

**Renée Jeffery**

***Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia: The Philosopher Princess***

**London, Lexington Books, 2018, 234 pp.**

*Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia The philosopher princess* is a book written by professor Renee Jeffery, an expert in international relations who addresses a remarkable personality in the history of ideas and, at the same time, discloses herself as a most able historian of ideas.

Through her research and teaching experience at Griffith University, Australia, Renée Jeffery has focused two main areas: Conflict, Justice, and Human Rights in the Asia-Pacific whereas she examines how post-conflict and transitional states in the region have sought to address past human rights violations. On the other side, in her book 2016 *Emotions and International Ethics* she examines the role that emotions play in making moral judgments and motivating ethical actions in international politics. As the author of a dissertation about *Hugo Grotius in International Thought* published by Macmillan (2006) she showed a distinct interest in the history of ideas.

With these precedents and, despite mentioning that the book here listed was composed in her *spare time*, it was almost inescapable that the period of the Thirty Years' War and the Westphalian treaties that define the modern state would capture the author's attention. Such motivation, perhaps, lead her to research the life and thought of Elisabeth of Bohemia (1618–1680) the daughter of the Elector Palatine, Frederick V, King of Bohemia, and Elizabeth Stuart, the daughter of King James I of England.

If Princess Isabel is a backstage figure in the clash of European powers, she is nevertheless a brilliant witness of her family's struggles, a

*spectateur engagé*. Renee Jeffery tells us about an exiled princess, a grief-stricken woman whose family was beset by tragedy and whose life was marked by financial dependence, depression, and chronic illness but transcended these handicaps. The Calvinist minded Elisabeth of Bohemia is presented as a courageous, knowing, tolerant and unflinching woman, which only gender has removed from a greater role in history – which she did not chase – and, particularly, in the history of thought. We get a mirror rear-mirror view of a period of Europe and how the Cartesian proposal of equality of reason was syntonised with the call-up of women such as Elisabeth and Anna Maria van Schurman.

Renée Jeffery highlights the princess's intellectual and humanistic endowments giving us a picture of her personality and intervention, as well as the cultural, scientific and religious circles in which she moved namely: the Hartlieb circle at the genesis of the Royal London Society; and the Mersenne Circle at the genesis of Académie Française; and the university of Heidelberg. On the other hand, we find in the book a panoramic description of the claims of two early protagonists of the Thirty Years' War, namely the Wittelsbach ducal house of Bavaria and the von Simmern house of Palatinate. 17th century interstate relations – as well as contemporary international relations – are permeated with reasons and emotions that help to perceive the clash and commitment of dynastic interests beyond the abstract opacity of *raison d'état*.

Drawing on her correspondence with René Descartes, and letters, diaries, and writings of her family, friends, and intellectual associates, Renee Jeffery contributes to the recovery of Elisabeth's place in the history of philosophy. Her correspondence with René Descartes naturally takes on a major role throughout the book, in chapters 3 to 7. Following the studies of Lisa Shapiro and others, Renee Jeffery demonstrates how Elisabeth had a philosophical position of her own, in part as a result of her existential circumstances; so particular and binding was it that it led Descartes to abandon substantial dualism and move on to a conception of duality of soul and body, as portrayed in the *Treatise on the passions of the soul* (1649). Descartes last book was written in 1646 and the manuscript conveyed to Elizabeth as a result of the transformation of his thought.

The book presents Elisabeth as a philosopher in her own right who made a significant contribution to modern understandings of the relationship between the body and the mind, challenged dominant accounts of the nature of the emotions, and provided insightful commentaries on subjects as varied as the nature and causes of illness to the essence of virtue and Machiavelli's *The Prince*. Jeffery convincingly maintains that Elisabeth is at the origin of the theory of moral sentiments, that attained a peak in 18th century England, through Shaftesbury, and then Hume and, although not mentioned, Adam Smith. Renee Jeffery's apt criticism of Daniel Gerber that dismissed Elisabeth as a *learned maiden*, tells a lot about a persistent and misogynist mistake; Jeffery could have added António Damásio, who did not catch the right tone when called Elisabeth *the sort of bright and friendly student we all wish to have*, in his book *Looking for Spinoza*.

Renée Jeffery has the gift of extracting the most precious sentences from Elisabeth and Descartes' correspondence. She guides us in a reliable way, through the intricacies of their respective thoughts. An exception is the lack of observations about the divine and scarce references to the issue of free will. Both would deserve further development for obvious reasons. The author also presents didactic summaries about personalities instrumental in their correspondence; stars of first magnitude, like Hippocrates, Epicurus, Seneca, Machiavelli, and Christine of Sweden; and others less well-known personalities like van Helmont, Simon Hartlieb and Anna Maria van Schurman.

Anna Maria deserves an acknowledgement for her role in promoting the equality of women. A motivating point of Renee Jeffery's book is the claim of a philosopher who, like other figures of her kind, has been referred to silence in the history of thought (p. xxiii) As she proceeds along this path through the book, Jeffery does not follow a radical feminist claim nor does she stand for neutralist statements. She treads a distinct path showing the first steps of the emancipation of women in middle 17th century, as attested by letters, books and tracts and interventions in a period when correspondence between sages was almost public information.

A critical note reiterated is the omission in the book of the assessment of the divine. Taking into account the context of the Thirty Years'

War: the confrontation between sovereigns and their supporters, Catholic, Lutherans and Calvinists; the heavy heritage of philosophy as a servant of theology; and the cultivation of religious tolerance by Elisabeth, we could expect a specific chapter in which Elisabeth's Calvinism and Pietism and conception of god was specifically focused. The theme is relevant because she was a thinker and a practitioner of religious tolerance, perhaps as much effective as Locke. It was this attitude that led her to be sought by, to correspond with and to welcome such different personalities as Malebranche, Leibniz, William Penn, Labadie and others, in the final part of his life, as abbess of the convent of Herford, in Germany. It is quite possible that Professor Renee Jeffery's investigations will lead her to research Christian tolerance in the 17th century; it would be a precious contribution at a time when the fundamentalism of Islamic currents and evangelical variants threatens world peace.

It is known that, from Hollywood, some noteworthy biographical films have emerged. Certainly, Elisabeth of Bohemia would provide one of them. While it is not carried out, we have in this book an almost perfect plot.

MENDO CASTRO HENRIQUES