



Christina of Sweden (1626-1689)

by Linda Rapp

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Christina of Sweden shocked the rest of Europe when she gave up her throne at the age of twenty-seven. The reasons for her abdication have been debated ever since, but among them was surely her strong aversion to marriage. She remained resolute on this point despite the persistent urging of her advisers that she wed and have children in order to ensure the line of succession.

Christina's parents, King Gustav Adolf and Maria Eleonora of Brandenburg, had been eager for an heir to the crown, but their first two children died shortly after birth. When the queen became pregnant for the third time, court astrologers predicted the birth of a healthy son who would succeed to the throne.

Her Confusing Birth

The arrival of the royal infant on December 8, 1626 caused great elation--and some confusion. The baby, robust in body and voice, was originally thought to be a boy, which, Christina recalled in later years, "filled the Palace with false joy."

Gustav, however, showed no dismay upon learning that the child was a girl, instead declaring that his daughter would certainly be very clever since she had already fooled everyone.

The king treated Christina just as he would have a son: he called for national celebrations of the royal birth and within less than a month convened the Parliament to have Christina named the official heir to the throne.

Education and Succession

Gustav further decided that her education should be that of a prince. Thus, her lessons included languages, political and military science, riding, and shooting--all of which suited her much better than women's traditional activities such as needlework, for which she claimed to have no aptitude whatsoever.

The king showed pride in his daughter, but Maria Eleonora made no effort to hide her disappointment that her child was a girl and, in her opinion, an ugly one at that. Throughout her life Christina found dealing with her mother a great trial.

Gustav Adolf died in the battle of Lützen (Germany) on November 16, 1632. The following February the Parliament officially declared six-year-old Christina King of Sweden. (The term *queen*, by which she is commonly known, was technically the designation of the wife of a male monarch.)

During Christina's minority Sweden was ruled by a regency. Chancellor Axel Oxenstierna was the *de facto* head of state.



Top: A portrait of Christina of Sweden by Sébastien Bourdon.
Above: A painting of Christina on horseback (1653) by Sébastien Bourdon.

Young Christina continued to receive a rigorous education to prepare her to rule the nation. Her knowledge and inquisitive spirit impressed all who observed her. By the age of sixteen she was attending meetings of the State Council, where, in the words of biographer Margaret Goldsmith, "she held her own in argument against the Chancellor."

Christina began to rule in her own right on her eighteenth birthday. Soon after her accession she successfully negotiated a peace treaty ending hostilities between Sweden and Denmark. She also worked tirelessly to bring as quick an end as possible to the Thirty Years' War, which had been costly in both lives and money. Although Oxenstierna would have preferred to prolong negotiations until all of the country's demands had been met, the Peace of Westphalia was secured in 1648, with terms generally favorable to Sweden.

The beneficiary of a fine education, Christina understood the importance of learning. She encouraged scholarship; she bought books from all over Europe for Swedish libraries; and she invited prominent thinkers, including René Descartes, to Sweden. Her commitment to fostering education, art, and culture earned her the nickname "the Minerva of the North."

Affectional Preference

Even before Christina reached the throne, the question of succession was much on the minds of many at court. The monarch herself was in no hurry to wed and indeed turned down a number of proposed matches.

Christina had long been considered "mannish" because of her intellect and love of studying, and her manner of dressing reinforced the impression. She showed virtually no interest in fashionable clothing or hairstyles and often wore garments and shoes that were of a masculine style.

In spite of her "unfeminine" dress and demeanor and her increasingly vocal opposition to the idea of marriage, there were occasional rumors that she had a male lover. The true object of her affection, however, was Ebba Sparre, her lady-in-waiting and "bed-fellow."

That Christina slept with one of the women of her court meant nothing in and of itself: in the cold north it was a common and practical custom for people of the same sex to share a bed merely to keep warm. Christina's physical attraction to Sparre is made clear, however, in the loving letters that she wrote to her after leaving Sweden.

Abdication and Conversion to Catholicism

As early as 1651 Christina considered abdicating in favor of her cousin Charles Gustav. He had not yet married but was not, like Christina, opposed to the idea. He had, in fact, expressed interest in marrying her.

Despite this early indication, Christina's final decision to abdicate in favor of Charles Gustav was considered stunning. It prompted all manner of speculation.

Within days after attending her cousin's coronation on June 6, 1654, Christina left Sweden. Before her departure she had her hair cut off and assumed masculine attire. She then journeyed to Denmark under the name of Count Dohna.

She continued to Brussels, where on December 24, 1654, she was baptized in a private ceremony into the Catholic faith, a religion illegal in Sweden at the time.

Word of her conversion spread, and on September 22 of the following year she had a second, public,

baptism in the presence of a representative of Pope Alexander VII.

Christina was a prize convert, and the pope himself welcomed her when she arrived in Rome in December 1655.

Life in Rome

The Italian capital became Christina's home for the rest of her life, although she traveled around Europe on several occasions. Particularly in France her unorthodox ways drew comment. Because of her mannish clothing and assertive manner she was called an "Amazon." She is also reported to have made amorous advances toward several women during her journeys.

Even after her abdication Christina retained political ambitions. She negotiated with French minister Cardinal Jules Mazarin to be named King of Naples, but the plan came to naught due to an uproar after she ordered Giovan Rinaldo Monaldeschi, a member of her retinue, executed for treason. He had probably tried to shoo his knowledge of Christina's quest for Naples for his personal gain, but details of the incident are unclear.

When the throne of Poland became vacant in 1668, Christina made a half-hearted attempt to vie for the elective post of king at the urging of Cardinal Decio Azzolino, a powerful churchman whom she had befriended in Rome.

The loss of the Polish election caused little dismay to Christina, who preferred to remain in Rome, where she had founded the Accademia Reale (now called the Accademia dell'Arcadia) to promote the study of literature and philosophy.

Patronage of the Arts

Christina was an active patron of the arts. Her extensive collection of paintings was noteworthy for its numerous depictions of women in erotic poses.

She turned a former convent called Tor Di Nona into a theater where plays and operas were produced. Instead of using *castrati* for the female roles in the operas, Christina brought beautiful and talented local young women to the stage.

Christina became a devoted admirer of Alessandro Scarlatti after hearing a performance of one of his early works. She made him her choirmaster, and it is she who suggested the theme for his opera *Pompeo* (1683).

Christina also championed Arcangelo Corelli, who conducted the orchestra at a concert that Christina gave in 1687 in honor of James II of England.

Death and Subsequent Speculation

Christina died in Rome on April 19, 1689 after a short illness. She had requested a simple funeral, but Pope Innocent XII arranged an elaborate ceremony. Throngs lined the route as a large procession of clergy and leading scholars brought her to St. Peter's Basilica for interment in an ornate tomb.

The fascination with Christina has not diminished over time. In Rouben Mamoulian's *Queen Christina* (1933) another enigmatic Swede, Greta Garbo, portrayed the monarch on screen. Christina's love for Ebba Sparre is shown by a passionate kiss between the two women. In the film, however, Sparre soon betrays the love of Christina, who then becomes the lover of the Spanish ambassador.

The ambassador, Antonio Pimentel, is one of a number of people--men and women alike--whose

relationships with Christina were the subjects of rumor during her lifetime. Apart from the clear expression of love in the letters to Sparre there is little evidence to support the considerable speculation.

Speculation about Christina's sexuality has indeed been present, however, from the very day of her birth when she was mistaken for a boy. Some have suggested that she may have been a hermaphrodite.

In 1965 Christina's body was disinterred and examined. Investigators were able to determine that the skeleton was that of a woman, but because of decomposition and the fact that the embalmers had removed some of the internal organs, analysis of the soft tissue was not possible. In death as in life Christina had retained her ability to confound.

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