

Contemplating Royal Women's Access to Power and the Transition Between the Middle Ages and the “Monstrous Regiment” of the Early Modern Era

Elena Woodacre

MY INTEREST IN queens began with a fascination with practices of succession and a desire to understand how women were able to access and exercise power. I began to formulate ideas about factors that enabled female rule during my Masters research, which explored female succession and ruling queens in the twelfth century, and refined these ideas in my doctoral research on the reigning queens of Navarre. Essentially, I believe it boils down to three key factors¹ which make female rule viable:

1. Law and Custom
2. Precedent
3. Situational Factors

Law and custom on succession practice developed over the course of the Middle Ages. Succession practices were fairly diverse and flexible in the early Middle Ages; then, over the course of the medieval period, processes became more rigid and increasingly codified. The flexibility inherent in the succession process during the early developmental period could benefit women, allowing them the opportunity to succeed to the throne given a lack of clarity on eligibility for the throne and as succession was dealt with on a more situational basis. An increasing preference for dynastic stability and continuity over the need for a *dux bellorum* or

1. Armin Wolf offers an extended list of factors for female succession in his paper “Reigning Queens in Medieval Europe: Where, When and Why,” in *Medieval Queenship*, ed. John Carmi Parsons (Stroud: Alan Sutton Publishing, 1998), 169-88, but I would suggest that they could be contracted down to the three I have suggested above.

“war leader” also informed succession practice and made women viable candidates for the throne, particularly if they were the only surviving legitimate issue of the previous ruler.

Two regions that had a high number of reigning queens in the Middle Ages, the Kingdoms of Jerusalem and of Navarre, are excellent examples of the importance of law and custom for female rule. The Kingdom of Jerusalem was a “new” kingdom, carved out of conquests made during the First Crusade. Female inheritance of lands in the Crusader States was permitted in order to enhance the security of the families who initially established themselves in the region.² As the kingdom was established, succession practice developed and changed over the course of the first few kings from election/selection to dynastic succession. The succession to Baldwin II combined these principles, investing the succession in his eldest daughter, Melisende, but selecting a husband for her in Fulk of Anjou that the barons approved of as a king consort.³ The right of women to succeed to the crown of Jerusalem was then reconfirmed in the *Livre au Roi*, which was drafted ca. 1200.⁴ On the other hand, in the kingdom of Navarre, it was regional Basque customs that allowed female inheritance and the active participation of women in the political arena that provided a helpful climate for female succession practices.⁵

2. See Joshua Prawer, *Crusader Institutions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 25.

3. See Hans Eberhard Mayer, “The Succession to Baldwin II of Jerusalem: English Impact on the East,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 39 (1985): 139-47, and “Studies in the History of Queen Melisende of Jerusalem,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 26 (1972): 95-182.

4. “*Le Livre au Roi*,” in *Assises de Jérusalem; Assises de la Haute Cour (Lois I)*, tome I, ed. M. le Comte Beugnot (Paris: Imprimerie Royale, 1841). See also Myriam Greilsammer, “Structure and Aims of the *Livre au Roi*,” in *Outremer: Studies in the History of the Crusading Kingdom of Jerusalem presented to Joshua Prawer*, ed. B. Z. Kedar, H. E. Mayer, and R. C. Smail (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi Institute, 1982), 218-26.

5. See the discussion of the Basque laws of inheritance in Roslyn M. Frank, Monique Laxalt, and Nancy Vosburg, “Inheritance, Marriage and Dowry Rights in the Navarrese and French Basque Law Codes,” in *Proceedings of the Fourth Annual Meeting of the Western Society for French History*, ed. Joyce Duncan Falk (Reno: Western Society for the Study of French History, 1977), 22-31, and Maïté Lafourcade, “La résistance des Basques à la pénétration du Droit romain: L'exemple du Pays basque de France,” *Revista internacional de los estudios vascos (RIEV)* 52, no. 1 (2007): 81-94.

The right of women to inherit the crown (in the absence of male heirs) was enshrined in the *Fueros*, a code of law and custom in Navarre that began as an oral tradition in the Middle Ages before it was first codified in 1238.⁶

Precedent was another key factor. It was difficult for the first woman to succeed to the throne, and “test cases” were not always successful, witness the failure of the Empress Matilda to claim the English throne or Juana of Navarre, daughter of Louis X, to claim her birthright in the French succession crisis of 1316.⁷ However, once a precedent for female succession was established, it was difficult to overturn and enabled other women to follow in an earlier queen’s footsteps.⁸ Again, this trend can be seen in the Kingdom of Jerusalem, the Iberian peninsula, and later in England, where the accession of Mary Tudor (or arguably Lady Jane Grey) opened up a notable period of female rule in Early Modern England under the Tudor and Stuart sisters.

Situational factors were also critical; indeed, this could be applied

6. Ismael Sánchez Bella, ed., *El Fuero Reducido de Navarra (Edición crítica y Estudios)*, 2 vols. (Pamplona: Gobierno de Navarra, 1989). The *Fueros* were initially codified under the first Champenois ruler, Teobaldo I, in 1238 and subsequently improved and reissued by Felipe III d’Evreux and Juana II in 1330 and by Carlos III in 1418. On inheritance, royal and otherwise, see Titulo 8, 314-19. The Gobierno de Navarra has published an excellent study on the history of the *Fueros*: *Navarra, Comunidad Foral Historia y actualidad del Fuero Navarro*, 1999. This can be accessed on-line at http://www.pnte.cfnavarra.es/publicaciones/pdf/fuero_dg.pdf.

7. See Elena Woodacre, *The Queens Regnant of Navarre: Succession, Partnership and Politics, 1274-1512* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 51-61.

8. A rare case of overturned precedent can be seen in Aragon, when succession principles were changed after the rule of Queen Petronilla to exclude female claimants. However, Petronilla’s rule was exceptional. Her father Ramiro left his monastery after his brother Alfonso I died without heirs with the sole intention of fathering a child who could replace him. Once Petronilla was born, Ramiro placed her in the care of her intended fiancé and returned to his monastery. Aragon developed a system of semi-Salic law, which allowed claimants through the female line but did not allow women to rule directly. See William Clay Stalls, “Queenship and the Royal Patrimony in Twelfth-Century Iberia: The Example of Petronilla of Aragon,” in *Queens, Regents and Potentates*, ed. Theresa M. Vann (Cambridge: Academia Press, 1993), 49-62, and Alfonso Garcia Gallo, “El Derecho de Sucesion del Trono en la Corona de Aragon,” *Anuario de Historia del Derecho Español* 36, no. 5 (1966): 5-188.

more widely to the position of all women exercising power. The deaths of brothers and husbands enabled women's access to power, allowing them to succeed to a throne in their own right or administer lands on a child's behalf. The absence of husbands on war or Crusade or the incapacity of a husband, such as Henry VI of England or Charles VI of France, also enhanced women's opportunities to exercise power. Fertility issues, or more importantly, a lack of male heirs, could make a daughter first in line to a throne. While law, custom, and precedent laid the groundwork for women to access power, situational factors made it possible—indeed, these were arguably the most significant element of the equation. For example, Blanca I of Navarre's ability to succeed to the throne was enshrined in the *Fueros*, and it was confirmed on multiple occasions by orders of succession issued by her father Carlos III, but it never would have occurred if her two brothers had not died in childhood.⁹

Another situational factor which could prove crucial in a woman's ability to access or exercise power was her relationship with those around her, particularly her co-rulers. Janna Bianchini, in her study of Berenguela's reign alongside her son Fernando III of Castile, has argued that women needed a male co-ruler.¹⁰ While this is a debatable assertion, certainly in the majority of cases women did have a co-ruler, most often a husband, child, or family member. Even Elizabeth I, who famously chose not to marry, arguably had William Cecil, Lord Burghley, as a co-ruler *de facto* if not *de jure*. Theresa Earenfight, in her seminal article "Without the Persona of the Prince" and in her wider work, has made compelling arguments for the corporate nature of monarchy and the importance of understanding royal partnership.¹¹ She has described monarchical

9. Blanca's accession was also dependent on the untimely death of her two elder sisters, particularly Juana (1382-1413), who was initially the designated heiress both before the birth of her younger brothers and again after their deaths in 1402.

10. Janna Bianchini, *The Queen's Hand: Power and Authority in the Reign of Berenguela of Castile* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

11. Theresa Earenfight, "Without the Persona of the Prince: Kings, Queens and the Idea of Monarchy in Late Medieval Europe," *Gender & History* 19, no. 1 (2007): 1-21, doi: 10.1111/j.1468-0424.2007.00461.x.

power as a “flexible sack” which stretched to accommodate both kings and queens—as well as favorites and royal family members as desirable.¹²

As part of this “flexible sack” or partnership with a co-ruler, a woman’s access to power was enhanced when her partnership with her co-ruler was working most effectively. The importance of a good personal and working relationship with her co-ruler was vitally important. In Berenguela’s case, the strength of her relationship with her son Fernando was the foundation upon which they built their very successful joint reign. Isabel of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragon’s motto *Tanto monta*, and the fact that they continue to be referred to together as *los Reyes Católicos*, reflects their incredibly effective power-sharing dynamic and solid personal and political partnership.¹³ In contrast, the disastrous relationship between Urraca of León-Castile and Alfonso of Aragon in the twelfth century led not only to the end of their partnership but also war between their respective realms.¹⁴ Queens consort also gained greater ability to access power when their relationship with their husband, the king, was strong. A positive personal relationship increased the amount of time she spent with her husband, increasing opportunities for influence and intercession. In addition to affection, trust was another vital factor, as a husband would be unwilling to delegate duties or allow a wife or mother to rule in his absence if he did not trust his female co-ruler.

On a related note, a woman’s access to power was to some extent affected by “popularity,” both hers and her husband’s. Both Matilda of England and Sibylla of Jerusalem were hampered by consorts who were unpopular with their subjects; this was certainly a factor in why both

12. *Ibid.*, 10.

13. See Barbara F. Weissberger, “*Tanto monta*: The Catholic Monarchs’ Nuptial Fiction and the Power of Isabel I of Castile,” in *The Rule of Women in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Anne J. Cruz and Mihoko Sukuki (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 43–62 for an in-depth analysis of the use of this motto and the official symbolism of the *Reyes Católicos*. See also Theresa Earenfight, “Two Bodies, One Spirit: Isabel and Fernando’s Construction of Monarchical Partnership,” in *Queen Isabel I of Castile: Power, Personage, Persona*, ed. Barbara F. Weissberger (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Tamesis, 2008), 3–18.

14. For a full history of the marriage of Urraca and Alfonso, see Bernard F. Reilly, *The Kingdom of León-Castilla under Queen Urraca, 1109–1126* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982).

women struggled to assert their claim to the throne. Conversely, a queen consort who did visibly exercise power and influence with her husband could become unpopular, particularly when it was felt that she used her influence to her family's benefit, as in the English cases of Eleanor of Provence, Elizabeth Woodville, or later Henrietta Maria.¹⁵

The “Monstrous Regiment”: Continuity or Change?

“The Monstrous Regiment” is a term often applied to denote a surge of female rulers in the Early Modern period and the debate over female rule highlighted by John Knox in his infamous “First Blast of the Trumpet,” which is where the term derives from.¹⁶ However, was the Monstrous Regiment really a break from medieval traditions or merely a continuation of the practices of female rule and regency in the Middle Ages? While queens regnant were a new innovation in England in the sixteenth century, they were well known on the Iberian and Italian peninsulas, in the Latin East, and had also been seen in northern and eastern Europe in the Middle Ages. England's four queens regnant (five if you count Lady Jane Grey) were in parity with the number in medieval Navarre or the Crusader States. With regard to regent queens, Mary of Guise in Scotland and in France the two Medici regents and Anne of Austria were all highly visible female rulers. However, it is important to note that the French regents in particular built upon medieval precedents of female regency.¹⁷

While tracts such as the aforementioned contribution by John Knox and the anti-gynecocracy commentaries of François Hotman and Jean Bodin appear to create a misogynist opposition to women exercising power, these too could be seen to be a continuation of the *querelle des*

15. See Theresa Earenfight's contribution to this discussion for more analysis of the role of queens, particularly her comments on the mobility of women.

16. John Knox, “The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women” (Geneva, 1558).

17. For French regents see Andre Poulet, “Capetian Women and the Regency: The Genesis of a Vocation,” in Parsons, *Medieval Queenship*, 93-116; and Katherine Crawford, *Perilous Performances: Gender and Regency in Early Modern France* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

femmes which was firmly rooted in the Middle Ages.¹⁸ Women who exercised power vigorously in the medieval period were often criticized by contemporary chroniclers, though not always. For example Berengaria, Blanche of Castile, Melisende of Jerusalem, and Isabel *la Católica* all won praise for their wisdom and effective rule. However, we need to be careful when we look at criticism of female agency and rule in both the medieval and Early Modern period. Criticism of female rulers is not always driven by misogyny or opposition to female power.¹⁹ John Knox's vitriolic tract was targeted at the three Marys: Mary of Guise, Mary Queen of Scots, and Mary Tudor, whose opposition to the Reformed Religion that Knox espoused could be argued to be the real basis for his opposition. Indeed Knox was apologetic to the Protestant Elizabeth I on her accession, indicating that he did not truly oppose female rule in principle. Salic Law was retroactively engineered, arguably more to bar the claim of Edward III through the male line than to prevent female rule.²⁰ By the sixteenth century, writers like Jean Bodin and François

18. François Hotman, *Francogallia*, trans. J. H. M. Salmon and ed. Ralph E. Giesey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972); Jean Bodin, *Six Books of the Commonwealth (Les Six livres de la République)*, trans. M. J. Tooley (Oxford: Blackwell, 1955).

19. Two excellent works on the topic are Sharon L. Jansen, *Debating Women, Power and Politics in Early Modern Europe* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); and Amanda Shepard, *Gender and Authority in Sixteenth Century England* (Keele: Keele University Press, 1994).

20. There has been considerable scholarship on the development of French succession practice with regard to Salic Law. For a few key examples, see Philippe Contamine, "Le royaume de France ne peut tomber en fille': Fondement, formulation et implication d'une théorie politique à la fin du Moyen Age," *Perspectives Médiévales* 13 (1987): 67-81; Sarah Hanley, "The Politics of Identity and Monarchic Government in France: The Debate over Female Exclusion," in *Women Writers and the Early Modern British Political Tradition*, ed. Hilda L. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 289-304; the classic article by John Milton Potter, "The Development and Significance of the Salic Law of the French," *English Historical Review* 52, no. 206 (1937): 235-53, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/554261>; Craig Taylor, "The Salic Law and the Valois Succession to the French Crown," *French History* 15, no. 4 (2001): 358-77, doi:10.1093/fh/15.4.358, and "The Salic Law, French Queenship and the Defence of Women in the Late Middle Ages," *French Historical Studies* 29, no. 4 (2006): 543-64, doi:10.1215/00161071-2006-012; and Éliane Viennot, *La France*,

Hotman could claim Salic Law was a pillar of French monarchy but again is this truly misogyny or merely flag-waving jingoism?

In sum, though the Monstrous Regiment of the Early Modern period may have hit the headlines for colorful characters who were exercising power in a turbulent political landscape, these women can hardly be seen as an innovative break from the Middle Ages. Rather they represent the continuation of a tradition of female agency, exercising political power and influence in their own right and with their partners, sometimes praised and sometimes criticized.

University of Winchester

les femmes et le pouvoir: l'invention de la loi salique (V-XVI siècle) (Paris: Perrin, 2006).