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Sarah Gristwood. *Game of Queens: The Women Who Made Sixteenth-Century Europe.* New York: Basic Books, 2016. Illustrations. 400 pp. $28.99, cloth, ISBN 978-0-465-09678-7.

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

In a time when women can respectably occupy the highest echelons of power and simultaneously a presidential candidate can publicly disparage his political opponent with the shocking words "nasty woman," Sarah Gristwood's *Game of Queens* reminds us of long-held and disturbingly unchanging perceptions of women and power. The long sixteenth century witnessed an unprecedented political arena populated by queens regent and regnant, some as pawns and others as true players exercising power. To take William Shakespeare one step further, though "uneasy lies the head that wears a crown," the gender of the head affects the degree of unease not only of the monarch but of those around her as well.

The sixteenth century witnessed the confluence of the northern Renaissance, the consolidation of national monarchies, and the breakup of Western Christendom via the birth of Protestantism. All of this was accompanied by almost incessant warfare: the Italian Wars and larger Hapsburg/Valois rivalry; war with the Turks; religious wars in France, the Netherlands, and the Holy Roman Empire; and civil skirmishes that raged throughout western Europe. A historical maxim, and the dominant perception during this time, was that a throne was in greatest danger when it was occupied by a minor or a woman. Monarchical power was masculine by default, gendered in its very nature. Unfettered female authority was defined as an abomination, an unnatural state, contrary to the order established by God that placed man above woman. Yet almost all the great states of Europe experienced dynastic crises or circumstances that would lead to either a young monarch or a female ruler. Gristwood's book illustrates in fine detail that the sixteenth century was truly an age of queens.

Gristwood's engaging narrative studies three generations (loosely) of fascinating royal women, beginning with Isabella of Castille, Margaret of Austria, Louise of Savoy, and Marguerite de Navarre; followed by the generation of Katherine of Aragon, Anne Boleyn, Catherine de Medici, Marie de Guise, and Jeanne d'Albret; and ending with Mary Tudor, Mary Queen of Scots, and Elizabeth I. She shows just how careful her figures were as they navigated the Scylla of appearing not to challenge traditional male authority and the Charybdis of being strong rulers. This is not a collection of mini-biographies; rather, it is a holistic approach to the period that situates these women in their larger political and religious contexts. Gristwood is particularly successful at revealing a kind of "sisterhood" of queens—their interconnectedness through blood and marital ties, mentor/protégée relationships, and diplomacy. Usually these women are considered individually

as "exceptional" figures, contrasted as pairs, or studied in the context of the history of their particular states. Instead, Gristwood, via her holistic pan-European approach, uncovers the surprising extent to which their lives were interwoven and the centrality of these female figures to the defining events of the era. Gristwood's book admirably moves the political history of the era beyond the towering male figures of Henry VIII, Francis I, and Charles V, and the "exceptionality" of Elizabeth I.

The holistic approach is a strength, but it also creates one of the book's biggest problems. The scope of the narrative is enormous, so much so that the book includes a chronology of events; genealogical trees of the royal families of France, England, Scotland, Spain, and the Hapsburg Empire; and a list of dramatis personae. While these are helpful, they do not compensate for an absence of judicious curating. This is especially apparent in chapters, organized chronologically, that are overpopulated at times with minutiae. For example, in chapter 18, "New Pieces on the Board ... 1526-1528," consisting of seven pages, the author jumps between Scotland, the Netherlands, Hungary, Italy, and France. Chapters like this feel more like a listing of loose ends or miscellanea rather than cohesive pieces of her study. While the work is engaging and elegantly written, the narrative is at times confusing and the weighting of events unclear. Breadth in some places takes precedence over necessary depth in others. While her coverage of Elizabeth is tremendous, Gristwood chooses to emphasize international affairs, the issue of her marriage, and tensions with Mary Queen of Scots over her internal successes. A key factor in the stability and longevity of Elizabeth's reign was her compromise in creating a religious settlement that was acceptable to both moderate Catholics and moderate Protestants in the aftermath of the religious swings of Edward's Protestantism and Mary's Catholicism. The Elizabethan Settlement was a magnificent piece of statecraft and strong component of her success in turbulent times, yet here it is subsumed under diplomatic efforts with Scotland, France, and Spain.

Gristwood's book is intended as a popular historical narrative and, therefore, it poses problems for the scholarly reader. In a dense book of 324 pages of text, there are a scant 6 pages of suggestions for further reading and some general notes. Though the author refers to and quotes primary sources, such as letters, diplomatic dispatches, and contemporary pamphlets and histories, she gives only selective attribution. This can be especially problematic in a historical era when different factions were producing propaganda to legitimate their causes. In the religious conflicts in France during the 1560s and 1570s, both the Catholic faction and the Huguenots were publishing pamphlets attempting to control the narrative of events to the point of impersonating each other. Thus, assessing responsibility for such incidents as the Vassy Massacre and St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre is problematic without careful attribution of sources. That said, the book is not intended to be a scholarly monograph; it was written with an informed lay audience in mind.

Gristwood makes a strong argument for the centrality of female power in a world that traditionally has been focused on male domination. She succeeds in situating her queens in their proper place, not just as pawns or exceptions. Rather, she shows us a network of powerful women who maneuvered (some more successfully than others) around the limitations placed on them and made their mark on the era. She brings her queens to life, imbuing them with very human qualities and treating them with fairness and sympathy. The book would be a grand starting point for those interested in monarchy and political history of the sixteenth century.

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