

WELLMAN, Kathleen – *Queens and Mistresses of Renaissance France*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013. Pp. 433.

In general, the study of royal mistresses is undertaken separately from that of queens, but that approach, as Kathleen Wellman's book demonstrates, has the inconvenience of separating the part from the whole, ignoring the relationships established by the individuals concerned. It thus makes perfect sense to study queens and mistresses jointly, especially in France, where the status of the latter seems to have been so important as to make their influence almost indistinguishable in terms of power. The author has analysed these women in the Renaissance, understood as a broad period, ranging from 1444—when Charles VII designated his first official mistress, Agnès Sorel—to 1599, when Gabrielle d'Estrées died before she could marry Henry IV. This means many queens and mistresses have been studied in detail, and sometimes also other women who were neither, such as Louise of Savoy whose role as regent and political partner to her son Francis I the author explores. Such an achievement requires the mastery of a multitude of characters, episodes, and political circumstances over a range of a century and a half, which the author dominates effortlessly. The quantity of cases displayed was not feasible through the reading or re-reading of manuscript sources; Wellman relies mainly on bibliography and printed materials, such as chronicles, travel accounts, ambassadors' reports, *memoirs*, letters, etc. However, the reader is not informed either about their authors or the context in which they were writing, making the discussion of the weaknesses and strengths of the primary sources generally absent in the book. However, this is a minor fault within the book's many virtues, as it is the first comprehensive study of a subject that attracts a great deal of attention, and is certainly in need of fresh approaches.

Recent historiography on queenship has emphasized the role of women as political actors and cultural agents, and it is now clear to historians that the political and cultural history of Early Modern Europe can no longer ignore them. However, queens and mistresses always related to royal male figures; their role was exerted always in relation to a man, and they exerted power rather informally, except in specific circumstances (such as regency in the case of queens). Also, as the author makes perfectly clear, the status of mistresses was more fragile than that of queens, as they did not have legal rights, and as such, their influence ceased

after the king's death or loss of favour. The location of women's powers in the private sphere makes it sometimes very difficult to assess their real roles. Even so, Wellman has succeeded in demonstrating how crucial these women were in shaping court culture, the visual arts, and politics, thus being able to argue that women *did* have a Renaissance.

Some features seem to be specific to the French monarchy, and puzzle the reader. First of all, the king's legitimate and illegitimate children could be reared together in the same palace, generally separated from the one where the king was living. Second, some foreign young royal brides were educated in the French court from early childhood, and thus there was the possibility of being refused after a lengthy stay in France, as happened to Margaret of Austria (1480-1530), who was engaged to Charles VIII, and Mariana Victoria of Spain (1718-1781), formerly to wed Louis XV and later queen of Portugal by her marriage to Joseph I. Also, French queens might be crowned in separate ceremonies, that is, not jointly with their husbands, whereas in some kingdoms coronations were replaced by other rituals of passage, not extensive to royal wives. Last but not least, the very status of royal mistresses: even though virtually all kings in Europe were entitled to have them, France seems to have been a case where these women displayed an official status unrivalled anywhere else, meaning that such mistresses predictably created similarly official extra-magnetic fields for competition among courtiers. Why such important differences occur is yet to be explained. These are questions that the reader might want to see answered in the book, but perhaps this task is for other historians, as the comparative study of queens and mistresses in the different European monarchies is yet to be undertaken. For now, Wellman has surely done enough to shine a light on queens and mistresses in Renaissance France.

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