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Women Like That: Rebellious Royalty

As a young queen, Christina entertained the French ambassador by having a group of her proper, Lutheran ladies-in-waiting sing to him in French. They sang a dirty soldier's song without understanding a word of it, although Christina herself certainly did. She was 18 and had been the queen of Sweden since she was six, but until her eighteenth birthday a council of regents had run the country in her place. If they expected to continue managing Christina and therefore the country after she reached her majority, this incident made it clear Christina would be her own woman.

She was born in December of 1626 to King Gustavus Adolphus and his wife Maria Eleonora, a beautiful but mentally unstable woman. When the king was killed in battle, he had left detailed instructions about how the princess was to be raised and educated in preparation for her role as Queen of Sweden. Her education was suitable for a young prince and included long hours of study and intense exercise, usually denied girls in the seventeenth century.

Those around her supposed that she would drop her tomboy ways when she grew older and began to want a husband. But Christina considered herself ugly and it was said that she "hated mirrors because they had nothing agreeable to show her." She was also very self-conscious of her physique because one shoulder was higher than the other. (When Swedish actress Greta Garbo played the young queen in a 1933 film, she protested against how glamorous the characterization was; the Swedes had no romantic ideas of their cross-dressing queen.)

As a young woman she came to have an aversion to marriage although her biographers go to great lengths to convince themselves she was lovers with one or two of her court 'favorites.'

Much happened in the first months of her actual reign. Her cousin and intimate friend since childhood, Maria, became engaged and left Christina's court. They had been raised together, and Christina was also friends — some say lovers — with Maria's fiancé as well. They could not marry without the Queen's permission, which she gave without flinching although both friends would thus be unavailable to her. Christina also suffered several severe bouts of illness in a short time due to the stress of ruling a country that had been continually at war since before she was born. She was constantly wrangling with the government over peace treaties.

francesca
susanna

In the midst of all this turmoil, Ebba Sparre arrived at court. The same age as Christina, she became the queen's ward when her father died some months earlier. She and Christina immediately formed a relationship that was unusual because Christina was not inclined to have women friends. Ebba found the usual conventions of femininity tiresome and foolish. Perhaps Ebba's kindness and affection for the stressed-out young queen soothed Christina's usual aggressiveness. At any rate, Ebba remained Christina's constant companion for the next nine years until they were 28 when Christina abdicated.

It was the custom for unmarried people to sleep with friends of the same sex, and Ebba was Christina's bedmate. Christina told the Spanish ambassador that she was in love with Ebba, and it was later gossiped that she had "hidden the beautiful Ebba Sparre in her bed and associated with her in a special way." Christina's nickname for Ebba was 'Belle' — French for beautiful.

In 1654, Christina abdicated and her cousin Charles became the king. At the time she claimed that her real reason for abdicating was her aversion to marriage. A monarch must produce an heir, and between her disinclination and her often poor health, Christina didn't think she would be able to do that. She also insisted that she wanted a quiet life that being a monarch did not allow. After she left Sweden, Christina went to Europe where she converted to Catholicism — which was illegal in Sweden — and made a big stir wherever she went.

"Oh, how happy I would be if it were permitted for me to see you, Belle," Christina wrote the next year from Rome, "but I am condemned to the fate of loving you always, esteeming you always and never seeing you." In the midst of another round of festivities in Brussels Christina wrote, "...I will carry with me even after death the noble passion and tenderness that I have always shown to you."

After five or six years of travel, intrigues both political and otherwise, a lot of partying and generally shocking behavior in Europe, Christina went back to Sweden in the fall of 1660. Her cousin, King Charles X, had died earlier in the year, leaving as king a sickly boy of six, and she had to sort out her financial affairs. While in Sweden she flamboyantly flaunted her Catholicism in the face of the stoic and conservative Swedes, going to mass far more often in Stockholm than she had ever bothered to in Rome.

By this time, her cousin Maria's husband was the chancellor of Sweden. Christina's old favorite had remained bitter over an old argument and now prevented her from seeing Ebba during her visit. They had written back and forth about the possibility of Ebba visiting Christina

**"I am
condemned
to the fate
of loving
you always,
esteeming
you always
and never
seeing you!"**

**Queen Christina
to her companion,
Ebba in 1655**

in Germany perhaps, but Ebba was already in poor health at the time and died two years later in 1662 without having seen Christina again.

Christina lived until 1689, wandering between Germany and Rome. She lived a capricious life, some would say dissolute, behaving as she pleased and making as many friends as enemies along the way until she died of a stroke at the age of 62. ▼

Francesca Susanna is a writer interested in lesbians through history. She lives in Burlington.