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Katherine Crawford, *Perilous Performances: Gender and Regency in Early Modern France.* Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2004. 310pp. Abbreviations, notes, bibliography, and index. $49.94 U.S. (hb). ISBN 0-074-01541-X.

Review by Jonathan Dewald, University of Buffalo.

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The problem of regency--the management of government during a king's childhood or incapacity--brings together two apparently distinct lines of scholarly inquiry. On the one hand, understanding the real functioning of French government during the Old Regime requires looking closely at its regencies. Three of the five Bourbon reigns included them--four, if the period following Louis XVI's incarceration is included; and, under the Bourbons as under their Valois predecessors, these coincided with dramatic political events. At the same time, to study regency is also to study women's ambiguous role in Old Regime social practice and thought. All but one of France's early modern regents were queen mothers, yet over the same years, French women found themselves excluded from most other public positions. The Salic Law (first "discovered" in the early fourteenth century, then vigorously promoted during the political crises of the late sixteenth) denied women the throne, and theorists increasingly stressed their biological incapacity for politics of any kind. Regency poses questions about women's larger political roles during a time of advancing sexism, and about the place of gender ideas in the superficially masculine world of absolutist politics.

Katherine Crawford's new book thus addresses central questions about Old Regime political and social history. Her analysis starts from the complicated, often contradictory demands that regents faced on taking power. They had to maintain the fiction that absolute power rested with a boy king and demonstrate their complete devotion to the king's needs; the women among them, all of them foreigners as well, had to justify their exercise of public power. Since France was at war during most of its early modern regencies, they had also to demonstrate their effectiveness in the masculine world of arms. Negotiating these demands, Crawford argues, required what she terms performance: the self-conscious deployment of imagery, ceremonies, formal argument, propaganda, and brute force. The audience was large and critical, ranging from Paris shopkeepers, merchants, and bankers, to magistrates, aristocrats, princes, and foreign governments. Like other theatrical audiences, these onlookers had to be persuaded to suspend disbelief; effective government required securing their cooperation, or at least their obedience. Crawford offers a series of acute readings of the ceremonies and iconography that made this political theater work, stressing the care with which regents presented themselves to their public in person, paintings, and print.

Given the peculiarities of the institution, all Old Regime regents confronted these fundamental tasks. But, Crawford argues, they also addressed them in significantly different ways, and thus her approach is essentially narrative. The book moves in an orderly way through the relevant examples, recounting the major events of the regencies that marked French life from 1560 to the monarchy's collapse in 1792. Some of the differences among them resulted from external circumstances, some from the complicated interplay of temperaments and situations. Marie de Médicis took extraordinary steps to display her own power and importance, even after her son's adulthood. In contrast, Anne of Austria sought to efface the signs of her own influence and focus attention on her son as the true source of power--leading directly, Crawford suggests, to Louis XIV's stress on strong kingship. In this history, personalities mattered, but so also did historical consciousness. Regents knew their predecessors' successes and failures, and adjusted their own performances accordingly. This stress on the narrative specificity of each regency

represents a distinctive interpretive stance, setting Crawford's work somewhat apart from other recent treatments of these issues. Fanny Cosandey, for instance, has argued that the queen's place in French political life should be understood in terms of the increasingly sacred quality of monarchy itself. Whether as consorts or regents, their position was shaped by the growing awe with which subjects looked on their kings.[1] Cosandey's account thus stresses structure over narrative: regencies participated in a larger transformation of French government, which tended to make obedience a religious rather than a merely practical duty, and thus diminished the importance of particular political choices. In contrast, Crawford gives full attention to the role of individuals.

This narrative approach is especially helpful in the case of Philippe d'Orléans, the Old Regime's only male regent (1715–1723). Queen mothers, Crawford shows, enjoyed privileged access to the role precisely because they had no claim to other forms of power. Their maternal feelings (it was assumed) guaranteed that their interests would converge with their sons', and their exclusion from the throne ensured that personal ambition would not distract them. A boy king's male relatives occupied more ambiguous, even menacing positions, for their own rights to the throne made it difficult to view them as reliable guardians. As a result, the Old Regime's three ruling queen mothers were not alone in having to put on difficult gender performances. If they had to persuade the political nation that a woman could manage warfare and other affairs of state, Philippe had to show sufficient femininity that he could be trusted to nurture the young Louis XV. In doing so, he sacrificed some of the manly forcefulness that contemporaries believed necessary in an effective ruler, attracting widespread criticism for his supposed weakness. For men and women alike, Crawford shows, ideas about gender helped constitute power; and for both, balancing masculine and feminine imagery was a difficult, risky business.

This line of investigation leads Crawford to an original and suggestive analysis of the instabilities of regency government. Of course, the fact of instability itself scarcely needs demonstration. The regencies of Catherine de Médicis, Marie de Médicis, and Anne of Austria all produced civil wars; that of Philippe d'Orléans brought the return (after a fifty-year intermission) of nearly continuous agitation by the parlements. But Crawford shows that these outcomes reflected more than personal failings or the weaknesses to be expected of any caretaker government. More fundamentally, regency troubles expressed the contradictory political language that structured the institution, which demanded of any regent both self-effacement and self-assertion, femininity and masculinity. Crawford's analyses of how regents had themselves represented in pictures and ceremonies provide compelling evidence of the cultural forces that regencies had to balance.

Her exploration of regency outcomes is less convincing. Though she stresses differences among regents' political choices and notes some of their shortcomings, she tends to view all of them as able politicians, who "played an important part in the development of the modern state" (p. 200). In one sense this is a reasonable judgment, given the number of regencies during the Old Regime and the important moments at which they occurred, but it also neglects the bumbling, profiteering, and violence that characterized them. The Concinis (under Marie de Médicis), Mazarin (under Anne of Austria), and John Law (under Philippe d'Orléans) all undermined respect for the government by their financial misadventures, arguably with long-term consequences for French political culture. Neither Catherine nor Marie de Médicis ceded power gracefully, and each significantly weakened the state by her insistence on preserving personal influence over her children; Marie created further problems by her peculiar preference for her younger son. In these respects, the regencies seem to teach a conventional lesson: early modern politics demanded a broad range of skills, and few regents had much training in them. It is not surprising that they depended heavily on flawed counselors.

On the other hand, Crawford's work has the great merit of allowing us to see regency as a single phenomenon, characterized by a limited set of basic problems and limited possible responses to them. As

Crawford emphasizes, both regents themselves and the public watching them viewed the institution in just these terms, with a strong awareness of previous regime's successes and failures; and, as she also demonstrates, this included the makers of the French Revolution, who were still wrestling with the conjoined problems of power and feminity as the monarchy itself collapsed.

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[1] Fanny Cosandey, *La reine de France: symbole et pouvoir, XVe-XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000).

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