



*Royal Women and Dynastic
Loyalty*

**Caroline Dunn and
Elizabeth Carney (eds.)**

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Review by: Estelle Paranque



Royal Women and Dynastic Loyalty. Edited by Caroline Dunn and Elizabeth Carney. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. viii + 199 pp. £60.00.

The field of queenship studies has grown steadily in the last two decades, with more and more scholars becoming interested in examining the role of noble and powerful women in politics, religion, patronage, and so forth. This collection presents an original consideration of queenship, focusing on dynastic loyalties and how this influenced the role of royal women at court and beyond. It is concerned with the less obvious, fascinating, and “more discreet channels” (1) in which royal women performed their duties. To some extent, each of the women studied in this collection were builders of dynasties, as the editors explain: “many royal women were born into one dynasty and married into another” (5), a situation that could create conflicts of interest and divide or reinforce loyalties—and frequently did. The collection contains thirteen chapters ordered chronologically from ancient times to the nineteenth century. The chapters cover different geographical regions including the Ottoman Empire, Norway, and Egypt.

The editors have provided a shrewd introduction to the volume, explaining the themes and importance of such a study. They also explain how the chapters integrate and interrelate with one another, which is often key in an edited collection. Chapters 3 and 11 are good examples of this: while Chapter 3 examines how Hellenistic queens offered “solidarity between citizens and royal power” (38), Chapter 11 astutely and convincingly assesses how Ottoman sultanas stabilised the seventeenth-century political and economic crisis through marriages and alliances. René Langlois puts forward a clear argument that the sultanas’ choices were vital for the survival of the Ottoman Empire, observing that “female agency played a decisive role in the empire’s durability” (159).

Each chapter offers interesting insight into the definition of dynastic loyalties and how royal women navigated a world dominated by their male relatives. In Chapter 6, Karl C. Alvestad discusses a quite unknown story of early medieval Norway: Olaf II Haraldsson’s relationships with his female kin, and how “it can be argued that these relationships are integral to the political challenges experienced by Olaf II during his reign” (88). Family ties had strong political weight and often influenced the course of a reign. In that regard, Charles Beem’s chapter also highlights the importance of the familial relationships of Mary, Queen of Scots. He argues that these different familial loyalties influenced Mary’s decisions, which were ultimately “motivated by dynastic concerns” (111). For Beem, Mary’s dynastic claim was the driving force behind her end, not her faith. In contrast, Kelly D. Peebles shows that

Renée de France favoured faith over any dynastic loyalty. Indeed, despite her royal descent from the Valois-Orléans branch, Renée de France supported the Huguenots and was praised for it.

Chapter 7 focuses on how some royal women, like Isabel, consort of Alfonso V, and Isabel of Burgundy “played considerable roles in bringing together the estranged members of the family” (100). Ana Maria S.A. Rodrigues highlights the political stakes of the kingdoms of Portugal and Castile, and shows how the conflict between different royal houses emerged primarily from “loyalty and honor” (99). This chapter delves into the complexity behind marital alliances between kingdoms that were often rivals. In Chapter 12, Charlotte Backerra examines Elizabeth Christine of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel’s role in the War of Austrian Succession and her struggle to balance loyalties between two dynastic houses. Backerra convincingly reveals the obstacles that Elizabeth Christine faced and how royal women were “expected to be a bridge between two dynasties” (173) to ensure the stability of a future generation of monarchs and emperors. While Elizabeth Christine’s role in the evolution of tensions (or lack thereof) in Europe in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century has often been overlooked, this chapter rehabilitates her importance in one of the most crucial events of Habsburg history.

Another chapter that caught this reviewer’s eye concerns the Hellenistic dynasties who “ruled over Macedon, Egypt, and parts of Western Asia” (50). Here, Walter D. Penrose Jr examines how royal women’s dynastic loyalties and disloyalties contributed to a succession crisis and, eventually, war. The striking element of this chapter is the relationships between mothers and sons and how poor or negative familial affiliations further enhanced tensions that “plagued the Hellenistic dynasties with death and misfortune” (57).

In all, royal women were often actors, catalysts, and players of and within dynastic alliances, and their roles went beyond the bridge that they were expected to form between two dynastic houses. They had their own agency, desires, and allegiances that their families could not necessarily control. Their actions determined the prosperity or destruction of their royal families and houses, both the one they were born in and the one they married into. In that respect, this edited volume shrewdly reveals the fascinating roles royal women played in dynastic loyalty and how they performed these roles when it came to patronage, assuring good relations with neighbouring realms, or promoting religious faith.

Overall, this is a well-documented and original collection. I offer, however, two minor criticisms. First, I think the collection would have benefited from thematic sections instead of a chronological organisation. There are always arguments for both systems, but in this case I think it would

have made the chapters of the collection tie better to one another, as well as showing the geographical and temporal links. Second, it would have made more sense to expand each chapter, as they are all quite short (sometimes no more than ten pages, including notes and bibliography), and to instead create two volumes. All the chapters of this book are fascinating, but some of them left the reader unsatisfied and eager to know more because of the restrictive word-limit.

These critiques notwithstanding, this is a strong collection that offers original research. It is a valuable contribution to the field and should be read by both scholars and students with an interest in royal studies, queenship, and women in general.

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