

Powerful women



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Between 1450 and 1800 many women gained power as rulers, some as reigning queens, others as regents. Identify two such powerful women and discuss how issues of gender, such as marriage and reproduction, influenced their ability to obtain and exercise power. Two of the most powerful women of this era were Queen Elizabeth the first of England and Catherine the Great of Russia. These women had a difficult time gaining their power, and were faced with many adversaries, but, they overcame them and rose to the top. Catherine the Great of Russia started out as the empress consort of Russia, married to the emperor, which is not a bad title, but she did not have complete power and being Empress Consort did not make her famous. Although she was married to the emperor, it was not a happy marriage, he was mad and had fits of rages and was very gullible. She gave birth to his child, but was led to believe that this child was not his, and sent Catherine away. While she was by herself, she came into contact with several groups that were opposed to her husband's ruling. After Peter became Emperor, she started conspiring to take the throne for herself. When she learned that the Emperor had arrested her co-conspirators, she took matters into her own hands and accelerated the process, delivering a speech to the soldiers to protect her and keep her safe from her husband. She also had members of the clergy ready to ordain her as the sole occupant of the Russian throne. Once that was done, she had her husband arrested, forced him to sign a document of abdication, which left her as the next in line for the throne, and imprisoned him. The change that came over Russia was legendary. Under the new empress's rule, Russia expanded to cover New Russia, Crimea, Northern Caucasus, Rightbank Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania, and Courland at the expense, mainly, of two powers — the Ottoman Empire and the Polish—

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Lithuanian Commonwealth. All told, she added some 200, 000 square miles to Russian territory. Also, Catherine longed to be one of the Enlightened rulers. She was a major patron of the arts and wrote a children's education book based off the ideas of John Locke. Within a few months of her accession in 1762, having heard that the French government threatened to stop the publication of the famous French Encyclopédie on account of its irreligious spirit, Catherine proposed to Diderot that he should complete his great work in Russia under her protection. During Catherine's reign, Russians imported and studied the classical and European influences that inspired the Russian Enlightenment. Gavriila Derzhavin, Denis Fonvizin, and Ippolit Bogdanovich laid the groundwork for the great writers of the nineteenth century, especially for Alexander Pushkin. At the time of Catherine's reign, the landowning noble class owned the serfs, who were bound to the land that they tilled. Children of serfs were born into serfdom and worked the same land that their parents had. The serfs had very limited rights, but they were not exactly slaves. While the state did not technically allow them to own possessions, some serfs were able to accumulate enough wealth to pay for their freedom. All things aside, Catherine was by far the greatest ruler that Russia had ever seen, sadly, she died of a stroke on the 17th of November 1796. Another great ruler of this time was Queen Elizabeth I of England. Elizabeth was the fifth and last monarch of the Tudor dynasty. She was the daughter of the infamous Henry VIII, she was declared illegitimate after her mother, Anne Boleyn was executed 2 years after she was born. Elizabeth became queen at the age of 25, and declared her intentions to her Council and other peers who had come to Hatfield to swear allegiance. Elizabeth set out to rule by good counsel, and she depended heavily on a group of trusted

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advisers led by William Cecil, Baron Burghley. One of her first moves as queen was the establishment of an English Protestant church, of which she became the Supreme Governor. Elizabeth's reign was known as the Elizabethan era, famous above all for the flourishing of English drama, led by playwrights such as William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe, and for the seafaring prowess of English adventurers such as Sir Francis Drake. Towards the end of her reign, a series of economic and military problems weakened her popularity. Elizabeth is acknowledged as a charismatic performer and a dogged survivor, in an age when government was ramshackle and limited and when monarchs in neighbouring countries faced internal problems that jeopardised their thrones. Such was the case with Elizabeth's rival, Mary, Queen of Scots, whom she imprisoned in 1568 and eventually had executed in 1587. There were 4 monarchs, her half siblings that ruled for a short time before her, but, Elizabeth ruled for 44 years, which was great because it provided some much needed stability for England to emerge as a world power. Elizabeth, during the last years of her reign, came to rely on granting monopolies as a cost-free system of patronage rather than ask Parliament for more subsidies in a time of war. The Queen's health remained fair until the autumn of 1602, when a series of deaths among her friends plunged her into a severe depression. In February 1603, the death of Catherine Howard, Countess of Nottingham, the niece of her cousin and close friend Catherine, Lady Knollys, came as a particular blow. In March, Elizabeth fell sick and remained in a "settled and unremovable melancholy". She died on 24 March 1603 at Richmond Palace, between two and three in the morning. A few hours later, James VI of Scotland was proclaimed as the next king of England. Both of these women were quite remarkable,

overcoming countless obstacles to achieve their goals. These women were defiant of the rules, and were the most influential female monarchs of their time. They proved that women can do some jobs as good as, or even better than men.