Royal Mothers and their Ruling Children: Wielding Political Authority from Antiquity to the Early Modern Era

Elena Woodacre and Carey Fleiner (eds.)
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and

Virtuous or Villainess? The Image of the Royal Mother from the Early Medieval to the Early Modern Era

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Review by: Erica O’Brien


Royal Mothers and their Ruling Children is the first of two volumes examining royal motherhood, focusing particularly on the relationships between royal mothers and their children. As Elena Woodacre notes in her introduction, while much scholarship has been dedicated to studying premodern motherhood more generally, and that biographies of several of the royal mothers included in the volume exist, little attention has been paid to the roles of royal women as mothers and the challenges they faced, whether as a supporter of a claimant, a regent for an underage ruler, or as a queen mother to an adult sovereign. Through a series of case studies spanning a wide geographical and chronological range, Royal Mothers and their Ruling Children explores how specific women took on the role of royal mother and challenges common beliefs about particular mothers and their relationships with their royal children.

The first three chapters investigate five royal mothers’ efforts to secure their children’s rightful inheritance. Sarah Betts skilfully analyses the intersecting lives of Queen Henrietta Maria of England; her daughter Mary, Princess of Orange; and Henrietta Maria’s sister-in-law, Elizabeth, the “Winter Queen” of Bohemia, during the seventeenth century. Though all three women promoted their sons’ right to rule England, Orange, and the Palatinate respectively, these royal mothers challenge our expectations of a mother’s dedication to her child. They all professed a greater attachment either to a husband, as Henrietta Maria and Elizabeth did; or to a brother, as Mary did. As Betts demonstrates, these women were prepared on occasion to risk their children’s interests for the sake of these men. The other two chapters in this section focus on two fifteenth-century Spanish contemporaries: Juana of Portugal, Queen of Castile; and Juana Enríquez, Queen of Aragon. Diana Pelaz Flores considers Juana of Portugal and her daughter, Juana “la Beltraneja”, though she focuses more on the campaign to discredit the younger Juana’s legitimacy than on Juana of Portugal’s ultimately unsuccessful attempts to regain the Castilian crown for her daughter. Germán Gamero Igea questions the reputation of Juana Enríquez as a “wicked stepmother” (36), suspected of poisoning her stepson, Carlos, to enable her
son, Fernando, to become heir to the Aragonese throne. Together, these two chapters provide valuable context for the reigns of Fernando and his wife, Isabel—who became Queen of Castile instead of her niece, Juana “la Beltraneja”—both of whom occupy a prominent place in both academic discourse and the popular imagination.

The four chapters in the second part of the volume address the relationships between royal mothers and their adult sovereign children. Hang Lin analyses the volume’s only non-Western subjects, four early medieval Liao empresses—Yingtian, Chengtian, Qin’ai, and De—who ruled in place of their sons. Lin problematizes the approach to Chinese imperial history, demonstrating that the nomadic Khitan people had different attitudes towards female rulers than their settled Chinese neighbours, viewing powerful queen mothers not as a destabilizing force but as effective mediators of the transition from one emperor to the next. Penelope Nash and Carey Fleiner also discuss imperial mothers. Nash convincingly argues that the tenth-century German empress Adelheid’s childbearing significantly reduced her intervention in her husband’s charters, though her proposal that Adelheid and her daughter-in-law, Theophanu, deliberately controlled the number of children they bore, specifically the number of male heirs, is less plausible.

Fleiner provides a nuanced analysis of the relationship between the ancient Roman empress Agrippina and her son, Nero, measuring Agrippina against the model Roman mother and against the conception of the unnatural mater impotens to demonstrate Nero’s motive for murdering her. In the other chapter in this section, Jitske Jasperse offers the first analysis of coins and seals associated with the twelfth-century half-sisters Judith of Thuringia and Bertha of Lorraine, to show how these royal mothers affirmed their co-rule with their sons through visual media.

The three chapters in the volume’s third and final section re-examine the reputations of three royal mothers, and propose more finely developed views of their influence on their sons. Janice North critiques both medieval Castilian chronicles and modern historians for perpetuating the character of Queen María de Molina as selfless and unambitious in her regency for her son, Fernando IV, and grandson, Alfonso XI. North compellingly re-assesses the chronicles to show that they should be understood not as works of history, but rather of political propaganda, designed to cover up María’s political activities, including her involvement in a plot against her own son. In contrast, both Kathleen Wellman and Estelle Paranque seek to rehabilitate the reputations of two sixteenth-century French royal mothers: Louise of Savoy and Catherine de’ Medici. Wellman argues that Louise of Savoy has been unfairly denigrated in modern historiography for the supposedly masculine qualities she demonstrated during her regency for her son, François I, and that
rather it was Louise’s motherhood that best qualified her for the regency. Paranque takes a novel approach to the long-vilified Catherine de’ Medici, demonstrating how Catherine fulfilled both maternal and paternal roles for her son, Henri III, thus inspiring him to be a father to his subjects.

The focus of the second volume—*Virtuous or Villainess?*—shifts to the contemporary image and modern perception of medieval and early modern ruling mothers. In her introduction, Carey Fleiner explores the criteria by which we measure “good” and “bad” mothers, and the chapters in the volume invite the reader to reconsider these criteria, and the evidence by which royal mothers are judged. The first six chapters address the images of particular royal mothers: images that were either self-fashioned or constructed by these women’s contemporaries and later observers. Kriszta Kotsis’s chapter on the ninth-century Byzantine empress Theodora stands out as the volume’s only non-Western contribution. Kotsis uses both visual and textual sources to demonstrate that representations of Theodora’s maternity, unusually for the Byzantine period, were the primary force behind attempts to establish her family’s dynastic stability and her eventual canonisation.

The remaining five chapters in the first section have as their subjects women who were connected through birth or marriage to England during the eleventh through fifteenth centuries. Manuela Santos Silva offers a novel study of Philippa of Lancaster, and the impact of Philippa’s English education on that of her children, who were raised in the Portuguese court. Certain questions that Silva’s chapter raises—chiefly, why the Portuguese royal library lacked French vernacular texts given that French was the language that Philippa communicated in—require deeper investigation. Laura L. Gathagan successfully resolves the opposition between two contemporary textual depictions of Mathilda, wife of William the Conqueror, and her relationships with two of her children. Gathagan argues that Fulcoius of Beauvais’s passive Mathilda, grieving the loss of her daughter to a convent, is an expedient fabrication; while Orderic Vitalis’s militant mother, protecting a rebellious son, is more accurate. Charles Beem explores the motivations of a different Matilda, the twelfth-century empress and claimant of the English throne. As Beem observes, Matilda’s inaction after her father’s death, which allowed her cousin Stephen to take the crown, has never been satisfactorily explained. Beem suggests that the reason behind Matilda’s hesitance was her third pregnancy, and he further demonstrates that when Matilda did pursue her claim, she downplayed her roles as wife and mother (though the eventual presence in England of her son, the future Henry II, cemented her political authority).
Chapters by Louise J. Wilkinson and Elena Woodacre re-evaluate two royal mothers who seemingly abandoned their children: one to leave England as the dowager queen, the other to come to England as a new queen. Wilkinson examines the circumstances surrounding Isabella of Angoulême’s departure for France in 1217, the year after her son’s coronation as Henry III, arguing that Isabella essentially had no choice, as she was excluded from governance during both her husband’s and her son’s reign. Woodacre offers a thorough historiographical reassessment of Joan of Navarre, whose separation from her children by her first husband when she married Henry IV has been seen as evidence either of maternal desertion in service of ambition, or of maternal protectiveness of politically vulnerable children. As Woodacre concludes, Joan’s reputation as a mother is supported when she is judged to have acted within certain boundaries of motherhood, but is denigrated when she is seen to have stepped outside these bounds, justifiably or not.

The four chapters of the volume’s second part take innovative approaches to analysing the legacies and modern perceptions of royal mothers. Sally Fisher skilfully demonstrates why Lady Margaret Beaufort—mother of Henry VII—adopted the deliberately ambiguous signature “Margaret R” in a conscious act of self-fashioning multiple identities. Zita Rohr employs the appropriate metaphor of chess to examine the political manoeuvres of the mother-daughter pair, Violant of Bar and Yolande of Aragon. As Rohr discusses, Violant’s “queen’s gambit” (180) was declined by her opponent, María de Luna; while Yolande’s gambit succeeded against the French queen Isabeau of Bavaria. Another partly historiographical chapter by Katarzyna Kosior demonstrates that the reputation of the sixteenth-century Polish queen, Bona Sforza, was undeservedly tarnished in the centuries after her death through the development of Polish nationalism, which linked her supposedly “bad” motherhood to her Italian roots. Finally, Katherine Weikert offers a second chapter on the Empress Matilda, which examines depictions of Matilda in popular historical fiction novels from the past four decades. Weikert persuasively argues that the fictional characterisations of Matilda, and her attitude towards motherhood, reflect contemporary currents in feminist thought.

The chief strength of Royal Mothers and their Ruling Children and Virtuous or Villainess? is that most chapters successfully challenge widely-held misconceptions about specific royal mothers, and the relationships they had with their children. However, the selection of essays—at least in the first volume—is slightly weighted towards medieval Spanish subjects: more Classical, non-Western, or interdisciplinary topics would have rounded out both volumes, and widened their potential audience. The most significant contribution of the two volumes, however, is the editors’ creation of a
valuable intersection between royal studies and gender studies, one that hopefully will be expanded in future scholarship.

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