

Woodacre, Elena, and Carey Fleiner, eds. *Royal Mothers and their Ruling Children: Wielding Political Authority from Antiquity to the Early Modern Era* (Queenship and Power), Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015; hardback; pp. 253; R.R.P. €84.99; ISBN 9781137513106.

This important collection continues the breakdown of the anachronistic stereotypes of historical women as only ‘the virtuous mother, the wilful mistress, [or] the wicked stepmother’ (p. 151). Significantly, the collection emphasises how royal mothers ‘were expected to be guarantors of dynastic continuity, political stability, and the progenitors of future sovereigns’ (p. 1). The book focuses on the acknowledged, but seldom analysed, fact that ‘motherhood consolidated a royal woman’s position not only during her husband’s lifetime ... but crucially after his death, ensuring that her power, influence, and authority would remain’ (p. 1).

The first section focuses on the ways that royal mothers could either secure or damage their offspring’s succession. Diana Pelaz Flores demonstrates that Juana of Portugal’s ‘damaged reputation’ undermined the succession of her daughter, Infanta Juana (p. 3). Germán Gamero Igea’s study of Juana Enríquez demonstrates how the queen-lieutenant successfully secured the throne of Aragon for her son Ferdinand in spite of the more direct claims of her stepson, Carlos de Viana, and at the expense of her own political position. Sarah Betts’s excellent chapter concludes the section by analysing how three Stuart mothers—Elizabeth Stuart, Queen of Bohemia; Henrietta Maria; and Princess Mary of Orange, mother to the future William III—dually assisted their husbands’ attempts to regain their thrones and endeavoured to secure their children’s successions.

Jitske Jasperse exploits underutilised sources—namely seals and coins—for her discussion of Judith of Thuringia and Bertha of Lorraine. While the **[page 179]** chapter is slow to set out its historical and geographical context, Jasperse convincingly demonstrates how the two women ‘joined forces with their sons’ (p. 96), and acted as regents and advisers during their sons’ minority and sometime imprisonment. Jasperse’s study reminds readers that ‘coins and seals ... are sources just as important as written ones’, and that these sources demonstrate that the sisters held authority ‘specified assuredly as motherly authority’ (p. 97).

An unexpected delight—which reinforces both the collection’s wide range and its broad appeal—is Hang Lin’s chapter on the regents of the Khitan Liao. The Liao dynasty (907–1125) produced four empresses, ‘all ambitious and wilful’, who ‘ruled the empire as defacto sovereigns with the authority of a regent for their husbands or sons’ (p. 106). These women, who all came from powerful families, ‘excelled not only in administrative conductions but also in military affairs’ (p. 118). Lin demonstrates how mothers and sons battled with each other for power, and how the Liao’s nomadic societal structure afforded ‘women an elevated position’ (p. 119). By expanding its horizons beyond Europe, this chapter reinforces the role sociocultural and socioeconomic contexts played in the level of political authority a woman could wield.

Empress Adelheid, wife of Otto the Great, is the subject of Penelope Nash's chapter. Adelheid, at various points in her life, reigned as regent on behalf of her husband, son, and grandson. Importantly, Nash's work confirms 'that the contemporary chroniclers perceived the intersection and interaction of her ruling and motherhood roles as equally important' (pp. 127-28).

Carey Fleiner's chapter reassesses one of the most (in)famous royal mothers: Agrippina the Younger. In an important reconsideration of this mother-son relationship, Fleiner asserts that Nero was not an innocent bystander in their tumultuous relationship, and demonstrates how reliant Nero was upon Agrippina—whether he wanted to admit it or not. Fleiner's otherwise excellent analysis, unfortunately, does not extend to the contemporary accounts of the attempts on Agrippina's life: without even alluding to their theatrical quality, Fleiner simply quotes the sources, despite the ridiculousness of the stories (p. 161).

Kathleen Wellman highlights the positive relationship that often existed between mothers and sons in her study of Louise of Savoy and Francis I of France. Wellman demonstrates not only that Louise was a 'savvy diplomat' who was of immense help to Francis, but also how Francis's reliance on his mother 'led to wider criticism that she emasculated him' (p. 6).

The 'rose-tinted reputation' (p. 6) of Maria de Molina—the wife of Sancho IV of Castile—is the subject of important revision by Janice North. Maria, under North's probing, is shown to be not 'entirely selfless' in her abdication: instead, she was concerned with 'the advancement of her [page 180] family and the security of her dynasty' (p. 220). Estelle Paraque inverts North's approach, and instead attempts to show Catherine de' Medici as a 'positive influence and inspiration to her son Henri III to be a father to his people' (p. 6).

Elena Woodacre and Carey Fleiner have, with this collection, selected chapters that not only make significant individual contributions, but also fit well together. Separately and collectively, the chapters provide a clear sense of the similarities and differences that existed in the ways that royal women exercised power and authority across different monarchies throughout history. Readers are told that this volume is the first in a two-part collection, and if this work is any indication of what is to come, readers should be eager to see what Woodacre and Fleiner produce next.