more mundane discourses on women and politics a century later are no less fuelled by the dark undercurrents that inspired David’s gendered representations.

Femininity as a strategy of political and public authority is addressed in Beatrijs Vanacker’s and Josephine Hoegaert’s contributions, that analyze two royal figures at the British court in different circumstances and periods, but both marked by the modernization of politics and its recalibration of monarchical sovereignty and queenship. Beatrijs Vanacker’s chapter ‘Relational Authority and Female Sovereignty’ looks at female authority and British court politics from the receiving end. Her chapter traces the experiences of the novelist and playwright Fanny (Frances) Burney (1752–1840), who joined the English Court as Keeper of the Robes to Queen Charlotte, wife of King George III, from 1786 until 1791. Charlotte was not a ruling sovereign in a strict political sense of the word, but functioned as a queen consort, which assumed different roles and, correspondingly, strategies of power. During her years at the British Court, Burney, who was a prolific diarist, kept a journal in which she carefully documented the life and events of the Royal family, particularly underscoring the Queen’s exemplary role in terms of moral authority. Burney’s ‘Court Journals’ are usually read as a source documenting the political and personal dramas of George III, which she witnessed first-hand. Yet Vanacker’s analysis shows how these journals are in fact much more than the report of a royal family’s crisis. They give testimony to the private and public challenges a well-known woman writer such as Burney faced in seeking her place in a strictly hierarchical and cultural scene that was alien to her own civic environment. The journals reveal a continuous effort to negotiate and shape her own position, both within the royal household at the time of her stay as in the intellectual society she lived in afterwards, and in both, the Queen plays a significant role. In a highly literary mode Burney’s work figures queen consort Charlotte as an embodiment of female propriety and responsibility. These were the qualities that conferred her a (modest) political role at the English court when the king’s continued illness created a power vacuum, but it is also the form in which she functions as a mirroring device in the self-positioning of an ambitious woman writer.

It was Queen Victoria who cemented the model of the ‘feminized’ monarchy, not as a queen consort retrieved from a foreign nation, but
as a fully fledged British queen with a strong sense of personal strategy at times when the – profoundly masculine – voice of popular sovereignty had to be reckoned with in any negotiation of political power. While it seems that Victoria is the inevitable suspect in studies of female sovereignty, all the more so since she was the longest-reigning monarch of the British Isles, recent research has addressed this figure and her style of government from angles that reveal aspects contrary to the common notion of ‘the mother of the nation’. Josephine Hoegaerts’s chapter ‘The Sound of Sovereignty: Royal Vocal Strategies in the Victorian House of Lords’ looks at this famous female sovereign from the perspective of voice studies. She focuses on the so-called ‘Queen’s Speech’, the speech delivered at the State Opening of Parliament, and investigates the tensions generated not only by the presence of a royal sovereign voice in a realm representing modern democratic politics, but also by a female voice and body in a profoundly male space and soundscape. As Hoegaerts shows, the speaking queen appealed to the imagination of the public. Her first opening of Parliament ‘in person’ in 1837 received enormous attention in the press, with papers remarking on the Queen’s youth, looks, behaviour and even vocal performance. The Queen’s ‘exceptional silvery tone’ was particularly suited to the performance of sovereignty and helped to overcome the gap between a manly voice and practices of representation, which was confirmed by the consternation that arose when she lapsed into silence in the 1860s. But most importantly, while the event of a woman publicly speaking before an audience of silent men reversed the gender ‘balance’ in Parliament, in the end it did not change but only affirmed and strengthened the identification of modern politics with masculinity.

The function of space in the eternally repeating process of self-positioning female rule, subtly at play in Victoria’s presence in Parliament, can be revealed as a strategy that functions in a comparable manner in different dimensions, ranging from territorial and cultural descent over transnational movement to architectural settings. Four chapters address the legitimation of women sovereigns from the angle of the spaces and places of power.

With the express indication of ‘Queen from the South’ Ayaal Herdam and David Smallwood analyze how the remarkably long career of Eleanor of Aquitaine, who was Queen of France and England in twelfth-century Europa, hinged on her territorial and dynastic descent. Being duchess of Aquitaine was the core of her political agency. From her lifetime to the present day, this queen has been an object of
fascination that betrays a certain level of perplexity. In Ridley-Scott’s 2010 semi-historical movie *Robin Hood*, the iconic Vanessa Redgrave features Eleanor as an elderly but proud and vigorous queen mother, who tries to take in hand the power battle between her sons. In their historical survey, Herdam and Smallwood portray Eleanor as political strategist. As a teenager who became heir to the legacy of the Dukes of Aquitaine, she was the most wanted partner in terms of political alliance of her time and subsequently became Queen of France and Queen of England. While Eleanor faced tremendous challenges in her long life, through marriage politics, navigation of intercultural differences, strategic political and military action, and lawmaking, she retained her territories, installed her children on thrones across Europe, and became the head of a powerful dynasty. The design of her own tomb, as mentioned, was a last gesture of power of a figure worthy of legend.

María Cristina Quintero’s chapter, ‘The Spaces of Female Sovereignty in Early Modern Spain’, adds to recent insights in sociology, anthropology and literary history that have brought to the fore the relationship between space and gender. Quintero reveals how the early modern Habsburg women at the Spanish court negotiated space in order to acquire or legitimize their authority, either as queen consorts or regents, in the system of rule. The chapter investigates different spatial dimensions, one of which is the transnational movement of a princess destined to become queen in another nation, as was the case with Mariana of Austria, who married Philip IV by proxy in Vienna and had to undertake an arduous trip by land and sea from Vienna to Spain, crossing Italy and stopping at various cities along the way. The journey, which lasted nine months, was a process of legitimation of the foreign bride in her new homeland and almost literally functioned as the run-up to a long career of sovereign power. On a domestic architectural level, royal power was also closely related to the spaces of the royal palace, where king and queen inhabited different quarters and wielded different forms of authority. While the *casa de la reina* was a physical configuration, it also functioned as a political organization, where the queen was an important avenue to wield power. Particularly in the case of Mariana, who occupied the space of court for about half a century and acquired the previously unheard position of *potestad absoluta* (‘supreme authority’), the gendered space of the *casa de la reina* was transformed into the real locus of power. The queen’s rooms were also used for staging baroque plays, the *comedia*, that brought female sovereigns on the stage and the imaginative space of the theatre.
allowed for a heterotopic space in which lessons of female sovereignty were performed and mirrored. Some 300 seventeenth-century Spanish plays dealing with female rulers have been identified in recent research, which reveals the extent to which they functioned as a counter-discourse against the political ideology of female enclosure. The strict courtly protocol the queen’s quarters were subjected to did not prevent them from being the place where the legacy of mythical queens and female knights was performed and continued.

In his chapter ‘French Aristocrat and Polish Queen’, Jarosław Pietrzak investigates the remarkable career of Maria Kazimiera (1674–1698), a French aristocrat who arrived in Poland as a lady-in-waiting to the French Princess and later Polish Queen Louise Marie Gonzage de Nevers and who made it to Queen of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth herself. Although foreign to the language, culture and political system of the commonwealth, Maria Kazimiera promoted her husband’s election as king and managed to rule in partnership with him for more than twenty years. As careful archival studies of historical sources, chronicles and correspondence reveal, the Queen maintained a strong control of both internal and foreign affairs in a system of sovereignty that by rule did not grant power – let alone the power of office – to women and was totally alien to this kind of agency. Not only as a French princess in a foreign country, but also in terms of court space, the Queen transgressed borders, as an incident in 1678 with the chancellor of Nowogród, Mikołaj Władysław Przeździecki, reveals. The chancellor, who was in private audience with the King, records how, all of a sudden, the Queen burst into the monarch’s chamber by ‘knocking on the doors until the King asked for them to be opened’, then led the King aside ‘with great force, speaking in French’. Though not always in sympathy, it was witnessed that the Queen ‘[…] could move her husband first of all, then the huge, lethargic corps of the commonwealth that is so difficult to set in motion’. In spite of her vigorous attempts to establish her son on the Polish throne after the king’s death, her career ended when the old system of rule proceeded and another candidate was elected. Maria Kazimiera left the country where she had wielded power and where her memory became a distorted legend.

The last two chapters deal with the situation of royal sovereignty and the role of queens and queen consorts in times when ideas and strategies concerning women and political power were tied into a broader context of the transition of sovereign power propelled by rapid imperial expansion, industrialization, burgeoning democracy and
continental political crises. Joanna Marschner investigates the three generations of royal consorts in eighteenth-century Britain, who were all of German descent: Caroline of Ansbach (1683–1737), Augusta of Saxe-Gotha (1719–1772) and Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz (1744–1818). Marschner’s chapter points to the important role these consorts fulfilled in promoting the interests of the royal family, nation and empire by making strategic use of their ‘soft’ power. Foreign as these women were and functioning within a political climate in which Parliament and public opinion were to be reckoned with, they furthered the integration of the new Hanoverian regime, dedicating themselves to championing Britain’s trade interests and imperial ambitions. While not wielding power in a strictly political sense, these royal women not only won a degree of agency and freedom for themselves but also contributed to the modernization of British monarchy and its transformation into a moral institution. An interesting example of queenly strategies to reinforce the position of the dynastic line, in which their role was quite literally vital, is Caroline’s harking back to English history in a gesture of self-assimilation. The inventories of her book collections show her eagerness to learn about the history of her new homeland, especially that of Queen Elizabeth I and other Tudor predecessors. On top of that, her picture room displayed a collection of portraits that formed a visual family tree of British and European dynastic connection in which drawings of members of the Tudors were juxtaposed with paintings of her own children.

In this process, which reached its climax under Queen Victoria, a far less well-known princess, Charlotte of Wales, played a crucial role, which Virginia McKendry analyzes in her chapter ‘Taming the Sovereign’. Drawing on parliamentary debates, newspapers, satires and letters, McKendry reveals how Charlotte (1795–1817) as young princess and heir to the throne strategically deployed a gendered rhetoric of family values to promote her own interests as future sovereign. Charlotte, who died in childbirth at the age of twenty-one, was heir to the throne when British monarchy found itself under pressure due to international political crises, poor socio-economic circumstances and the unpopularity of her father, George IV. With what appears to be a clear vision of her future role, Charlotte attempted to transform the image of the monarchy into a form of rule that matched a constitutional structure. An important element of strategy was her feminization of the institution as the embodiment of the nation’s morals and values. In doing so, Princess Charlotte offered a counter-model to her father’s controversial politics
and, more importantly, secured her own sovereignty as royal heir in a climate of increasing political radicalization and anti-royalist sentiment.

We close the introduction to *Strategic Imaginations* with a consideration that concerns the relationship between the history and theory of political rule. While this is not pursued systematically in our volume, we feel it is something that should be included when dealing with the history and concept of sovereignty from a gender perspective, if only to provide some food for thought. While cultural-historical research has produced a growing mountain of evidence of the historical existence of female sovereignty, political theory seems to remain fairly unaffected by this. Protagonists whose work is rehearsed and rehashed in contemporary conceptualizations of sovereignty are routinely exempted from questions relating to the gender of the sovereign and – ergo – sovereignty. Carl Schmitt, for example, whose 1922 definition of sovereignty as a supreme power that manifests itself in the fact that he, the sovereign, can suspend the law and proclaim the state of exception without legal authorization, has become a classic reference point. While Schmitt’s notion of the exceptional is admittedly formalist and does not match historical sovereignty as we know it, addressing the gender of the sovereign is an interesting issue, all the more because it appears as something of a dark undercurrent in his work, as his 1956 essay on *Hamlet* indicates. Schmitt’s analysis of sovereignty in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* hinges on the idea that this tragedy bore a very close relationship to the reality of late-Elizabethan and early Jacobean reign, with one exception: female rule. It is striking, Schmitt argues, that Shakespeare omitted the figure of the queen as an agency, which disrupts the logic of his plot, but had to be done in view of the ‘experience of a common historical reality’ of his contemporaries. Indeed, still fresh in the memory of his audience was the complicity of James’s mother, Mary Queen of Scots, in the murder of her husband. Schmitt calls this omission the ‘taboo of the queen’. Interestingly, Schmitt does not consider that the ‘taboo’, instead of being a sign of moral compromise, could just as well be an indication of Shakespeare’s unwillingness to stage a situation in which a queen claims sovereign power and acts accordingly. In terms of historical proximity, this is hardly an awkward scenario, since James’s grandmother had become queen-regent after the death of her husband and his own mother had – albeit unsuccessfully – clung to her throne. In a somewhat tautological gesture, Schmitt breaks off from this argument: ‘We leave aside here all explanations that refer to patriarchy or matriarchy […] such explanations use the play only to illustrate general theories’.
Another thinker that comes to mind here is Michel Foucault and the notions of power and sovereignty in his scenario of the transition from the ‘old regime’ to political modernity. Foucault’s work is well-rehearsed and does not need to be explained in detail, yet from our perspective it is worth expanding on it a little more, particularly concerning the connection between (physical) life and rule in what has become known as biopolitics. The core of Foucault’s argument is that political modernity transformed ancient ‘life-and-death’ rule into a politics of life management, which is a deeply permeated regulation of the body that ventures power over its entire population. In a somewhat shorthand mode, Foucault states the difference between old and modern politics as follows: ‘The old power of death that symbolized sovereign power was now carefully supplanted by the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life’. But why is there only a focus on sovereignty and death and not on sovereignty and reproduction? While acknowledging that reproduction of the species is a prime function of women in modern society, Foucault does not address how this functioned in the old ‘mechanisms of power’, which is surprising considering that these were propelled by ‘the blood relation’, ‘values of descent’ and ‘through blood’. If modern society transferred from a system of blood to one of sex, it seems the two always crossed in the life of women who functioned in hereditary systems of rule. Women sovereigns, who were almost without exception included in dynastic mechanisms, functioned as reproducers of the (sovereign) species, which burdened their bodies up to the point of complete exhaustion and death. The female body – literally split by pregnancy and birth – is not a standard item in reflections on the history of sovereignty. Yet already the echoes of pregnancy and childbearing in the different chapters in this book not only provide a horrifying list of suffering, debility and death, but also account for different situations of power over time. Eleanor of Aquitaine gave birth to nine children in fourteen years’ time, Charlotte, queen consort of George III gave birth to fifteen children in twenty years’ time, while her later namesake, Charlotte of Wales, died in childbirth at the age of twenty-one. It is worthwhile noting that whereas historical sources account for queens’ physical sufferings in their role as reproducers, fictional evocations seem to omit the carnal reality of pregnancy and childbirth. The mythical Voadicea is simply the mother of nine daughters, as is Mühlbach’s evocation of the Prussian queen Louise, mother of the nation. In term of aesthetics, virgins as those in Roman history or courtly literature, appear to be
more attractive. A recent cinematic image offers a striking example of the intersection of life, death and power in the existence of the woman sovereign. The 2018 awarded-winning film *The Favourite* by former art-house director Yorgos Lanthimos deals with the power struggle between three women at the early eighteenth-century court of Queen Anne, who was the last monarch in the Stuart line. Next to pursuing the duties of a sovereign in times of war, religious tension and the strife between hereditary sovereignty and democratic rule, she also gave birth to seventeen children in fifteen years’ time, thus functioning within the mechanism of sovereignty both in the symbolic and biopolitical sense. While Lanthimos’s dark comedy unfolds the plot of a frenetic battle of power between the queen and her two ladies-in-waiting, it also brings into view the destructive reproductive mechanism the queen has been subjected to as female sovereign. The movie foregrounds the queen’s decaying body both visually and thematically. This is endorsed in a harrowing closing scene. The last image of the movie consists of a long shot that shows Queen Anne (Olivia Colman) grasping the head of hair of her ‘favourite’ Abigail (Emma Stone), who sits on her knees in front of the queen and clearly expresses suffering at the brutal grasp. Anne’s bodily gesture is one of bare power, as she literally suppresses the other woman. Yet the same scene also shows a feeble woman on shaky legs with a face distorted by a stroke, who tries to seek balance while grabbing her servant’s hair. This scene makes visible the profound ambiguity in the concept ‘sovereign subject’. The cinematographic representation of the woman who rules but who is equally ruled by coercive biopolitical mechanisms is also reinforced by a fictional addition in the otherwise seemingly authentic historical setting. In her royal bedchamber, Queen Anne keeps a litter of rabbits that are allowed to hop around, which she names and addresses in a fond manner. The presence of the little animals is not one of the many freakish courtly customs which the film lavishly displays. Anne keeps the rabbits in memory of her dead children, which her advisor Sarah (Rachel Weiss) finds ‘macabre’, whereas Abigail, in a rare moment of compassion, is on the verge of tears when the ailing queen explains what the animals mean to her. The queen’s rabbits, symbol of frenetic procreation, function as a visual metaphor of the profoundly paradoxical situation of the female sovereign, whose claim to power is not only never without dispute, but whose body, moreover, is an object of biopolitics that bereaves it of the dignified humanity she is supposed to represent as sovereign of the nation.
Notes

1 Amely Bölte, Anna Antonia, oder Dresden vor hundert Jahren (Prague: Kober & Markgraf, 1860), vol. 3, p. 31
4 In the introduction to their 2019 volume Realities and Phantasies of German Female Leadership, Elisabeth Krimmer and Patricia Anne Simpson open their survey of this perception of female leadership with some examples of the ‘crudely sexist and misogynist messages’ that pervaded American society when Hillary Clinton ran for presidency in 2016, including a bumper sticker that said, ‘I wish Hillary had married O.J.’ Mary Beard also refers to this period in American politics and the violent gendered reactions Clinton’s run caused as symptomatic of the exclusion of women from power. See: Elisabeth Krimmer and Patricia Anne Simpson, eds., Realities and Fantasies of Female Leadership. From Maria Antonia of Saxony to Angela Merkel (Rochester: Camden House 2019), 1–23; Mary Beard, Women and Power. A Manifesto (London, New York: Liveright, 2017), p. 77f.


Elena Woodacre points out that the phenomenon of monarchy has often ‘been isolated by discipline or presented as oppositional to the work of specialists from other academic areas […]’, adding that ‘historians often struggle to deal with time and change or became bogged down in context’. Elena Woodacre, ‘Understanding the mechanisms of Modernity’, in *The Routledge History of Monarchy*, eds. Elena Woodacre, Lucinde H.S. Dean, Chris Jones, Russell E. Martin and Zita Ava Rohr (London, New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 1–19, p. 1.


Foucault, History of Sexuality, p. 139f.

Foucault, History of Sexuality, p. 151.
23 In an extensive monograph on the role of Queen Anne as patroness of arts and figure of courtly culture, James Anderson Lynn counters the general tendency in modern history to ‘underestimate Anne’s intelligence and ability’. James Anderson Winn, *Queen Anne, Patroness of Arts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. vii.

24 A critical gender analysis could also be done on Giorgio Agamben and his encompassing philosophical project on the phenomenon of the ‘homo sacer’ in Western political history. Considering that the woman who was invested with sacred power (usually at a genealogical dead-end) nonetheless functioned as the (natural) machine for the continuation of that very (sacred) power seems to make an example par excellence of the threshold between bare life and law that Agamben seeks in arcane worlds. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazan (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 2.