

# 1 The Radicalism of Female Rule in Eighteenth-Century Britain

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Thomas Christie – political firebrand, journalist, member of publisher Joseph Johnson’s most intimate radical circles – sympathized entirely with the French Revolution, at least in its early stages. In his *Letters on the Revolution of France and the New Constitution*, published by Johnson in 1791, Christie portrayed the Revolution unfolding across the English Channel as orderly, deliberative, and, above all, reasonable. No aspect of the Revolution illustrated this ethos more clearly, Christie felt, than the French National Assembly’s recent decision *not* to tamper with the old regime laws governing royal succession, which prevented women from assuming the throne.<sup>1</sup> “The ancient Salic law,” Christie explained, “which excludes females from succeeding to the throne, was considered by the Assembly as a fundamental and wise regulation of the monarchy, which merited to be solemnly renewed, and permanently established.” As Christie went on to note, in a passage that warrants citing in full, it was in preserving the Salic law that the French had demonstrated “that they knew where to draw the line, and so to honour the sex as not to injure their *real* happiness, or endanger the welfare of society.” “They have rightly judged,” he wrote, “in not raising them [women] out of their natural sphere; in not involving them in the cares and anxieties of State affairs, to which neither their frame nor their minds are adapted; in not charging them with the weight of a sceptre, which they scarcely ever sway but in appearance – with true respect for the gentleness of their nature, and the delicacy of their sex, they have saved them from the horrid obligation of proclaiming war, and calling forth men to battle and bloodshed; with all the other unnatural and shocking circumstances that attend a reversal of the laws of Nature, by appointing women to rule over men.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> On the strange history of the Salic law in old regime France, as it pertained to the prohibition of women from the throne, see Sarah Hanley’s pioneering scholarship, including *Les droits des femmes et la loi salique*; “Identity Politics and Rulership in France,” pp. 78–94; and “The Salic Law,” pp. 2–17.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Christie, *Letters on the Revolution of France, and on the New Constitution* (London: J. Johnson, 1791), pp. 217–218.

Why would a Briton such as Christie describe female sovereignty as a “reversal of the laws of Nature”? England, after all, had long permitted women to rule, albeit for pragmatic and religious reasons, and with preference still given to men (until the passage of the Succession to the Crown Act of 2013).<sup>3</sup> And this permissiveness was routinely made a point of national pride. “If any should allege the Freedoms indulged to the *French ladies*,” advised a smug Joseph Addison in 1716, “he must own that these are owing to the natural Gallantry of the People, not to their Form of Government, which excludes by its very Constitution every Female from Power, as naturally unfit to hold the Sceptre of that Kingdom.”<sup>4</sup> Addison spoke from experience. Queen Anne’s reign had ended just two years earlier, preceded by those of three other queens in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – Mary I, Elizabeth I, and Mary II. The sixteenth century had also seen Mary of Guise and her daughter Mary Stuart exercise their rule in Scotland. Then, too, there was the fact that such a tradition could be said to reach deep into the nation’s past, to include Boudica, the leader of the ancient Icenii tribe, as well as the Empress Matilda and Eleanor of Aquitaine, among others.<sup>5</sup>

On one level, then, we might attribute Christie’s championing of the Salic law to a knee-jerk Francophilia, so typical of British reformers in the first heady years of the French Revolution. For Christie, bristling at the recent publication of Edmund Burke’s highly critical *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), defending the French revolutionaries’ every decision had become a personal and professional mandate. Yet, Christie’s comments also suggest a marked discomfort with the gendered implications of Britain’s own royal traditions. This is because, as Christie himself explained, admitting women to the throne was never just a question of royal policy. It also raised significant questions about “where to draw the line” in regards to the treatment of women more generally. As a political reformer still attached

<sup>3</sup> The 1543 Act of Succession and 1554 Act Concerning Regal Power together had determined not just that women could become sovereign – absent a male heir to the throne – but also that they would rule on the same terms as men. On the acts, see esp. Beem, *The Lioness Roared*, pp. 179–180; and Jordan, *Renaissance Feminism*, p. 116. Only in 2013, with the passage of a new Succession to the Crown Act, has the practice of male preference been abandoned.

<sup>4</sup> See Joseph Addison, *The Free-Holder*, no. 4 (January 2, 1716), reprinted in *The Free-holder: Or Political Essays* (London: J. and R. Tonson, 1744), p. 19. Emphasis Addison’s.

<sup>5</sup> On this point, see Helen Castor, *She-Wolves: The Women Who Ruled England before Elizabeth* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011); and Jodi Mikalachki, *The Legacy of Boudicea: Gender and Nation in Early Modern England* (New York: Routledge, 1998). Culturally significant also is the intrepid female figure Britannia, who came to personify the nation with particular force during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and whose identity was often fused with that of the nation’s female sovereigns. For a discussion of Britannia and female sovereignty, see Emma Major, *Madam Britannia: Women, Church, and Nation 1712–1812* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

to patriarchal assumptions about men and women's distinct places in the world, the prospect of female rule was thus profoundly unsettling.

From Christie's perspective, moreover, these were not just abstract concerns. Rather, he wrote with full knowledge that some of his more radical colleagues (more radical, at least in regards to questions of sex and gender) had started to pursue precisely this line of reasoning, using Britain's rejection of the Salic law as a tool for women's social and political advancement. Since the Glorious Revolution of 1688–1689, and only accelerating with the American and French revolutions, certain reformers had begun to probe their nation's relatively open royal succession policy and to extract broader meanings from the tradition of elite female inclusion. That men and women alike were permitted to rule, that Britain had a long history of female sovereigns, and that Elizabeth I, in particular, had demonstrated tremendous skill on the throne – these facts became evidence for some that their nation was already committed to a version of gender equity, and that women's treatment in the future would only become more fair, humane, and consistent. To put it differently, Christie had good reason to worry about the broader destabilizing effects of allowing women to “rule over men.”

This chapter outlines this conversation as it unfolded over the course of the long eighteenth century, exploring both why and how certain reformers began to shape the figure of the female sovereign into a radical construct. I will focus especially on how progressive thinkers toward the end of the century used a woman's “right to rule” to make new claims about the “rights of women,” and on how events within the royal family contributed to this dynamic. Yet, as Christie's comments suggest, I will also touch on some of the anxieties that such claims helped produce. After all, even these early investigations faced criticism. It is only with this background in mind that we can begin to make sense of the surge in feminist engagement with the queen during the first decades of Victoria's rule – as well as of the considerable pushback that this thinking prompted. For this particular strand of debate, far from being introduced with Victoria's ascension, was long in the making.

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In some respects, this story could begin in the sixteenth century, when England's first queens regnant – Mary I (1553–1558), followed by her half-sister Elizabeth I (1558–1603) – ascended to the throne, and when Mary of Guise and Mary Stuart ruled successively over Scotland. For, already in the Tudor period, there were select commentators who relished the prospect of female rule, not just for its own sake, but also for what it might do for English and Scottish women. “Elizabeth's erudition and

effective rulership,” writes Sarah G. Ross, “were trumpeted” by progressive Renaissance figures, and “may well have inspired subroyal families to educate their daughters.”<sup>6</sup> The words of the Elizabethan pedagogue Richard Mulcaster bear witness to this potential:

[A]s they [women] communicate with us in all qualities and honors, even up to the scepter, so why ought they not in anywise but be made communicants with us in education and training, to perform that part well which they are to play, for either equality with us or sovereignty above us?<sup>7</sup>

It was such sentiments, after all, that terrified the Protestant theologian John Knox, who condemned the “monstrous regiment of women” in 1558, shortly before Elizabeth I assumed the throne.<sup>8</sup>

Yet, such radical interpretations of queenship were relatively unusual during the Tudor period, a comment less on early modern Britons’ capacity for egalitarian thinking and more on their inability to see queens regnant, strictly speaking, as women. As Cynthia Herrup has observed, in her incisive analysis of what she describes as the king’s “two genders” (a play on Ernst Kantorowicz’s classic formulation of the king’s “two bodies,” e.g., the “body politic” and the “body natural”), sixteenth-century subjects seem to have

<sup>6</sup> See Ross, *The Birth of Feminism*, p. 181. As Ross continues, p. 182, “Queen Elizabeth served as a crucial point of reference for English men and women who took an explicit feminist position from the late sixteenth century onward.” On Elizabeth I’s impact on egalitarian theories and practices, see also Jordan, *Renaissance Feminism*, esp. her discussion of “Woman’s Rule: The Tudor Queens,” pp. 116–133; and Pamela Joseph Benson, *The Invention of the Renaissance Woman: The Challenge of Female Independence in the Literature and Thought of Italy and England* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), esp. chapter 9, on “The Defense of Female Regiment: Practical Politics.”

<sup>7</sup> Richard Mulcaster, *Positions*, ed., Richard de Molen (New York: Columbia University Teacher’s College Press, 1971 [1581]), p. 145, cited in Ross, *The Birth of Feminism*, p. 182. See also Anne Bradstreet, “In Honor of that High and Mighty Princess Queen Elizabeth,” in *The Tenth Muse, Lately Sprung up in America* (London, 1650), cited in Ross, *The Birth of Feminism*, p. 183: “Now, say, have women worth? Or have they none?/Or had they some, but with our Queen is’t gone?/Nay, Masculines, you have thus taxed us long./But she, though dead, will vindicate our wrong./Let such as say our sex is void of reason/ Know ‘tis slander now, but once was treason!” Nor were such sentiments confined to the British Isles. The Cartesian French thinker François Poullain de la Barre made a similar argument in his *On the Equality of the Two Sexes* (1673), in which he criticized the Salic law in France because it degraded Frenchwomen.

<sup>8</sup> See Knox, “The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women,” pp. 373–374. Knox insisted that female rule went against God’s will: “I am assured that God hath reveled to some in this our age, that it is more than a monstre in nature that a Woman shall reigne and have empire above a Man . . . howe abominable, odious, and detestable is all such usurped authoritie.” Knox’s comments were directed primarily at Mary of Guise, Mary Stuart, and Mary I. On Tudor anxieties in regards to female rule, see esp. Carole Levin, *The Heart and Stomach of a King: Elizabeth I and the Politics of Sex and Power* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994); and Beem, *The Lioness Roared*.

been far more complacent regarding female sovereigns – often understood at the time as *female kings* – than we have generally presumed.<sup>9</sup> This is because, as Herrup explains, all sovereigns were seen to possess “two genders,” one eternal and perfect (coded male) and the other temporal and imperfect, and thus capable of being inhabited by *anybody*, whether “adult male, minor, or female,” the “inadequacies” always “subsumed” by the “fully able royal body.”<sup>10</sup> A number of scholars have corroborated this view; having the “heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too,” even if the “body but of a weak and feeble woman,” could get a female sovereign quite far in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century political field, as Queen Elizabeth I well knew.<sup>11</sup>

It is for these reasons that the Glorious Revolution, which saw the abdication of James II in favor of William and Mary of Orange, marks a decisive turning point in my narrative. For, if “two-bodies” – or “two genders” – legalism was able to sustain the nation’s relatively open royal succession policies during the Tudor and Stuart periods, the concept of female sovereignty became significantly more knotty once this legal framework began to be dismantled in the wake of 1688–1689. This is because the Glorious Revolution largely did away with the concept of “divine right” monarchy, which had informed sovereignty for centuries. No longer could the king or queen necessarily be construed as sent from God “by birth,” as the Anglican bishop John Aylmer had put it soothingly in his *Harborowe for Faithfull and Trewe Subjects* (1559).<sup>12</sup> Closely related,

<sup>9</sup> See Herrup, “The King’s Two Genders.” For Ernst Kantorowicz’s original formulation, see *The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016 [1957]). On the concept of “female kingship,” see William Monter, *The Rise of Female Kings in Europe, 1300–1800* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> Herrup, “The King’s Two Genders,” p. 495.

<sup>11</sup> Queen Elizabeth I shared these words in a rousing speech delivered to her troops assembled at Tilbury Camp as they prepared for a Spanish invasion in 1588. On this point see Levin, *The Heart and Stomach of a King*, esp. pp. 122–123; Paul Kléber Monod, *The Power of Kings: Monarchy and Religion in Europe, 1589–1715* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 63–64; Jordan, *Renaissance Feminism*, p. 131; and Rachel Weil, *Political Passions: Gender, the Family and Political Argument in England, 1680–1714* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), pp. 166–167. As Levin notes, *The Heart and Stomach of a King*, p. 123, “If a kingly body politic could be incorporated into an actual natural female body – her natural self – how much more natural right Elizabeth had to rule, and to rule alone.” For a broader assessment, see also Howard Nenner, *The Right to Be King: The Succession to the Crown of England, 1603–1714* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

<sup>12</sup> See John Aylmer, *An Harborowe for Faithfull and Trewe Subjects* (London: J. Daye, 1559). Aylmer elaborates by stressing God’s role in sanctioning female rule: “Placeth he [on the throne] a woman weake in nature, feable in bodie, softe in courage, unskilfull in practice, not terrible to the enemy, no shilde to the frynde, well, *Virtus mea* (aith he) *in infirmitate perficitur* . . . If he put to his hande she can not be feable, if he be with her who can stande against her.”

the Glorious Revolution also simultaneously transformed monarchy itself into a civil contract, as enshrined in the Bill of Rights (1689). It was Parliament, not the sovereign, which now possessed the ultimate authority. “[T]he community,” John Locke famously stressed in his second treatise on government, “comes to be umpire, by settled standing rules, indifferent, and the same to all parties.”<sup>13</sup> As a result of these seismic changes, the logic underpinning sovereignty, in general, and female sovereignty, in particular, became more tenuous.<sup>14</sup> For now a queen regnant had only one body, and that body was, to borrow Rachel Weil’s formulation, but a woman’s.<sup>15</sup> Going forward, the queen would be distinguished by nothing more than rank and pedigree from others of her sex. What is more, she would rule, not by the grace of God, but, rather, by the consent of the people. Her subjects alone would determine her fitness to lead.<sup>16</sup>

These terms opened up a space for sometimes dramatic reconsiderations of female sovereignty, and especially of the extent to which queens regnant could be said to be exceptional rather than exemplary.<sup>17</sup> For, if female sovereigns were merely women of an elevated station, whose rule depended upon the approval of their subjects, surely this said something about the sex’s positions and potentials in a broader sense? Was it not time, then, to revisit and advance the *querelle des femmes*, that long-standing debate about the status of women that had originated in Renaissance France? Surveying the remarkable flowering of discussion of queenship over the course of the eighteenth century, what becomes striking is the extent to which those committed to versions of female advancement latched on to this line of reasoning. Such thinking, in fact, was already being hinted at by John Locke in his first treatise on government, published in 1690. There he used queens Mary I and Elizabeth I as a means of challenging the patriarchal vision contained in the Book of Genesis. “[Will any one say],” Locke wondered, “that either of our

<sup>13</sup> See John Locke, “The Second Treatise,” in *Two Treatises of Government and a Letter Concerning Toleration*, ed., Ian Shapiro (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003 [1690]), pp. 100–210 at p. 137.

<sup>14</sup> On the monarchy’s “identity crisis” in the wake of the Glorious Revolution, see esp. Morris, *The British Monarchy and the French*, esp. pp. 1–12.

<sup>15</sup> See Rachel Weil, *Political Passions*, esp. chapter 7, “‘Queens Are but Women’: Images of Queen Anne.” Clarissa Campbell Orr also speculates on the possibilities opened up once “royal women became representative figures for women . . .” See the introduction to Orr, *Queenship in Britain 1660–1837*, pp. 1–52 at p. 41.

<sup>16</sup> Of course, the shift away from “divine right” sovereignty did not happen overnight. Well into the nineteenth century (and to some extent even today) Britons might invoke “Providence” as playing a role in sustaining the monarchy.

<sup>17</sup> On Elizabeth I’s exceptional status, see Benson, *The Invention of the Renaissance Woman*, p. 233 ff; and Beem, *The Lioness Roared*, p. 180.

queens, Mary or Elizabeth, had they married any of their subjects, had been by this text [e.g., Genesis] put into a political subjection to him? or that he should thereby have had monarchical rule over her? God, in this text, gives not, that I see, any authority to Adam over Eve, or to men over their wives, but only foretels [sic] what should be the woman's lot."<sup>18</sup>

During Queen Mary II's rule (1689–1694), proponents of female advancement began to tease out these associations, although in ways that might be described as still somewhat tentative – perhaps because they wished to preserve what remained a precarious political experiment, perhaps because they found Mary, who willingly ceded so much of her power to her husband, King William III, with whom she ruled jointly, to be a frustrating queen regnant.<sup>19</sup> When Mary's strong-willed younger sister Anne assumed the throne in 1702, however, early women's activists found a more appealing role model and put quill to paper. Here, after all, was a female ruler who managed to persist in the face of considerable political opposition and bodily failures (corpulence, illness, an inability to produce an heir despite at least seventeen pregnancies).<sup>20</sup> Writers including Sarah Fyge Egerton, Elizabeth Elstob, Mary Astell, Catharine Trotter Cockburn, and Lady Mary Chudleigh identified with Anne's tenacity and used their queen both to call attention to women's capabilities and to advance their own authorial ambitions.<sup>21</sup>

This is not to suggest that these writers always had the same goals in mind when they invoked Anne – or, for that matter, that they shared a uniform understanding of who their queen was, what kind of authority she possessed, and why she ruled. The notion of “divine right,” for instance, did not fall away entirely in the post-1688 period, despite the triumph of the Revolution Settlement. In her *Poems* of 1703, Lady

<sup>18</sup> See John Locke, “First Treatise on Government,” in *Two Treatises of Government and a Letter Concerning Toleration*, pp. 32–33. For a broader discussion of the role of common law and the uses of history in Enlightenment debate, see Julia Rudolph, *Common Law and Enlightenment in England, 1689–1750* (Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2013).

<sup>19</sup> On this point, see Carol Barash, *English Women's Poetry, 1649–1714: Politics, Community, and Linguistic Authority* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 215: “Given Mary's public participation in models of political order that symbolically gave away powers and authorities she was born with, it is not really surprising that women writers tended not to write to or about her.”

<sup>20</sup> See Barash, *English Women's Poetry*, p. 228.

<sup>21</sup> On female poets and Queen Anne, see Barash, *English Women's Poetry*, esp. chapter 5, “Queen Anne among the Poets,” pp. 209–258; Catherine Gallagher, “Embracing the Absolute: The Politics of the Female Subject in Seventeenth-Century England,” *Gender I* (1988), pp. 25–39; and the introduction to Orr, *Queenship in Britain, 1660–1837*, esp. p. 40. As Barash notes, *English Women's Poetry*, p. 216, “Anne provided a very different model of women's political and linguistic authority [than her sister Mary].” And on p. 229: “It was . . . as reigning and virtuous *femme forte* that Anne symbolically encouraged other women to write.”

Chudleigh described Anne as part of a “God-like . . . Royal Race,” even as she tried to establish lines of connection between the female sovereign and the female subject.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, what united these writers was their collective belief in Anne as an exemplar of female, not just royal, capabilities and virtues. They saw their queen as a model for English women, to be actively praised and emulated. They even used the queen to defend their own right to speak out. For Catharine Trotter Cockburn, a playwright and philosopher who came to public attention for her *A Defense of the Essay of Human Understanding, Written by Mr. Lock* (1702), Anne’s rule provided the ideal pretext for her own daring theatrical experiments.<sup>23</sup> As Cockburn explained in the prologue to her play *The Revolution of Sweden* (1706), her drama would by no means offer “a soft effeminate Feast.” Yet, if any thought it improper for a female playwright to explore women’s role in the Lockean social contract, as Cockburn does in her play, she urged them only to think of the current structure of the English state. “Nor can the vainest haughtiest Man, disdain,” Cockburn warned, “A Woman’s Precepts in Great ANNA’s Reign.”<sup>24</sup>

The Tory philosopher Mary Astell likewise used the third edition of her *Some Reflections Upon Marriage*, published in 1706, to demonstrate that Anne’s rule forced a reappraisal of women’s abilities and warranted their broader inclusion in public pursuits. In her preface, Astell noted that it was especially strange for her critics to insist on the “natural inferiority of our sex,” given that Anne ruled. “If,” Astell wrote, “by the Natural Superiority of their Sex, they mean that every Man is by Nature superior to every Woman . . . it wou’d be a Sin in any Woman to have Dominion over any Man, and the greatest Queen ought not to command but to obey her Footman, because no Municipal Laws can supersede or change the Law of Nature; so that if the Dominion of the Men be such, the Salique

<sup>22</sup> See Lady Mary Chudleigh, “To the *Queen’s* most Excellent Majesty,” in *Poems on Several Occasions* (1703), reprinted in *The Poems and Prose of Mary, Lady Chudleigh*, ed., Margaret J. M. Ezell (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 162. That Queen Anne, too, often invoked the Godly plan guiding her rule also suggests that “divine right” monarchy continued to exert some force well after 1688, or, at the very least, that it had its strategic uses. For more on this, see Barash, *English Women’s Poetry*, p. 222.

<sup>23</sup> On this point, see Barash, *English Women’s Poetry*, pp. 256–257.

<sup>24</sup> See the prologue of Catharine Trotter Cockburn, *The Revolution of Sweden: A Tragedy: As It Is Acted at the Queens Theatre in the Hay-Market* (London: J. Knapton, 1706). For background on Cockburn and her philosophical and theatrical contributions, see her *A Defense of the Essay of Human Understanding Written by Mr Lock, Wherein Its Principles, with Reference to Morality, Revealed Religion, and the Immortality of the Soul, Are Consider’d and Justify’d: In Answer to Some Remarks on That Essay* (London: 1702); and Anne Kelley, “Introduction,” in *Eighteenth-Century Women Playwrights*, volume 2, ed., Derek Hughes (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2001), pp. xxiii–xxx.



Law, as unjust as English Men have ever thought it, ought to take place over all the Earth, and the most glorious Reigns . . . were wicked Violations of the Law of Nature!”<sup>25</sup>

Such inquiries continued under the Hanoverians, even in the absence of a ruling female monarch. (No woman would sit on the British throne between 1714, the year of Anne’s death, and 1837, the year of Victoria’s accession.) Regardless, reformers often invoked the figure of the queen regnant – both as a legal construct and as a historical fact – to make a pitch for women’s expanded participation in national life. In a case in 1737 regarding whether women could become sextons of a parish, for example, Chief Justice Lee defended women’s right to serve on the grounds that “Women have held much higher offices, and indeed, almost all offices of the kingdom, as Queen, Marshall, Great Chamberlain . . .”<sup>26</sup> And in *Woman Not Inferior to Man* (1739), one “Sophia” insisted that female sovereigns offered prime evidence of men and women’s shared intellectual capacities – and of their shared ability to take on a range of demanding professional positions, including leadership of the military. “[S]ince,” she explained, “this nation has seen many glorious instances of *Women*, severally qualified to have all public authority center’d in them: why may they not be as qualified at least for the subordinate offices of ministers of state, vice-queens, govern-esses, secretaries, privy-counsellors, and treasurers? Or why may they not, without oddity, be even generals of armies, and admirals of fleets?”<sup>27</sup> The widowed landowner Margery Weldone, meanwhile, writing in *The Gloucester Journal* in 1740, used queens (as well as other exceptional women) to justify her bold claim that all power “both *Legislative* and *Executive*, *Ecclesiastical* and *Civil*, may be divided among *both Sexes*, and that they may be equally capable

<sup>25</sup> See the preface for Mary Astell, *Reflections upon Marriage*, third edition (London: R. Wilkin, 1706), pp. 3–4; Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell: An Early English Feminist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); and Barash, *English Women’s Poetry*, pp. 250–252. As Barash notes, p. 252, “Just as Queen Anne can claim a natural right to govern men, women who praise her are empowered to enter intellectual worlds formerly possessed by men.” The cleverness of Astell’s tactics would be celebrated by subsequent activists. In a piece published in *The Westminster Review* in 1898, for instance, the suffragist Harriet McIlquham congratulated Astell for her use of “unsparing satire” to “show the absurdity of supposing every man superior to every woman. And such opinions to prevail during the glorious reign of a Queen!” See “Mary Astell: A Seventeenth-Century Advocate for Women,” *The Westminster Review* 149, April 1898, pp. 440–449 at p. 447. The scholar and suffragist Charlotte Carmichael Stopes would also praise Astell’s use of queens in her *British Freewomen: Their Historical Privilege* (London: S. Sonnenschein & Co., 1894), pp. 123–124.

<sup>26</sup> See Croake James, *Curiosities of Law and Lawyers* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1882), pp. 430–431.

<sup>27</sup> See *Woman Not Inferior to Man: or, a Short and Modest Vindication of the Natural Right of the Fair Sex to a Perfect Equality of Power, Dignity, and Esteem, with the Men* (London, 1740 [1739]), p. 48. Emphasis Sophia’s.

of Sitting in *Parliament*.” As this “[r]elict of five husbands” put it, “[i]s it not absurd that *Women, in England*, should be capable of inheriting the *Crown*, and yet not intrusted with the Representation of a *little Borough*, or so much as allow’d to vote for a Representative?”<sup>28</sup>

For some reformers, the Salic law itself became a kind of shorthand for a cruel and compassionless male prerogative. In his 1757 poem “The Femeinead, or Female Genius,” John Duncombe used the Salic law to chide “lordly Man” for his tendency to overlook female talent: “By Salic Law the Female Right deny,/And view their Genius with Regardless Eye?”<sup>29</sup> Sarah Fielding invoked the “Salick Law” to similar effect in her popular novel *The History of Ophelia* (1760), in the context of ridiculing one of her male characters, Mr. Giles – a man who chastised his sister for meddling in “politicks” and acting as if women had something “to do with the Nation.” “You want a Petticoat Government, I warrant,” cries Mr. Giles. “Was I King, I would make an universal Salick Law, that should not allow you the Government of your own Lap-Dogs.”<sup>30</sup> During the 1784 general election, a journalist even cited the Salic law in his defense of Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, who had campaigned energetically (and, many believed, inappropriately) on behalf of the Whig politician Charles James Fox. “Say what you will,” the journalist reported in the *Morning Herald and Daily Advertiser*, “’tis all in vain – We have no Salic law in England.”<sup>31</sup> The playwright Thomas Holcroft likewise used the Salic law in his play *Seduction* (performed at the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane in 1787) to call attention to the sexual double standard within marriage: “A savage Salick law the men maintain’d;/O monstrous! We were slaves! And husband’s reign’d.”<sup>32</sup>

What is notable about so many of these Georgian texts, moreover, is the extent to which they strive to close the gap between the female sovereign and

<sup>28</sup> See Margery Weldone, “To the Author of the Gloucester Journal,” reprinted in *The Gentleman’s Magazine* X (February 1740), pp. 60–61. Emphasis Weldone’s. See also Harriet McIlquham, “Some Further Eighteenth Century Advocates of Justice for Women,” *The Westminster Review*, January–June 1903, pp. 167–179, for a lengthy discussion of Weldone as an “eighteenth-century advocate of justice for women” and of her clever use of queens. As McIlquham explains, p. 170, Weldone’s letter was written in response to a joking suggestion that men “having made such a hash of Government” ought to allow women to govern for seven years.

<sup>29</sup> See John Duncombe, “The Femeinead, or Female Genius” (1757), cited in Elizabeth Eger, “Representing culture: The Nine Living Muses of Great Britain (1779),” in *Women, Writing and the Public Sphere, 1700–1830*, eds., Elizabeth Eger, Charlotte Grant, Cliona O. Gallchoir, and Penny Warburton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 104–132 at p. 124.

<sup>30</sup> See Sarah Fielding, *The History of Ophelia*, ed., Peter Sabor (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2004 [1760]), p. 175.

<sup>31</sup> See “Continuation of the Returned Members of the New Parliament,” *Morning Herald and Daily Advertiser*, April 10, 1784.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas Holcroft, *Seduction: A Comedy* (London: G. G. J and J. Robinson, 1787), p. 82.

the female subject. Note, for instance, how the anonymous author of the path-breaking *Female Rights Vindicated* (1758) used Elizabeth and Anne's prowess to demonstrate "our Ability for governing."<sup>33</sup> The attempt to establish an equivalence here is striking, and distinguishes this argument from most made during the Tudor and Stuart periods. In her epistolary novel *Letters from the Duchess de Crui and Others, on Subjects Moral and Entertaining* (1776), Lady Mary Walker similarly aimed for correlation, marshalling female sovereigns to build a case for women's education. Dedicating her text to Queen Charlotte, consort of George III, Lady Walker urged Britons to remember Boudica and Elizabeth I when determining social policy for women.<sup>34</sup> "What English monarch," Walker demanded, "ever excelled our incomparable queen Elizabeth in the arts of ruling? Her glorious administration was one continued exercise of the most refined politics."<sup>35</sup> Even the Scottish jurist and philosopher Henry Home, Lord Kames, tried to establish direct lines of connection between the female sovereign and the female subject in his *Sketches of the History of Man* (1774), albeit with a less overt desire to challenge the status quo. As he suggested, a woman's ability to rule served as a useful barometer of a nation's "polished" status. "The gradual advance of the female sex to an equality with the male sex," Kames explained, "is visible in the laws of female succession that have been established at different times, and in different countries" – a self-congratulatory argument, no doubt, but one that still succeeded in linking royal succession policies to larger questions of social and sexual equality.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> See A Lady, *Female Rights Vindicated; or the Equality of the Sexes Morally and Physically Proved* (London: G. Burnet, 1758), p. 32. Emphasis mine.

<sup>34</sup> The dedication to Charlotte was intended to lend an air of respectability – and urgency – to Lady Walker's arguments. As she wrote, "Although it may be easy to baffle, or evade the force of my written arguments, respecting the eminent qualifications of women, yet the fact will remain indisputable, when they contemplate those of your Majesty." See Lady Mary Walker, *Letters from the Duchess de Crui and Others, on Subjects Moral and Entertaining*, volume 1 (London: Robinson, Walter and Robinson, 1776), dedication. Although the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* describes Walker's works as having "little to offer modern readers," they do seem to have been widely read in their moment and into the nineteenth century. As late as 1903, the suffragist Harriet McCluham was citing Walker's work in the pages of *The Westminster Review*. See Dorothy McMillan, "Walker, Lady Mary (1736–1822)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

<sup>35</sup> See Walker, *Letters*, pp. 116–117.

<sup>36</sup> See Lord Kames, *Sketches of the History of Man* (Edinburgh: W. Creech, 1774), p. 203. Later in this same chapter, Kames remarked that "In polished states, women are not excluded from succeeding even to the crown. Russia and Britain afford examples of women capable to govern, in an absolute as well as in a limited monarchy." Kames's discussion would be reprinted in the Rev. John Adams, *Curious Thoughts on the History of Man* (London: G. Kearsley, 1789), where Adams included this analysis in a chapter "On Female Succession."

By the second half of the eighteenth century, then, certain British reformers were already beginning to build a case for the queen regnant as change agent. Yet, if the Glorious Revolution of 1688-1689 helped make it possible to think of the female sovereign as a disruptor along sex and gender lines, the American and French revolutions only encouraged this line of inquiry. Why would this have been the case? On the one hand, this is because the American and French revolutions cemented the “one body” status of the modern sovereign – in ways that would benefit feminist argument. From the 1770s, it became exceedingly difficult to think about kings and queens as divine entities. Here, after all, was George III. Spurned by the colonists in America in 1776, the king grew ever more committed to representing himself as a simple family man, fascinated by farming and agriculture, and surrounded by his many children. There was good reason why his subjects referred to him, fondly, if mockingly, as “Farmer George.”<sup>37</sup> George III’s mental instability – he suffered a bout of madness in 1788 – and increasing infirmities only contributed to his subjects’ keen sense of their sovereign as all too human. And here too were Louis XVI of France and his wife Marie-Antoinette, forced from Versailles by a violent mob during the “October Days” of 1789, reduced to constitutional monarchs in 1791, and then beheaded ignominiously in 1793. It was in this context, according to the English minister and poet Richard Graves, that “boys and kings” now enjoyed “complete *Equality*.”<sup>38</sup> Or, in the more famous lament of the conservative Irish political thinker Edmund Burke, the French revolutionaries had treated their king as if he were “but a man,” and their queen as “but a woman.”<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> On George III’s evolution in the popular imagination, see Colley, *Britons*, esp. pp. 204–236; Morris, *The British Monarchy and the French Revolution*; Tamara L. Hunt, “Morality and the Monarchy in the Queen Caroline Affair,” *Albion* 23, no. 4 (1991), pp. 697–722; and John Clarke, “George III,” in Antonia Fraser, ed., *The Lives of the Kings & Queens of England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 280–287. On George III as paterfamilias, see esp. Colley, *Britons*, p. 232: “[Georgian] Monarchy, as [Edmund Burke] rightly diagnosed, could never survive on constitutional abstractions alone. If it was to flourish, it required romance, glamour, irrationality and uncritical devotion. It also needed a human face, to ‘be embodied . . . in persons.’ For these purposes, it was no longer enough for royal apologists to emphasise that George III ruled with divine approval because he was a Protestant and a constitutional monarch. A more personal foundation for monarchy was wanted. And it was duly found, found by giving the very old notion of the king’s two bodies a new and more secular twist. Yes, the line now went, George III was on a different level from all of his subjects, the inhabitant of splendid palaces and the fulcrum of unprecedented ceremony; but he was also a husband, a father, a mortal man subject to illness, age and every kind of mundane vulnerability, and, therefore, essentially the same as his subjects.”

<sup>38</sup> See Richard Graves, *Senilities; or, Solitary Amusements in Prose and Verse: With a Cursory Disquisition on the Future Condition of the Sexes* (London: Longman, Rees, Browne, 1801), pp. 197–198.

<sup>39</sup> See Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, third edition (London: J. Dodsley, 1790), p. 114.

On the other hand, the American and French revolutions facilitated the spread of “rights talk” itself, and, with it, fresh interest in the rights of women.<sup>40</sup> The issuing of the American Declaration of Independence in 1776, followed by the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen in 1789, prompted an uptick in homegrown demands for increased “rights”; that is, those civil and political rights that extended beyond the limited prerogatives set out in the Bill of Rights of 1689 (which had concentrated primarily on the rights of parliamentarians vis-à-vis the king or queen). For most reformers in Britain during this period, it was the rights of *men* that were now firmly on the table: their right to free speech, to practice their faiths without penalty or fear of persecution, and, crucially, to participate in parliamentary elections – a right still limited to the landed elite. But, for some of those in the most advanced Enlightenment circles, the rights of women also became a rallying cry, with Mary Wollstonecraft’s seminal *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) proving a catalyst for discussion.<sup>41</sup>

It was in this context that queens regnant became imbued with fresh meaning. For, the rise of “rights talk” prompted heightened concern, not just with what rights men and women possessed, but also with the best ways of securing them. And here, constitutionalism (i.e., the acts, laws, and customs that structured the nation, given that Britain lacked a formal written constitution) became a key source of inspiration – both for those pursuing the rights of men, and for those pursuing the rights of men *and* women.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, as much as reformers insisted on men and women’s natural rights, e.g., those rights that men and women possessed simply by dint of being human, or cited different philosophical traditions (stadial theory, Cartesianism), they also frequently turned to history, plumbing their nation’s past for indications of liberal precedents and democratic instincts. Those demanding the rights of men, then, scoured Anglo-Saxon records for proof of their “ancient” liberties. Those demanding the rights of women, meanwhile, honed in on queens regnant and the

<sup>40</sup> There is a rich literature on the rise of “rights talk” in the revolutionary age, but, see esp. Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007) – and, for an alternative perspective, Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

<sup>41</sup> On the nuances of women’s rights ideology and activity in the late eighteenth century, see esp. Barbara Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); and my own *Men and the Making of Modern British Feminism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

<sup>42</sup> On constitutionalism as a powerful mode of radical rhetoric, see esp. James Epstein, *Radical Expression: Political Language, Ritual, and Symbol in England, 1790–1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); and James Vernon, ed., *Re-reading the Constitution: New Narratives in the Political History of England’s Long Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

Salic law (as well as other historical examples that challenged patriarchal norms and conventions).<sup>43</sup> In the history of female sovereigns, women's rights reformers found rich constitutional arguments. By rejecting the Salic law, the nation had already permitted a select group of women to receive rigorous educations, to retain their own property, and to participate at the highest levels in the political, military, and spiritual life of the country. What is more, those women who had taken on these roles had generally proven quite capable of learning and leading. Was it not then time now to extend such rights to other British women?

We see this impulse, for instance, in *The Laws Respecting Women* (1777), published in the midst of the American Revolution. Here, an anonymous author (often assumed to be Elizabeth Chudleigh, Countess of Bristol) used female sovereigns to impress upon his or her readers an expanded notion of women's legal rights. How, the author asked, could a nation admit one woman to the top position but restrict all other females to the extent that they could not even own their own property once married, due to the constraints placed upon them by the terms of coverture?<sup>44</sup> In his *History of Women* (1779), meanwhile, the Scottish physician William Alexander suggested that there was a grave injustice in the fact that women could rule but were denied far more basic civil and political rights. "[I]n Britain," he scoffed, "we allow a woman to sway our scepter, but by law and custom we debar her from every other government but that of her own family, as if there were not a public employment between that of superintending the kingdom, and the affairs of her own kitchen, which could be managed by the genius and capacity of woman."<sup>45</sup>

In the following decades, the queen regnant became only that much more of a fixture in rights-based discourses. Consider a letter to the editor that appeared in *The Gentleman's Magazine* in 1788, on the cusp of the French Revolution. Here, the author "Calidore" (likely the Scottish reverend-turned-writer Andrew Macdonald) made a bold argument for female political inclusion, based on the precedent established by Boudica, Elizabeth I, and Anne. As he explained, these women were "heroines" who showed that the "leading maxims of feminine empire are to rouze men from ignorance and barbarism, and to diffuse among them arts and literature." Boudica, especially, was singled out for her passionate and

<sup>43</sup> On women's rights reformers' various uses of history in the late eighteenth century, see esp. Philip Hicks, "Women Worthies and Feminist Argument in Eighteenth-Century Britain," *Women's History Review* 24, no.2 (2015), pp. 174–190.

<sup>44</sup> See (Elizabeth Chudleigh, Countess of Bristol?), *The Laws Respecting Women; As They Regard Their Natural Rights or Their Connections and Conduct*. . . (London: J. Johnson, 1777), p. 1.

<sup>45</sup> William Alexander, *The History of Women*, volume 2 (Dublin: J. A. Husband, 1779), p. 439.

unwavering commitment to the British people.<sup>46</sup> Reflect, too, on the anonymously published pamphlet *Principles of Order and Happiness under the British Constitution* (1792). Written in the form of an exchange between a cautious “clerk” and a radical “squire,” in a style not unlike that of the conservative moralist Hannah More in her popular *Village Politics* (1792), the pamphlet broaches the subject of women’s rights by way of a discussion of queenship:

SQUIRE: Do you give [your wife] the same authority in your family as yourself?

CLERK: You are joking. No wife ought to have the same power as a husband.

SQUIRE: Why not?

CLERK: Because she is a woman.

SQUIRE: But if equality continued from our birth, we have no right to make that distinction. A woman is born equal to a man. There have been many queens and empresses, who have governed mighty empires prosperously. Upon the authority of Paine’s book, a lady has lately published as good a one, to uphold the Rights of Women: So that we husbands must look about us.

CLERK: We will not encourage that book at the Club.

SQUIRE: Certainly, if women can govern kingdoms well, they might rule our houses and families equally well. But it is ordered otherwise.

CLERK: It seems as if this order of things depended on some other cause.

SQUIRE: It depends on a law of society, as antient as the beginning of social intercourse. But if the women of this day should incline to change it, they might, according to that doctrine.<sup>47</sup>

This exchange, with its provocative (yet open-ended) suggestion that women “might” find a way to alter the “antient” laws of society, shows just how much weight female sovereigns could carry. After all, queens offered the clearest, most tangible evidence that an alternative dynamic could exist between the sexes – a dynamic, moreover (and this was the key point) that was already written into the British constitution. To put it differently, female sovereigns provided one of the very few instances of an “is” rather than an “ought.”

Those reformers eager to inject a more egalitarian strain into British radicalism during the 1790s routinely underscored this point. The Norwich-based writers and activists Richard Dinmore and Thomas Starling Norgate, for instance, devoted substantial portions of their texts to demonstrating that their nation’s constitution would be rendered more

<sup>46</sup> See Calidore, “To Mr. Urban,” *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, 58 (1788), p. 101. On Calidore’s likely identity as the Rev. Andrew Macdonald, note that Calidore published a letter in *The Star and Evening Advertiser* in January 1789, which was posthumously attributed to Andrew Macdonald by the journalist John Taylor.

<sup>47</sup> See *Principles of Order and Happiness under the British Constitution* (London: Printed for Public Good, 1792), p. 10.

consistent, and more fully in accordance with earlier Anglo-Saxon principles, by carrying the politics of the throne into other areas of society. For both men, this even meant granting women the right to vote. As Dinmore explained in his *A Brief Account of the Moral and Political Acts of the Kings and Queens of England* (1793), “The want of this right [women’s right to vote] is peculiarly absurd in this kingdom, where a woman may reign, though not vote for a Member of Parliament.”<sup>48</sup> To flesh out their arguments, Dinmore and Norgate honed in on the history of specific female sovereigns, focusing especially on Elizabeth I. According to Dinmore, Elizabeth “may fairly be considered the best monarch that ever sat on the English throne.” “Indeed,” Dinmore continued, “the character of this Queen convinces us of the injustice that has hitherto been done to the Rights of Women.”<sup>49</sup> In Norgate’s similar assessment, as he explained in an essay published in 1795 devoted entirely to the “reign and character” of Elizabeth, here was a “great and splendid” leader who demonstrated by her example that women should be given a better education and encouraged to play a more active role in the nation’s public life.<sup>50</sup>

Comparable strategies would be adopted by the reformers Mary Robinson and Mary Hays, who used queens regnant and queens consort during the later 1790s to “make arguments about societal expectations placed on women, the double standard of sexual morality, and the need to educate women.”<sup>51</sup> In her *A Letter to the Women of England, on the Injustice of Mental Subordination* (republished as *Thoughts on the Condition of Women* in 1799), Robinson – actress, author, and former mistress to the

<sup>48</sup> See Dinmore, *A Brief Account of the Moral and Political Acts of the Kings and Queens of England*, pp. 178–179.

<sup>49</sup> See Dinmore, *A Brief Account*, p. 178. Interestingly, Dinmore anticipates later critiques of Elizabeth, namely that “It may be said that the prosperity of her kingdom was owing to the wisdom of her Ministers.” Yet, he forms a ready response, which would be picked up by other suffragists in the Victorian period: “Admit it. Can there be so great a compliment paid to her understanding as to suppose her capable of chusing, and of being governed by wise men?”

<sup>50</sup> See Thomas Starling Norgate, “Observations on the Reign and Character of Queen Elizabeth,” in *Essays, Tales, and Poems* (Norwich: J. March, 1795), pp. 114–144 at pp. 142–143.

<sup>51</sup> See Mary Spongberg, “The Ghost of Marie Antoinette: A Prehistory of Victorian Royal Lives,” in *Clio’s Daughters: British Women Making History, 1790–1899*, ed., Lynette Felber (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2007), pp. 71–96 at p. 73. These points are further elucidated in Spongberg’s book, *Women Writers and the Nation’s Past 1790–1860*. As Spongberg shows, “The Ghost of Marie Antoinette,” p. 92, if queens regnant demonstrated the possibilities for women, queens consort illustrated “men’s patriarchal dominance over all women” and thus the need for political and legal reform. Gina Luria Walker also offers a riveting assessment of how Mary Hays used royal women to advance the causes of their female subjects. See Gina Luria Walker, *Mary Hays (1759–1843): The Growth of a Woman’s Mind* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), esp. p. 197.



Prince of Wales (the future George IV) – cited Elizabeth I as a means of measuring the female sex's inner, if often thwarted, potential. “[J]udge,” she commanded her readers, “whether England ever boasted a more wise or more fortunate sovereign: one, more revered in council; more obeyed in power; or more successful in enterprize. And yet Elizabeth was but a woman!”<sup>52</sup> In her *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain in Behalf of Women* (1798), *Female Biography* (1803), and *Memoirs of Queens* (1821), meanwhile, the dissenting writer Mary Hays also explored this theme. “Let it not be said,” she wrote in her much-publicized *Appeal*, “that crowned heads are too much out of the common road, to be brought forward for examples; for as they are neither more nor less than men and women, they come quite within our sphere.”<sup>53</sup> Given that female sovereigns were *only* women, Hays explained, it was well worth considering their achievements. “If then it can hardly be disputed,” she mused, “that women . . . have ruled with as much glory to themselves, as much benefit to their subjects, and as great marks of sound judgment, and knowledge in the arts of government, as the greatest princes their contemporaries; I hope it will not appear presumption to say, that did women receive equal advantages of education, there is every reason to suppose, they would equal men in the sublime science of politicks.”<sup>54</sup>

Robinson and Hays's royal turns have often been interpreted by modern scholars as a form of retreat – perhaps because Wollstonecraft, who continues to be the dominant representative of late eighteenth-century feminism, was notoriously skeptical of middle-class women's aping of queens and other royal women. Women, Wollstonecraft scoffed, have “resigned the natural rights which the exercise of reason might have procured them, and chosen rather to be short-lived queens than labour to obtain the sober pleasures that arise from equality.”<sup>55</sup> Wollstonecraft insisted that the invocation of natural rights, grounded in a conception of the sexes' shared capacity to reason, promised a smoother path to women's emancipation. (Even so, Wollstonecraft's resistance to thinking

<sup>52</sup> Mary Robinson, *Thoughts on the Condition of Women, and on the Injustice of Mental Subordination*, second edition (London: Longman and Rees, 1799), p. 29. Robinson's connections to the court have led Clarissa Campbell Orr to speculate on the ways in which “[t]he behavior of royalty and the modern debate on gender are therefore linked in this important decade for the birth of modern rights discourse.” See Orr, “The Feminization of the Monarchy 1780–1910,” p. 86.

<sup>53</sup> Mary Hays, *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain in Behalf of Women* (London: J. Johnson, 1798), p. 36. Of Hays, Spongberg writes, “[She] had long advocated the examination of the royal life as a form of feminist pedagogy.” See Spongberg, “The Ghost of Marie Antoinette,” p. 88.

<sup>54</sup> Hays, *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain*, pp. 37–38.

<sup>55</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (London: J. Johnson, 1792), p. 116.

with queens did not prevent her in her *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796) from defending the late Caroline Matilda, Queen Consort of Denmark and Norway between 1766 and 1775. There, Wollstonecraft expressed indignation that Matilda had been maligned by her critics when, in fact, she had many “proofs of good sense” and had only chafed at restrictive Danish expectations regarding women’s position.<sup>56</sup>) But, as my elucidation of the tradition in which Robinson and Hays were working helps show, their strategies for promoting women’s rights were, in fact, highly typical of their historical moment and anything but passive or apolitical.<sup>57</sup> As Hays put it in her *Memoirs of Queens*, published in 1821, reflecting on female royals was not a diversion, but, rather, a means of securing “the moral rights and intellectual advancement of woman.”<sup>58</sup>

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That Hays’s interest in queenship carried over into the nineteenth century should not surprise us, even though this was a relatively quiescent period in terms of feminist activity. For female sovereigns became only more useful to turn to once the revolutionary fervor had subsided. In years that saw the rise of Napoleon and threat of French invasion, coupled with heightened anti-revolutionary activity at home, invoking the accomplishments of Boudica, Elizabeth I, and Anne helped to tether women’s rights to a British past, and a highly patriotic one at that – that “respect for precedent” so characteristic of the English, as the suffragist Caroline Ashurst Biggs would later put it.<sup>59</sup> But Hays’s dogged emphasis on queenship from the late 1790s forward may well also have had something to do with the fact that hers was a nation suddenly contemplating queens regnant, not just as abstract concepts or as remote historical figures, but, rather, as flesh-and-blood entities. In 1796, George, Prince of Wales (the

<sup>56</sup> See Mary Wollstonecraft, *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (London: J. Johnson, 1796), p. 203.

<sup>57</sup> For further elaboration of this point, see my own “The Radicalism of Queenship: Mary Wollstonecraft and Alternative Sources of the Rights of Women,” *Romantic Circles Praxis* (forthcoming); Sponberg, “The Ghost of Marie Antoinette”; Sponberg, *Women Writers and the Nation’s Past*; Walker, *Mary Hays*; Hicks, “Women Worthies and Feminist Argument in Eighteenth-Century Britain”; and the introduction in Orr, *Queenship in Britain, 1660–1837*, pp. 1–52. As Orr writes, p. 41, “The republican feminism of Mary Wollstonecraft with its hostility to the ‘pestiferous purple’ was a significant but distinctly minority view.”

<sup>58</sup> See the preface in Mary Hays, *Memoirs of Queens, Illustrious and Celebrated* (London: T. and J. Allman, 1821), p. v. Emphasis Hays’s.

<sup>59</sup> See Caroline Ashurst Biggs, “Great Britain,” in *History of Woman Suffrage*, volume 3, eds., Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage (Rochester, NY: Charles Mann, 1886), pp. 833–894 at p. 835.

future George IV) and his wife, Caroline of Brunswick, welcomed into the world their first and only child, Charlotte – the product of an already unhappy union. (George had only agreed to marry Caroline the previous year in order to settle his debts; romance was never part of the conversation.) As the only child of George III's eldest son, Princess Charlotte immediately assumed an important position in the line of succession. From 1796 until her untimely death in 1817, she remained heiress presumptive to the throne.

The birth of Charlotte thus concretized what had been up to this point a rather theoretical discussion, at least since the death of Queen Anne in 1714; Britain would soon be ruled again by a woman. While Charlotte's own father, therefore, might have "wish'd for a boy," Mary Hays could not have been more pleased.<sup>60</sup> Eager to secure improved conditions for women, Hays followed Charlotte's educational progress and romantic involvements with considerable interest and called attention to the princess's intelligence, self-assertiveness, and democratic instincts. For instance, she fêted Charlotte for her refusal in 1814 to marry William, Crown Prince of Orange (her father's choice as a suitor) in favor of Leopold of Saxe-Coburg-Saalfeld, a decision that was made under the influence of Charlotte's strong-willed companion Cornelia Knight. Charlotte had an "independent spirit," proclaimed Hays, which enabled her to reject "the husband which state policy would have imposed upon her" and "give her hand" instead to "the man of her choice."<sup>61</sup> (That Charlotte herself explicitly adopted Elizabeth I as a role model must only have reinforced Hays's arguments. When asked in 1814, for example, whether she thought it wise that she board a warship, Charlotte allegedly responded: "Queen Elizabeth took great delight in her navy, and was not afraid to go on board a man-of-war in an open boat; then why should I?"<sup>62</sup>) Charlotte's sudden death in 1817, following the birth of a stillborn son, ended this suggestive line of inquiry.

But, just three years later, the trial of Caroline of Brunswick, Charlotte's mother, would inspire Hays and others to once again put the royal family to use for feminist purposes. Caroline's much publicized woes – an arranged marriage, a philandering husband, limited access to her child – had already struck a chord with those who recognized in her travails not just a royal woman's misadventures, but also the struggles of

<sup>60</sup> For the Prince of Wales's response to his daughter's birth, see Kate Williams, *Becoming Queen Victoria: The Tragic Death of Princess Charlotte and the Unexpected Rise of Britain's Greatest Monarch* (New York: Random House, 2010), p. 26.

<sup>61</sup> See Hays, *Memoirs of Queens*, p. 122.

<sup>62</sup> Cited in *Authentic Memoirs of the Life of the Late Lamented Princess Charlotte; with Clear Statements Showing the Succession to the Crown* (London: William Hone, 1817), p. 13.

her sex writ large. Consider the novelist Lady Charlotte Susan Maria Campbell Bury, who served for a time as the Princess of Wales's lady-in-waiting. As Lady Bury confided in her diary in 1814, following Caroline's decision to enter a voluntary exile so as to escape from the slanderous accusations being leveled at her by her husband, Caroline was a woman of "fire and determination." These were "*great* ingredients in any character," Lady Bury explained, but unfortunately qualities "not prized or done justice to in women – they are called obstinacy and violence." If only, she speculated, Caroline had been marked out to be a queen regnant rather than a queen consort. For only queens regnant had a chance of using their "fire and determination" as forces for good. "Otherwise," Lady Bury concluded, "as it is the interest of the stronger sex to subdue women mentally and personally . . . all display of vigorous intellect in them is charged with folly, if not with crime."<sup>63</sup>

When George IV, newly ensconced on the throne in 1820, tried to divorce Caroline by placing her on trial for adultery, such expressions of indignation became only more heated. In light of George IV's "unmanly" actions, reformers came forward to demand "women's rights" – and not just for Queen Caroline, but also for all British women.<sup>64</sup> Yes, for some, the "rights" being touted here were primarily women's rights to be protected and provided for by responsible men. As several scholars have observed, Caroline's trial gave men from the working and middle classes the opportunity to demonstrate the rectitude of their own chivalrous politics against those of George IV and "old Corruption."<sup>65</sup> One supporter of the queen, for example, writing in the pages of *The Republican*, accused George IV, in his conduct toward his estranged wife, of "trampling on the rights of women."<sup>66</sup> But the purpose here was not so much to demand legal protections for women; rather, it was to showcase the ways

<sup>63</sup> See Lady Charlotte Susan Maria Campbell, *Diary of Lady Charlotte Susan Maria Campbell, 17 June 1814*, in *Diary Illustrative of the Times of George the Fourth Interspersed with Original Letters from Queen Caroline*, volume 1 (London: H. Colburn, 1838), p. 216.

<sup>64</sup> There is a rich literature on Queen Caroline's trial. For general background, see E. A. Smith, *A Queen on Trial: The Affair of Queen Caroline* (London: A. Sutton, 1993); and Jane Robins, *Rebel Queen: How the Trial of Queen Caroline Brought England to the Brink of Revolution* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006). For references to the feminist dimensions of the trial, see Laqueur, "The Queen Caroline Affair," pp. 417–466; Anna Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1995); Clark, "Queen Caroline and the Sexual Politics of Popular Culture in London, 1820," 47–68; Spongberg, *Women Writers and the Nation's Past*; Colley, *Britons*, esp. p. 266; and the introduction in Orr, *Queenship in Britain*, esp. p. 41.

<sup>65</sup> On this point, see esp. Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches*, pp. 165–166; and Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991 [1987]), p. 152.

<sup>66</sup> See "To the King," *The Republican* III, April–August 1820, p. 590.

in which working- and middle-class men had behaved more honorably than the king by better caring for their wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters. For these reasons, such men deserved a more active role in the political life of the nation. In this way, the narrative actually reinforced notions about male independence and female dependence.<sup>67</sup>

But, for others, the invocation of “women’s rights” during Caroline’s trial was a genuine plea to grant women greater autonomy and control over their bodies.<sup>68</sup> Mary Hays was one of the most forceful in taking up this mantle. As she speculated in her *Memoirs of Queens* (1821), published after Caroline’s eventual acquittal, women had “considered [the trial] as a common cause against the despotism and tyranny of man.”<sup>69</sup> For Hays, the “common cause” invoked here was primarily women’s claim to equality before the law. But Hays was also deeply committed to what Mary Spongberg has described as women’s right to “an erotic life.”<sup>70</sup> Hays wanted to draw attention to the nation’s inconsistent moral and sexual codes, so punishing of women such as Caroline and so forgiving of men such as George IV.

In voicing such concerns, Hays was by no means alone. The historian Elizabeth Bengler, for example, also found in Caroline’s trial an opportune moment to pursue these themes, albeit in a more indirect manner.

<sup>67</sup> For more on the strategic invocations of chivalry during the trial, see esp. Louise Carter, “British Masculinities on Trial in the Queen Caroline Affair of 1820,” *Gender and History* 20, no. 2 (August 2008), pp. 248–269; and Hunt, “Morality and Monarchy in the Queen Caroline Affair.” As Carter notes, p. 249, the trial can be read as “an attempt to recast the nature of patriarchal authority and to deliver its benefits to a broader section of British men.”

<sup>68</sup> Thomas Laqueur, Anna Clark, and Mary Spongberg have done much to bring this perspective to light. As Clark observes, *The Struggle for the Breeches*, p. 174, “[b]y defending Queen Caroline’s rights as an abused wife, radicals admitted that the rights of women were a political issue.” And as Spongberg notes, *Women Writers and the Nation’s Past*, p. 101, the trial offered Mary Hays an opportunity to renounce the “patriarchal laws and institutions that oppressed women and shaped their historical representation.”

<sup>69</sup> See Hays, *Memoirs of Queens*, p. 127. The full passage reads: “Every manly mind shrank from the idea of driving, by protracted and endless persecutions, a desolate unprotected female from her family, her rank, from society and from the world. *Woman* considered it as a common cause against the despotism and tyranny of man. Morals are of no sex, duties are reciprocal between being and being, or they are abrogated by nature and reason. Brute force may subjugate, but in knowledge only is real strength, and to truth and justice is the last and only legitimate appeal. With the feudal institutions fell the childish privileges and degrading homage paid to the sex; and to *equity* not gallantry do they now prefer their claim. Oppression and proscription, it is true, still linger, but old things appear to be passing away; and, in another century, probably, should the progress of knowledge bear any proportion to its accelerated march during the latter half of the past, all things will become new.” On Hays’s commentary on Queen Caroline, see Spongberg, *Women Writers and the Nation’s Past*, chapter 5, “The ‘Acquittal’ of Queen Caroline: Mary Hays’s *Memoirs of Queens* as Political Dissent.”

<sup>70</sup> See Spongberg, *Women Writers and the Nation’s Past*, p. 115.

Building on the arguments made by the writer Lucy Aikin in her *Memoirs of the Court of Queen Elizabeth* (1818), Benger used her *Memoirs of the Life of Anne Boleyn, Queen of Henry VIII* (1821) to revisit the Tudor period and explore Henry VIII's unjust treatment of Anne Boleyn – second wife of the king and mother of Queen Elizabeth, who was executed in 1536 on the grounds of adultery. In Benger's telling, Henry VIII became a proxy for the current monarch, with Benger approaching her subject in ways that called attention, in the words of Mary Spongberg, to the "relation between men's treatment of women and political tyranny."<sup>71</sup> Then there were the more general cries issued, in the words of a detractor, by "the hundreds of infatuated women who have listed under the banners of the Queen of the *Radicals*," and who published broadsheets and ballads linking Caroline's rights to their own liberties.<sup>72</sup> As one female balladeer put it, it was incumbent on all "virtuous British wives" to "assert [the Queen's] rights" as "they are our own."<sup>73</sup> While the right to be protected may have been at issue here, such statements could also encompass a broader set of concerns about women's freedoms. Certainly, their demands were construed this way by their opponents. As one inflamed defender of the king wrote to the Tory-leaning *Morning Post*, describing the stereotypical supporter of Caroline, she was a woman who insisted that "our sex have *as much right as yours to liberty* – and I am for the *rights of women* for ever."<sup>74</sup>

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For all of these reasons, then, those pursuing women's rights were primed to see the young Victoria in a particular and extremely hopeful light. Born to the Duke and Duchess of Kent in 1819 – two years after her cousin Princess Charlotte's death and one year before the trial of her aunt, Queen Caroline – Victoria (christened Alexandrina Victoria) may initially have been only fifth in line to the throne, but was nevertheless promptly and enthusiastically incorporated into this developing feminist narrative.<sup>75</sup> The steady evolution of radical understandings of queenship,

<sup>71</sup> See Spongberg, *Women Writers and the Nation's Past*, p. 97.

<sup>72</sup> For this description of Caroline's female supporters, see "To the Women of England," *The Morning Post*, October 2, 1820, p. 2.

<sup>73</sup> See Anonymous, "Queen Caroline," cited in Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, p. 152.

<sup>74</sup> See "The Queen," *The Morning Post*, September 7, 1820, p. 2. Emphasis author's. I would like to thank Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches*, p. 172, for drawing this letter to my attention. For a similar critique, see also "To the Women of England," *The Morning Post*, September 29, 1820, p. 2, and October 2, 1820, p. 2.

<sup>75</sup> For an account that places princesses Charlotte and Victoria in conversation, see Williams, *Becoming Queen Victoria*. Williams, however, does not address the feminist dimensions of the princesses' public receptions. For a broader assessment of Victoria's

stretching back to the Glorious Revolution, coupled with the more recent dramas within the royal family, made it not just possible, but entirely easy, for reformers to place Victoria within an egalitarian framework. It was a framework, moreover, that took shape very quickly. Just five months after Victoria's birth, one self-proclaimed "Advocate for the Rights of Women" wrote to *The Morning Chronicle* demanding that women be given a voice in national politics, noting that "The Law allows women to be even Queens."<sup>76</sup> These strategic invocations of queenship would only intensify during the 1830s, as the fact of Victoria's succession became ever more likely. This is where my next chapter begins.

Before proceeding, however, we need to pause for a moment and consider some of the challenges that already presented themselves to those who experimented with this strategy, even at this early moment in our story. For these challenges would come back to haunt those who took up this mantle during the Victorian period. To some extent, the challenges came from within. Attempts to link a woman's "right to rule" with the "rights of women" were not uncomplicated exercises. Such attempts, after all, were predicated on sometimes willful or overreaching readings of the nation's past. They were also predicated on beliefs that queens (whether regnant or consort) largely had and would continue to exercise exemplary behavior – behavior, moreover, that would be oriented toward promoting the "rights" and "liberties" of the nation's citizens against a corrupt aristocracy.<sup>77</sup> There was good reason why few dwelled on the rule of Queen Mary I or "Bloody Mary." Then, too, there was the fact that these progressive arguments depended on the presupposition that the sovereign, whether male or female, actually still wielded considerable power in a constitutional system – that is, that he or she carried real political authority. This was a point that at times already strained radical argumentation, and that would only become increasingly contested in the decades that followed.

For, even as they insisted on linking the "right to rule" with the "rights of women," most reformers were not necessarily committed to strong versions of monarchical power. Queen Elizabeth I may have offered irresistible evidence of women's executive function, but Thomas Starling Norgate, Richard Dinmore, Mary Hays, and the rest by no

early years, see Lynne Vallone, *Becoming Victoria* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001).

<sup>76</sup> See "Rights of Women," *The Morning Chronicle*, October 30, 1819, p. 4.

<sup>77</sup> On this point, see Percy Shelley's address commemorating Princess Charlotte's death in 1817, *An Address to the People on the Death of the Princess Charlotte* (1843), which equates her demise with the end of British liberty. For further discussion, see Dorothy Thompson, "Queen Victoria, the Monarchy and Gender," in *Outsiders: Class, Gender and Nation* (London: Verso, 1993), pp. 164–186 at p. 167.

means wished to return to something approaching Elizabethan absolutism. Yet, to claim female royal succession as a source of female liberation would require that the succession itself matter, that is, that kings and queens were consequential. To make this argument, then, was in certain respects to place oneself at odds with further parliamentary and political reform. Note, for instance, Richard Dinmore's own already-labored efforts in his *An Exposition of the Principles of the English Jacobins* (1797) to keep an albeit feeble George III on the throne – instead of seeing the crown pass to his son, the future George IV – on the grounds that “the senseless glitter of a coronation, and the noisy enthusiasm which would attach itself to a new king” would divert the public's attention from the much more pressing problem of political reform.<sup>78</sup> How could Dinmore posit sovereigns and the royal succession, more generally, *both* as sources of reform and as distractions from real politics? As Dinmore's contradictory impulses indicate, radicals were engaged in a delicate balancing act.

But the challenges were not just internal. Already in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, those who tried to use sovereignty to secure female advancement met with some external opposition. Just as women's rights reformers relished their nation's open royal succession policies and tradition of female leadership, their critics were beginning to find clever ways to contain the radicalism of queenship. (Female sovereigns, we must remember, were always open to a range of interpretations, and this held equally true in regards to their status vis-à-vis women's rights debates.<sup>79</sup>) Even in Elizabethan England, in fact, there were conservative theorists eager to define female sovereignty in ways that might ward off gender trouble. For the Anglican bishop John Aylmer, for instance, writing just a year into Elizabeth I's rule, female sovereignty was acceptable, not just because of a divine plan, but also because “the regiment of England is not a mere Monarchie.” As Aylmer went on to explain to his readers, in what would have been an unusual interpretation in sixteenth-century England, the state was marked by its mixing of “monarchy, oligarchy, and democratie.” Elizabeth, in other words, proved no threat to the established order precisely because her role would be a limited one: “[I]f to be short she were a mere monark, and not a mixte ruler, you might peradventure make me to feare the matter the more, and the les to defend the cause . . . [but] it is not

<sup>78</sup> See Richard Dinmore, *An Exposition of the Principles of the English Jacobins*, second edition (Norwich: J. March, 1797), p. 17.

<sup>79</sup> On the many ways of reading queenship in British culture, see esp. Homans and Munich, *Remaking Queen Victoria*, esp. the editors' introduction, pp. 1–10; and the introduction in Orr, *Queenship in Britain*, esp. p. 42: “Royal women are perhaps the clearest examples of the contradictory representations of women within the western tradition.”



in England so daunger[ous] a matter, to have a woman ruler.”<sup>80</sup> As Constance Jordan rightly wonders, would Aylmer “have conceded as much to Parliament had the monarch he defended been a man”?<sup>81</sup>

Efforts to downplay, and diminish, queenship gained ground in the wake of the Glorious Revolution, quickening from the late eighteenth century. In this unsettled context, traditionalists tried to align female sovereignty with a more conservative world view, so as to ensure, in moralist Hannah More’s words, that the nation did not see the rise of “a whole sex of Queens,” citing Alexander Pope’s famous epistle “To a Lady” of 1743 (“Of the Characters of Women”).<sup>82</sup> True, few went so far as to suggest the abandonment of the nation’s royal succession policies, as Thomas Christie had in his *Letters on the Revolution of France* (1791), with which I opened this chapter. Most Britons remained profoundly suspicious of the Salic law, seeing it not just as foreign – and French at that – but also as an “artless system of jurisprudence,” in the words of one late-eighteenth-century historian.<sup>83</sup> Nevertheless, more than a few clearly wished to downplay the queen regnant’s significance, and to shed female sovereignty of its radical connotations.

To the extent that queens regnant must rule, therefore, some insisted that the imperative was national stability, not female advancement – and that the nation still *preferred* male rule. In this context, to criticize the French for denying women the “Gallick Throne” was not to endorse female succession per se, but rather, to broadcast the fact that Britain had been able to accommodate stronger and smoother transitions between sovereigns. The anonymous author of a poem “On the Salic Law” (1727) was already framing female sovereignty in these terms when he described Queen Anne as King William’s unthreatening successor: “When mighty William his dear Breath/resign’d,/He left a Female Successor behind./The Queen began her wise and gentle Sway,/She mark’d his Footsteps, and pursu’d his Way./Our neighbors then by sad Experience saw/The weak Foundation of the *Salic Law*.”<sup>84</sup> The towering legal thinker William Blackstone underscored this point in his *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765–1769), when he

<sup>80</sup> See Aylmer, *An Harbourove for Faithfull and Trewe Subjects*.

<sup>81</sup> See Jordan, *Renaissance Feminism*, p. 132.

<sup>82</sup> See Hannah More, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education with a View of the Principles and Conduct Prevalent among Women of Rank and Fortune*, volume 2 (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1799), p. 15.

<sup>83</sup> See *The History of France, from the First Establishment of That Monarchy, Brought Down to, and Including a Complete Narrative of the Late Revolution*, volume 1 (London: C. and G. Kearsley, 1791), p. 16. I have found remarkably few examples of thinkers who proposed establishing the Salic law in modern Britain – perhaps because its very history was so bound up in Anglo–French rivalry.

<sup>84</sup> “On the Salic Law,” *Whartonia: Or, Miscellanies, in Verse and Prose: By the Wharton Family, and Several Other Persons of Distinctions*, volume 1 (1727), p. 145. Emphasis author’s.

observed that, on the “failure of the male line,” the crown “descends to the issue female.” However, this policy was only intended to preserve the crown’s “descendible quality” – a quality, Blackstone stressed, that allowed the king to “never . . . die, in his political capacity,” even when the throne happened to be occupied by a woman.<sup>85</sup>

By the early nineteenth century, this alternative logic was hardening. Hannah More stressed stability above all else in her *Hints towards Forming the Character of a Young Princess* (1805), written as a guide to the education of Princess Charlotte. Although More wanted to ensure that Charlotte acquired the rigorous intellectual training needed to become a constitutional ruler – so as best to preserve British customs and institutions – she insisted that the princess be treated as a “providentially distinguished female,” whose particular rights and privileges had no bearing on the rest of her sex. Educating the princess, she explained, was a means of warding off revolution, not inviting it. “At this tumultuous period,” More proudly noted, “when we have seen almost all the thrones of Christendom trembling to their foundation; we have witnessed the British constitution, like the British oak, confirmed and rooted by the shaking of that tremendous blast, which has stripped kingdoms of their crowns, levelled the fences and inclosures of law, laid waste the best earthly blessings of mankind, and involved in desolation a large part of the civilized world.”<sup>86</sup> The writer and poet Mrs. Jane West also had stability in mind, although her treatment of queens regnant, in general, and of Charlotte, in particular, was far more dismissive than More’s. In her *Letters to a Young Lady* (1806), West – a conservative thinker who was a close acquaintance of the conduct-book author Sarah Trimmer and who elsewhere in her *Letters* described Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication* as marked by “absurdity and audacity” – described the future female sovereign as merely an “heiress,” guarding the throne for a male heir, or

<sup>85</sup> William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (San Francisco: Bancroft Whitney, 1890 [1765–1769]), pp. 420 and 422.

<sup>86</sup> Hannah More, *Hints towards Forming the Character of a Young Princess* (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1805), p. 51. For a similar appraisal of Princess Charlotte as being educated in the name of national stability, see “A Biographical Sketch of Her Royal Highness Princess Charlotte,” *The European Magazine and London Review*, July 1816, pp. 3–4. At the same time, even More’s account has a pluck that makes it at times difficult to categorize. She writes, for instance, p. 178, that “The best queens have been most remarkable for employing great men. Among these, Zenobia, Elizabeth, and Anne stand foremost. Those who wish to derogate from the glories of a female reign, have never failed to urge, that they were owing to the wisdom of the ministers, and not to that of the queen; a censure which involves an eulogium. For, is not the choice of sagacious ministers the characteristic mark of a sagacious sovereign?” For more on More’s treatment of Princess Charlotte, see Anne K. Mellor, *Mothers of the Nation: Women’s Political Writing in England, 1780–1830* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), pp. 37–38.

holding the position on behalf of her husband. For West, then, it was not Elizabeth I, but Mary II, who served as the model female sovereign, precisely because she had so eagerly ceded her power to her husband William III, with whom she ruled jointly. “Her positive refusal to accept a *solitary* scepter,” West observed, “was not affectation, but wisdom.”<sup>87</sup>

As Mrs. West’s assessment suggests, it was but a short step from thinking of female sovereigns as placeholders or helpmeets to further curtailing their rights altogether. And, indeed, it does seem, pace Aylmer, that formulations of the monarch as possessing a merely decorative, ornamental, or moral role – a role, that is, far more limited than that outlined in the Bill of Rights (1689) – came into sharper relief in the context of contemplating the specific problems posed by modern female sovereignty. From the 1790s, several Britons began to make more aggressive attempts to trivialize the sovereign’s powers in moments when they were thinking explicitly about the figure of the queen regnant. The French, according to the author of *Domestic Anecdotes of the French Nation* (1794), were wrong to think that they were “not governed by a *woman*.” For “it was ever a mistress of the king . . . who directed the affairs of government.”<sup>88</sup> By this logic, it was when women sat on the throne that men wielded power, not vice versa. Samuel Richardson had observed as much in his novel *Clarissa* (1748) decades earlier: “Women, indeed, make better sovereigns than men.”<sup>89</sup> Yet, Richardson had not intended this concession as a celebration of woman’s power. Recalling Richardson’s words in a 1799 letter to a friend, the poet Anna Seward explained that, for Richardson, “It is from the power each sex possesses over the mind of the other that a nation has the best chance for happiness under a queen, since they are governed by men, while under kings they are governed by women.”<sup>90</sup>

<sup>87</sup> See Mrs. Jane West, *Letters to a Young Lady: In Which the Duties and Character of Women Are Considered, Chiefly with a Reference to Prevailing Opinions* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees and Orme, 1806), pp. 212–213 and 128. For background on West, see Gail Baylis, “West, Jane (1758–1852),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. For a similarly dismissive treatment of queenship, see Jane Loudon’s futuristic novel *The Mummy* (London: H. Colburn, 1827), which imagines a British state in which only women will sit on the throne, but only men will vote.

<sup>88</sup> See *Domestic Anecdotes of the French Nation* (London: C and G. Kearsley, 1794), p. 180. Emphasis author’s.

<sup>89</sup> See Samuel Richardson, *The Novels of Samuel Richardson* (London: Hurst, Robinson, 1824), p. 150.

<sup>90</sup> See Anna Seward, April 30, 1799, in *Letters of Anna Seward: Written between the Years 1784 and 1807*, volume 5, ed., A. Constable (Edinburgh: A. Constable, 1811), p. 432. In this letter, Seward devotes significant space to parsing Richardson’s analysis. Richardson’s assessment of queenship would be cited so frequently in the nineteenth century that John Stuart Mill felt compelled to contend with it at length in his “The Subjection of Women,” in *On Liberty and Other Writings*, ed., Stefan Collini (Cambridge:

Certainly, many assessments of Princess Charlotte – both during her lifetime and following her death – sought to explain her role in just such patriarchal terms. Here was a future female sovereign who would reinforce, not undermine, the existing social and sexual order. Consider, for example, a journalist who wrote a piece on “The Women of Britain” for *The British Review* in 1816. The writer speculates on the shape and impact of Charlotte’s anticipated rule by bypassing entirely the question of her political authority and focusing on the domestic example that she would set for the rest of her sex. “In the course of natural succession we or our posterity are to live under a female sovereign,” the journalist concedes. But then note how quickly the author shifts tacks:

This will not diminish the importance and influence of the sex ... A female sovereign has a prerogative peculiar to her sex – a *moral* influence over the manners of her *female* subjects. In this respect she will have a power of doing good beyond what the highest positive privileges could confer; for, if what we have maintained with respect to the general influence of women be true, what will not that authority be capable of effecting toward the improvement of society, which will be able to turn the stream, the restless stream of fashion into the channel of domestic virtue. Happy sceptre! blessed potency! which can begin the work of moral and religious improvement at the highest source of life and instruction.<sup>91</sup>

Following Charlotte’s death in 1817, this emphasis on the princess’s domestic and feminine virtues would only become more pronounced. Yes, Charlotte was “but a woman,” but her very womanliness was understood to have set her on a markedly distinct royal path. In the *Authentic Memoirs of the Life of the Late Lamented Princess Charlotte*, for example, published anonymously in 1817, the author takes great pains to demonstrate that Charlotte, while perhaps eager to model herself on Queen Elizabeth I, ultimately aspired to be nothing more than a wife and mother – and encouraged other women to do the same. “[A]s a wife,” the author observes, Charlotte “was a model of her sex. She looked up to her husband with the most perfect affection and respect, and he deserved it all. His influence over her was unbounded, though the exercise of it was of the gentlest kind.” Nor was the princess eager to call attention to herself: “She aimed at little beyond neatness or plainness: there was no encumbering superfluity of jewels to be seen upon her person; in short, nothing which distinguished her from the common gentlewoman, in splendour of apparel. Always elegant, modest, and refined, and peculiarly

Cambridge University Press, 1989 [1869]), pp. 117–218 – to be discussed at length in the following chapters.

<sup>91</sup> See “The Women of Britain,” *The British Review*, and *London Critical Journal* 8, 1816, pp. 1–10 at p. 10.

chaste and circumspect in her demeanor.”<sup>92</sup> Or, in the words of another grieving Briton, “Every eye was turned to her, and to her conjugal tranquility – she was pointed out by matrons as a model to their daughters – and every patriot heart rejoiced in the prospect that a Princess so amiable was next in succession to the Prince Regent of the realm.”<sup>93</sup> Absent from such discussions, of course, were any references to the political roles or responsibilities for which Charlotte had been preparing assiduously.

What we see unfolding over the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, then, is a wide-ranging conversation about the rights and remits of the queen regnant, and about the bearing of these rights and remits on the common lot of British women. It was a conversation, moreover, that seemed to be becoming increasingly divisive, as women once again secured prominent places in the royal line of succession. Was the queen regnant to be a harbinger of female emancipation, of change from the top? Or was she to be a mere placeholder, exerting a moral influence while ceding her political functions to the more capable and experienced men who surrounded her? As Princess Victoria matured during the 1820s and 1830s, the jury remained out. It would be left to her future subjects to resolve – or rather, try to resolve – these pressing questions. The exchanges traced here would serve as an important prelude.

<sup>92</sup> See *Authentic Memoirs of the Life of the Late Lamented Princess Charlotte*, p. 15.

<sup>93</sup> See “Internment of the Princess Charlotte,” in Collection of newspaper cuttings relating to the death of the Princess Charlotte, British Library, 10805.cc.6. For other examples of this exultation in the “domestic” Charlotte, see the *Tracts on Princess Charlotte, 1817*, British Library, 1202.h.27. Within this collection, see esp. Rev. Isaac Purkis, *Reflections on the Death of Her Royal Highness the Princess Charlotte: Inscribed to His Serene Highness Leopold, Prince of Saxe-Coburg* (London: Printed for the Author, 1817), pp. 9–10: “It was an admirable trait in the character of her Royal Highness, that it was not her chief ambition to appear in the drawing room, to be admired in the assembly, to trifle away precious time and indulge avarice or prodigality at the card table; to be gazed at in the theatre, and to dazzle in public places; but, with the mild radiance of the ruby, to shine in the bosom of her family, to exemplify the virtues and possess the enjoyments of domestic life . . . The departure of this amiable Princess, whose example might have reformed the nation, is a just cause of regret to every one who bears the name of wife, of mother, or of daughter, in the land.” All of these tracts helped construct what Linda Colley has described as “a posthumous cult of Charlotte, built around her sex, youth, virtue, imminent maternity and tragic demise . . .” See Colley, *Britons*, p. 221.