

RethinKING Royalty: A Study of the Relationship
Between Mythology, Gender, and Female Kings

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What makes a king a king? What gives them the right to sovereign rule? The long white beard, the crown with shining jewels, an iron fist? Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines king as “a male monarch of a major territorial unit especially: one whose position is hereditary and who rules for life.” The word “king” has had a male connotation for generations and exclusively refers to men. However, history can be deceiving. Albeit rare, there have been many female kings throughout history. But what makes a woman a king and not queen? Some might call “female king” an oxymoron. Some female leaders who have led their countries solo have been dubbed “king,” but some remain in history as “queen.” From Hatshepsut the ancient Egyptian Pharaoh, to Tamar the Great of Georgia, and Emperor Wu Zhao of China, many fearless women have led their countries through times of peace, war, and everything in between. A prime example of one female king is King Hatshepsut who ruled during the New Kingdom of Egypt. She started as a queen regent to her son but was elevated to power by manipulating her gender. She was able to do this because of how mythology shapes ancient Egyptians’ view of gender. In this study, I analyze how mythology and religion have shaped our views of female leaders throughout history. I also examine the differences between female kings and queens who ruled solo. Is there a difference? Or just a matter of preference? Perhaps it is time to change our preconceived notions of gender and remember female leaders as who they are and nothing less.