



*Yolande of Aragon (1381-1442)
Family and Power: The Reverse of
the Tapestry,*

Zita Eva Rohr

**(New York: Palgrave Macmillan,
2016).**

Review by: Derek R. Whaley

Yolande of Aragon (1381-1442) Family and Power: The Reverse of the Tapestry. By Zita Eva Rohr. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. ISBN 978-1-137-49912-7. 284 pp. \$100.

Continuing the recent trend toward writing biographies of lesser-known female political figures, Zita Eva Rohr has privileged her readers in *Yolande of Aragon (1381-1442) Family and Power* with an in-depth look into the life and times of Yolande, the only child of Juan I of Aragon and the wife of Louis II, duke of Anjou and sometime king of Sicily. This book, the thirty-fifth in the Palgrave Macmillan *Queenship and Power* series, introduces yet another tale of a royal woman asserting her authority against the odds. Rohr herself is well-qualified for the task, having earned her doctorate in medieval and early modern history with an emphasis on rulership, politics, and gender, topics in which Yolande serves as a nexus point for her role in fifteenth-century French politics.

There are many potential angles from which Rohr could have approached Yolande, but she admits that she “centered on context to the detriment of detailed prosecution of a theoretical argument” (10). In the case of Yolande, of whom there are very few primary or modern sources to draw upon, this decision seems quite appropriate. Nonetheless, Rohr leaves no stone unturned in her search for Yolande in the historical record. She draws heavily from archival sources from France and Spain – all of the major chroniclers are included among her primary accounts. Her secondary sources attest to the amount of digging required to recover Yolande from the historiography. In the end, Rohr includes over one thousand endnotes that span sixty-nine pages, with in-depth commentaries and clarifications scattered throughout. She has thus provided in this book an expertly contextualized narrative upon which a solid theoretical argument could potentially be based in the future.

Rohr begins chapter one by telling the story of Yolande’s youth in Aragon before her marriage to Louis and the occurrence of all of the dynastic and political intrigues that foreshadowed her later life. She emphasizes strongly that Yolande operated in both the Aragonese and French cultural spheres because her mother, Violant de Bar, was the granddaughter of Jean II of France. Rohr also hints at a certain inevitability in Yolande’s marriage to Louis. She structures her narrative into five chapters subdivided into large titled sections that discuss various aspects of Yolande’s life or, more often, events in which she was at least indirectly involved. This makes navigation through the book easy for those using it for reference, but it also organizes the narrative well and breaks it up into a logical, readable manner.

The first chapter does, however, make clear the overarching difficulty Rohr has in structuring the narrative. Although Yolande is always present in the text, she is rarely the main character, often being sidelined by events that surround her and, to be fair, probably involve her intimately, but in which contemporaries and modern historians have generally neglected to include her. This is where “The Reverse of the Tapestry” subtitle comes into play, in Rohr’s unceasing desire to identify the subtext. Even in the first chapter, which is nominally about Yolande’s life before 1400, large sections discuss the Angevin adventures in Italy, the organization of the Aragonese kingdom, Franciscans, and the end of Juan I’s reign as king, none of which include Yolande as the main focus. Rohr clearly has difficulty determining precisely how Yolande was involved in these events because none of her sources provide enough evidence. This is a problem with studying gender history as a whole, but it does present a paradox throughout her work since Yolande is quite often entirely absent from the narrative. When Rohr states that she relies heavily on contextualization for this study, she means that much of Yolande’s story is told through those people who surrounded her since she herself is absent from the historical record.

Instead, Rohr’s book tells an entirely different but similarly unique tale of the Capetian house of Anjou from 1384 to 1442, and in many ways this is just as important since that story, like Yolande’s, has gone generally unremarked upon by English-language historians. From chapter two to the conclusion, the narrative twists and turns through the drama of the Armagnac-Burgundian war and the Hundred Years War, in which the Angevins led by Yolande played a vital role, especially once Yolande’s daughter Marie married King Charles VII of France. It is in chapter two that Yolande herself really shines. Following Duke Louis d’Orléans’ death in 1407, Louis II d’Anjou left Yolande in charge of Anjou and Provence as he sought the Neapolitan throne for a second time. While he was away, Yolande became involved in the Papal Schism and suppressed a noble revolt in Provence, all before a backdrop of the Armagnacs and Burgundians fighting for control of Paris in the face of an English invasion under Henry V. It is a lot to handle but by compartmentalizing the topics in subsections, Rohr addresses each crisis well.

In chapter three, Rohr discusses the rise of Yolande as a stateswoman. She follows her as she handles the Aragonese succession crisis in 1410, the death of Louis II in 1417, the marriage of Marie to Charles in 1422, and her role in the nomination of Arthur de Richemont as constable of France in 1425. This is the longest chapter in the book and the most technical in that many of the contemporary legal sources come into play here, slowing the narrative to make room for legal technicalities.

The final two chapters continue this trend by treading the familiar ground of Jeanne d'Arc's story, reframed in an appropriately Angevin context. However, Rohr becomes a bit too heavily focused on the rivalry between Richemont and Georges de La Trémoille, chief counsellor of Charles VII, which not only removes Yolande from much of the narrative but also does not necessarily frame her in a positive light. Jeanne and this feud dominate most of the remaining narrative until her son René's capture by Philippe III of Burgundy shifts the story to a new fight between Lorraine-Bar, Vaudémont, and Burgundy, a conflict that occupies the remainder of the book. Yolande dies rather suddenly at the end of chapter five after an absence of three years in the author's narrative, seemingly lost in the intricate plot threads that Rohr has entwined to reconstruct her story.

To Rohr, "it seems that every stitch was placed ... more often than not, by the hand of Yolande of Aragon" (199). Proving that, however, may be an unachievable goal – there simply is not enough evidence to decisively confirm that Yolande was responsible for many of the things that the author claims. But Rohr is careful to never explicitly state more than she can prove and nothing she implies seems especially unlikely. Ultimately, *Yolande of Aragon* proves to be less a biography of a single powerful medieval matriarch and more a well-written and researched insight into the activities of the house of Valois-Anjou from 1380 to 1442, a house and historical period which have desperately needed more focused analyses such as this.

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