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Review of Sharon L. Jansen, *Debating Women, Politics, and Power in Early Modern Europe*

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Sharon L. Jansen. *Debating Women, Politics, and Power in Early Modern Europe*.

New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. x + 260 pp. index. bibl. \$79.95. ISBN: 978-0-230-60552-7.

Sharon Jansen is a historian who has published a number of fine books, including *Dangerous Talk and Strange Behavior: Women and Popular Resistance to the Reforms of Henry VIII* and, of particular interest to this review, *The Monstrous Regiment of Women: Female Rulers in Early Modern Europe*, a book that examined the strong women who ruled in a variety of fashions, as regnant or regent. She begins her current book, *Debating Women*, describing being in the British Library in 1996 doing research on her *Monstrous Regiment* book. For background she read widely on the debate about nature and ability in the early modern period. More than a decade later, as Hillary Clinton began her run for the presidency and people today began to wonder about the question of could a woman rule, Jansen decided to go back to that research and write a book that centered on the gynecocracy debate and what it meant for questions of politics and power in early modern Europe. As she points out, though John Knox wrote his *First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* centuries ago, people today still debate the question of women and power.

Jansen begins her study with a chapter on Knox, who considered himself one of “God’s messenger[s]” in the *Blast* he wrote against women’s rule, particularly Mary I, Mary of Guise, and Mary Stuart. Knox used examples from the Old and New Testaments to demonstrate the wickedness and madness of women and how disastrous the rule of women would be, that it is against natural law, divine law, and civil law. Jansen asks the important questions, what did Knox hope for when he published his *Blast*, and whom did he hope replace the queens? Unlike some Protestants, Knox was not only against Catholic women rulers, but all women rulers.

After the discussion of Knox, Jansen moves on to those who early in the reign of Elizabeth I responded to Knox. Some, such as John Aylmer, have been often analyzed by modern critics, but others, such as Richard Bertie — who would have interesting ideas about powerful women since he was the second husband of Catherine Willoughby, Dowager Duchess of Suffolk (a man she had married out of love and respect and shared religious belief, since he was far below her in status) — have not. As Jansen points out, Bertie’s response is especially significant in refuting Knox about women’s legal status. She also examines the manuscript response by Henry Howard, written much later in Elizabeth’s reign. Jansen argues, I believe correctly, that even the most ardent defenders of women’s rule are in some ways ambivalent.

One of the great strengths of Jansen's study is her putting this sixteenth-century debate within a larger context. She examines the early histories of women that discussed the subject of women rulers. Her discussions of Boccaccio's *Famous Women*, Arienti's *Ginevra, concerning Famous Women*, Strozzi's *Defense of Women*, Equicolar's *Concerning Women*, and Agrippa's *On the Nobility and Preeminence of the Female Sex* are all very useful. She then uses these texts to discuss works closer in chronology to Knox, such as Vives's *The Instruction of a Christian Woman*.

Jansen's next chapter is in some ways the most welcoming of all. She presents the women's voices in the debate, beginning with Christine de Pizan. She then moves to a number of significant but less well-known women writers, such as Isotta Nogarola, Laura Cereta, and Louise Labé. Jansen carefully analyzes their responses to the male authors she has already discussed. Some of the most interesting texts are ones responding to Guiseppi Passi's *The Defects of Women*. "Moderata Fonte," which was the pseudonym of Modesta Pozzo, actually composed her manuscript before Passi's was published. Hers was published after her death, however, in response to it. Another specifically in response to Passi was Lucrezia Marinella's *The Nobility and Excellence of Women and the Defects and Vices of Men*, which again related the history of learned and illustrious women. Jansen ends her study with a brief chapter on queens and controversy in the early modern period and shows that by the late seventeenth century women were no longer ruling.

Since Jansen worked in the British Library in 1996 there have been many wonderful studies on early modern intellectual debates on women, women writers, and queens. Some of the material of this book is more widely known now than a decade ago. Jansen's book is beautifully written and accessible not only to scholars but to a general readership. Its greatest use would be to students, so we can only hope that an affordable paperback edition becomes available.

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