



Ceremonial and the Representation of Female Queenship between Exception and Everyday Life

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ABSTRACT: The wedding journey of Marie Louise Gonzaga Nevers from France to Poland, undertaken between November 1645 and March 1646, represents one of the most complex and significant episodes in seventeenth century European political culture and provides a privileged observatory for analysing the ways in which female queenship is constructed and represented between the exceptional dimension and everyday practices of power.

KEYWORDS: Marie Louise Gonzaga Nevers; female queenship; royal travel; ceremonial entries; political communication; seventeenth-century Europe.

It lies at the intersection of political and cultural history and the history of female queenship, offering historians a particularly fertile field of observation on the mechanisms of symbolic construction of power in Europe of the *ancien regime*.¹

As contemporary sources, diplomatic reports, journalistic accounts, ceremonial documentation and iconographic evidence show, the journey was a founding act of the Gonzaga Nevers' queenship.²

This contribution aims to analyse the journey not so much in its material dimension as in its symbolic and performative process, in which ceremony

¹ On the historiographical renewal relating to the study of monarchy as a symbolic and performative system, see J.-M. Apostolidès, *Le roi-machine. Spectacle et politique au temps de Louis XIV*, Paris 1981; B. Guenée, *L'Occident aux XIVe et XVe siècles*, Paris 1971.

² F. De Caprio, *Maria Luisa Gonzaga Nevers. Cerimonia e propaganda nel viaggio verso il trono di Polonia (1645-1646)*, Viterbo, Sette Città, 2018, "Introduction," pp. 9-16. I also refer to this text for bibliographical references to the figure of the Queen of Poland.



and representation contribute to the construction of a specific form of female queenship.

1 Marie Louise Gonzaga Nevers: education and political awareness

Marie Louise Gonzaga Nevers did not come to her marriage to the Polish sovereign Władysław IV Vasa as an inexperienced young princess. On the contrary, she came from a culturally vibrant and politically formative environment, that of the French court and the Duchy of Nevers, where she had gained solid social experience and an early awareness of the dynamics of power.³ Her age, thirty-four at the time of her wedding, clearly distinguished her from most royal brides of the time, who were often teenagers, and helped to define her atypical political profile.

2 The journey as a political and ceremonial operation

The journey to Poland was conceived from the outset not as a simple geographical displacement, but as a political and propagandistic operation.⁴ Each stage of the journey was governed by official protocols and incorporated into a precise ceremonial grammar, and it received extraordinary media coverage. In addition to the usual sources of news (notices, leaflets, pamphlets and broadsheets), the journey received exceptional coverage from the most important French newspaper, *La Gazette*, which followed the entire route with a continuous series of reports sent by local correspondents and published in real time, despite the fact that the route often passed through war zones. In turn, the magistrates of Gdańsk commissioned engravings of the preparations for the grand arrival in the city, with the aim of distributing them abroad.⁵

The departure from Paris on 27 November 1645 took the form of a state ceremony, with King Louis XIV, the regent, and a significant part of the

³ G. Platania, *Maria Ludovica Gonzaga Nevers: Una Principessa italo-francese sul trono di Polonia*, Rome 1999.

⁴ F. De Caprio, *Maria Luisa Gonzaga Nevers*, cit., pp. 243-90.

⁵ The task was entrusted to Guglielmus Hondius and his engravings were eagerly awaited by Gustave Renaudot, the editor of the *Gazette*, who wanted to write about them in the newspaper. Other engravings were made by Jeremias Falk. See J. Żukowski, "Ephemeral Architecture in Service of Vladislaus IV Vasa," in *Ceremonial Entries in Early Modern Europe. The iconography of Power*, edited by J.R. Mulryne, et al., Burlington 2015, pp. 189-220.

court accompanying the queen to the outskirts of the capital, symbolically sanctioning the continuity of French sovereignty.⁶

A central role in organising the journey was entrusted to the Maréchale de Guébriant, Louis XIV's extraordinary ambassador, who was responsible for ensuring that the ceremonial was observed and for safeguarding French interests throughout the journey.⁷ The King of Poland had requested that the Queen be accompanied by a princess, as she had married as *a fille de France*, i.e. a member of the royal family. But, apart from other considerations, the Maréchale guaranteed a wealth of experience in matters of ceremony and diplomacy.⁸

Contemporary sources clearly show that Marie Louise Gonzaga was not a passive figure, simply accompanied or directed by the royal ambassador. On several occasions, as emerges in particular from Pierre des Noyers' report,⁹ Gonzaga Nevers firmly defended her royal prerogatives, limiting the Maréchale's interference and asserting her own decision-making autonomy.

The journey to Poland, marked by the dialectic between French diplomatic supervision and Marie Louise's personal initiative, took on strong political significance. It was not a simple transfer, but a space for the negotiation of power, in which the future queen was able to demonstrate her governing abilities, anticipating the active role she would play on the Polish throne.

3 Representation of the journey: sources and communication strategies

The strategic dimension of the journey also extended to its public representation, through a multi-level communication strategy involving texts,

⁶ See the documents (including the decision of the Council of State and the order of the Secretary of State at *the Maison du Roi*) collected by Nicolas II Saintot (Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Ms. Français 14120, *Mémoires de M. Saintot, introducteur des ambassadeurs*, vol. IV, ff. 49r-65v. See F. De Caprio, *Maria Luisa Gonzaga Nevers*, cit. pp. 188-94; 220-34.

⁷ For a description of the organisation of the journey and the diplomatic function of Louis XIV's extraordinary ambassador, see the report by the ambassador's secretary: J. Le Laboureur, *Relation du voyage de la Roynne de Pologne [...]*, Paris, 1647.

⁸ See Vicomte de Noailles, *Épisodes de la Guerre de Trente ans. La Maréchal de Guébriant (de 1602 à 1643)*, Paris 1913, pp. 21-4.

⁹ Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Paris, 38/MD, *Poland*, MS. 1, P. des Noyers, *Memoirs of the journey of Madame Louise Marie de Gonzague de Clèves to take possession of the Crown of Poland and some remarks on the things that happened to her in that country*, ff. 296r-387v. passim, in particular for the episodes relating to the tensions between the queen and the Maréchale de Guébriant and for the active role of Marie Louise Gonzaga in managing the entourage and the ceremonial. A very faithful copy of the report, made in 1821, is preserved in the Biblioteka Książąt Czartoryskich, Kraków, Ms 1970, IV, pp. 7-196.

images and rituals to construct a controlled narrative of the event. Central to this were the reports of secretaries Jean Le Laboureur and Pierre des Noyers, who, while describing the same events, offered different interpretations, reflecting different political positions. In particular, Le Laboureur presented the journey in a celebratory light, as a manifestation of French power and the success of Mazarin's policy, relegating the queen to the role of an instrument of monarchical diplomatic strategy.

The account of Pierre des Noyers, the queen's personal secretary, is different. In his account, the journey is not only a celebration but also a process: it is along the roads of Europe that Marie Louise gradually reveals her political qualities, defends her royal prerogatives and builds a form of personal authority. The journey thus takes on the value of an original scene of female queenship, in which the sovereign asserts herself as an active political subject, even before her coronation.

Alongside the reports of the secretaries, a decisive role in the public construction of the event was played by the *Paris Gazette*, edited by Théophraste Renaudot. Between December 1645 and April 1646, the periodical followed the journey almost in real time, transforming it into a serialized story intended for European public opinion. *The Gazette* highlighted the spectacular nature of the ceremonies and the success of the Franco-Polish alliance, reinforcing the image of the journey as a triumph of French politics and prolonging its propaganda effectiveness. In contrast, the report by the master of ceremonies Saintot, which was more technical and devoid of celebratory intent, accurately documents the ritual order, allowing us to distinguish between the reality of the ceremony and its propagandistic reworking in other sources.

4 The stages of the journey as a dramaturgy of power

As a whole, the journey appears as a true dramaturgy of power, articulated in stages that take on political and symbolic significance in the process of legitimizing the queen. The departure from Paris marks the beginning of this staging, transforming the sovereign into a mobile political body and symbolically projecting French sovereignty beyond national borders.

The crossing of the Spanish Netherlands introduces a more complex dimension: in a context marked by the Franco-Habsburg conflict, every ceremony becomes a diplomatic act. The solemn entries into Brussels and Antwerp, as well as the journey on the golden *bucintoro* already used by Cardinal Infante, place the event within a shared European political culture, in which sovereignty is asserted through the ritual control of space.

The passage through the United Provinces marked a break in the journey: the ceremonial pomp was toned down, the welcomes were more sober and the material conditions difficult, with logistical shortcomings, harsh weather and the coldness of the local authorities.

However, these difficulties were reinterpreted as proof of the Queen's steadfastness. Her ability to maintain decorum and ritual continuity even in adverse conditions helped to build an image of queenship based on discipline and self-control, as well as magnificence. The organizational complexities—including the management of three separate processions and the poor roads in an exceptionally harsh winter—thus reinforce the symbolic and anticipatory value of this phase of the journey.

The papal nuncio Giovanni de Torres wrote from Warsaw: "The cold is so excessive in these parts that the locals say they have not suffered such cold for many years."¹⁰ During the journey through the Spanish Netherlands, as Gonzaga wrote to the regent of France, Anne of Austria, two of the queen's carriages broke down, as did one of Madame de Guébriant's, two of the Polish ambassadors' carriages, and another carriage blocked the road, preventing the procession from continuing.¹¹ But the journey was overshadowed above all by the poor organisational efficiency of a transport entrepreneur, known to us by the name or nickname of *Le Roy*, who had been hired in France. Under the contract, he was responsible for the carriages, horses, harnesses, luggage, accommodation and supplies, as well as resolving unexpected problems, such as when boats had to be procured quickly to cross a ford that had become impassable; "things in which there were losses and much confusion."¹²

Faced with logistical difficulties, the queen intervened decisively: she cancelled the contract with *Le Roy*, reorganised transport by purchasing new, more suitable horses and carriages, hired new coachmen, transferred the luggage and changed the route to speed up the journey at the king's request. The trials faced along the way are interpreted as preparation for future political difficulties in Poland. The experience of adversity thus becomes a symbolic resource, outlining a model of sovereignty based not only on splendour but also on the ability to resist and adapt.

The entry into Poland marks the culmination of the drama of the journey. In Gdańsk, the city is transformed into a great political theatre, where

¹⁰ Archivio Apostolico Vaticano, *Segreteria di Stato, Polonia*, vol. 54, Giovanni de Torres to Camillo Pamphili, Warsaw, 27 January 1646, f. 43r.

¹¹ See M.L. Plourin, *Marie de Gonzague. Une princesse française reine de Pologne*, Paris 1946, pp. 107-8.

¹² F. De Caprio, *Maria Luisa Gonzaga Nevers*, cit., pp. 245-46 and 282-3.

the consort's queenship is re-enacted through ephemeral architecture, armed processions and an aristocratic participation of extraordinary grandeur. Sources show that the event was conceived not only as a solemn welcome, but also as a decisive moment in the public legitimisation of the queen's authority. The display of weapons, clothing and horses recalls the Sarmatian ideology of the Polish nobility, symbolically integrating the future queen into the political traditions of the *Rzeczpospolita*.

The entry into Gdańsk, widely reported in the press, gazettes, diaries and engravings, is constructed as an orderly and harmonious triumph between sovereign and nobility. Texts and images do not merely record the event, but define its political significance, transforming it into an exemplary moment of visual legitimisation and the construction of consensus and public memory.

5 Travel, mobility and political communication

One of the most innovative aspects of this journey lies in its communicative dimension. The journey was not only staged, but also narrated and disseminated through various channels, giving rise to a form of pre-modern political communication based on mobility. Written reports, journalistic accounts and engravings transformed the queen's physical journey into an event followed and commented on by a European audience.

From this point of view, the serialisation of the travelogue in the *Parisian Gazette* represents an extraordinarily modern element in the political communication landscape of the seventeenth century. Marie Louise Gonzaga's journey is not presented as a concluded event, but as an ongoing process, marked by successive updates accompanying the physical unfolding of the journey. The news published regularly between December 1645 and April 1646 followed the rhythm of the journey itself, allowing the public to 'follow' the queen along the roads of Europe almost in real time.¹³ The serialised narrative of the *Gazette* kept the public's attention alive beyond the wedding, prolonging the propaganda effectiveness of the marriage. By repeating themes such as the enthusiasm of the welcomes, the dignity of the queen and the magnificence of her entourage, the newspaper constructed a coherent and controlled image of the event. The journey thus became a tool for shaping pre-modern public opinion, guided by means of communication closely linked to power.

¹³The *Gazette*, the semi-official organ of the French court, regularly followed Marie Louise Gonzaga's journey, turning it into a serialised story for the French and European public. The articles and *extraordinaires* dedicated to the journey ended on 8 June 1646, followed by a special issue on 5 September, focusing on the coronation.

The dissemination of engravings also played a decisive role: depicting solemn entrances and spectacular displays, they established a visual memory of the event and reinforced the link between the queen and the magnificence of monarchical power. Marie Louise's journey thus stands as one of the first examples of the coordinated construction of a sovereign's public image through various media.

6 Female queenship between Exception and Everyday life

The journey provides a particularly effective opportunity to reflect on the theme of female queenship in the Europe of the *ancien regime*.¹⁴ If, on a doctrinal level, the queenship of the consort is conceived as derivative and subordinate, the concrete experience of the journey shows how this pattern can be reinterpreted and, in part, overcome.¹⁵ Instead, when the queen arrives in the kingdom where her husband was a king, she emphasises the reflective nature of her own queenship in her actions.

The journey thus becomes a space for negotiation between the exceptional and the everyday. Exceptional, because the event is extraordinary and unrepeatable; everyday, because queenship is exercised day after day along the roads of Europe, through practical decisions, diplomatic relations and the management of the entourage.

In this sense, the case of Gonzaga Nevers shows how female queenship could manifest itself not only in the solemn moments of court or high diplomacy, but also in the dynamic dimension of travel, transforming mobility into a political resource.

Read in its overall sequence, the journey appears as a veritable drama of power, articulated in successive acts, each with a precise political meaning. The crossing of the Spanish Netherlands, an area of strong tension between France and the Habsburgs, transformed each reception into a delicate demonstration of diplomatic balance. The receptions organised by the Marquis of Castel Rodrigo were based on Marie Louise Gonzaga's dual status

¹⁴ There is an enormous amount of literature on three types of queens (queens *sui iuris*, queen consorts, queen regents). See at least *The Body of the Queen: Gender and Rule in the Courtly World, 1500–2000*, edited by R. Schulte, New York—Oxford 2006, (in particular pp. 1–16 and 88–100); S.J. Jansen, *Women, Politics, and Power in Early Modern Europe*, New York 2008; C. Casanova, *Regine per caso. Donne al governo in età moderna*, Bari-Rome 2014; C. Beem, *Queenship in Early Modern Europe*, London 2022.

¹⁵ See *Women and Sovereignty*, edited by L. Fradenburg, Edinburgh 1992. The *Gazette* of 10 February 1646 reports an episode in which the queen is effectively attributed a substitute for one of the king's prerogatives: on leaving Bremen, some prisoners threw themselves under her litter asking for asylum and a pardon, which, it is implied, were granted.

as Fille de France and Queen of Poland. On the one hand, they aimed to involve her in an attempt at confidential negotiations between France and Spain; on the other, to steer her and the Polish ambassadors towards a position favourable to the Habsburgs. The Marquis entrusted her with a letter for Mazarin containing a peace proposal, which the Cardinal deemed impractical or suspicious, considering it a possible stratagem to create tensions between France and the United Provinces. The queen was supposed to convey the proposal verbally to the Marquis de Longueville, the French plenipotentiary at the Congress of Münster.¹⁶ To avoid tensions between her identity as *fille de France* and that of Queen of Poland, Marie Louise chose not to pass through Münster, changing her itinerary and limiting herself to sending a letter to the plenipotentiary via the French resident Saint Roman.

The queen was no longer merely a sovereign travelling towards her kingdom. Le Laboureur notes that, upon crossing the small river that marked the border between Pomerania and Royal Prussia, it was then that “elle commença de regner.”

The entry into Poland marked the culmination of the journey. In Gdańsk, the city organised one of the most extraordinary ceremonial entries of the seventeenth century for Marie Louise, with ephemeral architecture, triumphal arches, public performances and an impressive parade of the armed nobility.¹⁷ In Warsaw, she met Władysław IV and celebrated her religious wedding, while in Kraków, the coronation ceremony definitively sanctioned the political recognition of the queen consort by the political community of the *Rzeczpospolita*.

7 Conclusions

Marie Louise Gonzaga Nevers' journey to Poland is emblematic of the political culture of the seventeenth century, in which power was inseparable from its staging and public narration. It was not only a prelude to the wedding and coronation, but a veritable political laboratory: through ceremonies, solemn entrances, press reports and images circulated throughout Europe, the queenship of the future sovereign was gradually constructed even before her official inauguration.

The journey took the form of a drama of power spread out over time, in which each stage contributed to the queen's legitimacy. Mobility thus became a political resource and a tool for negotiation, challenging the idea of

¹⁶ See *Lettres du Cardinal Mazarin pendant son ministère*, edited by M.A. Chéruef, Paris 1879, volume II, pp. 271-271 (*Au duc de Longueville*, 23 December 1645).

¹⁷ F. De Caprio, *Maria Luisa Gonzaga Nevers*, cit., pp. 296-302.

‘derivative queenship.’ although part of a system that attributed derivative power to women, Marie Louise was able to build active authority through concrete decisions, management of difficulties and representation strategies.

The wealth of sources—gazettes, reports, engravings—also reveals the emergence of forms of pre- modern political communication capable of shaping public perception of events on a European scale. The journey thus established itself as a device for continuous legitimisation, in which theatricality, consensus building and the affirmation of female queenship were closely intertwined.

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