



*Queenship and the Women of
Westeros: Female Agency and
Advice in Game of Thrones and A
Song of Ice and Fire*

Zita Eva Rohr and Lisa Benz (eds.)

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The adaptation of the book series *A Song of Ice and Fire* by George R. R. Martin (1991-present) was transformed from a popular fantasy series to a globally successful television show, *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019), which introduced millions of viewers to a world inspired, in Martin's own words, by the dynamics of the Wars of the Roses. Both series are set predominantly on the continents of Westeros and Essos, the former of which is the backdrop for the characters explored in Rohr's and Benz's volume. Using a medieval world view, both *A Song of Ice and Fire* and *Game of Thrones* have drawn much criticism and analysis from historians and literary scholars working on the field of medievalism. Zita Eva Rohr's and Lisa Benz's collection, *Queenship and the Women of Westeros. Female Agency and Advice in Game of Thrones and A Song of Ice and Fire*, draws together experts from royal studies and medievalism to discuss the representations of women in both the novels and the television series, considering the power and agency of women across the two mediums. The introduction to the volume notes the complexities between what the Middle Ages is, its many constructions, and the Middle Ages against which Martin has created his universe (xxxii-xxxiii). For this review, readers ought to note that there is a discrepancy between the hard and online versions of the volume with regards to the structure and layout: any comments around erroneous structure discussed below were present in the hard copy only.

The book is divided into three parts: Queenship, Female Agency, and The Role of Advice. It is bookended by a foreword by Carolyn Larrington and an afterword by Elena Woodacre which highlight the key themes surrounding female power, inheritance, succession, and influence. Each of the chapters of this volume weave real world examples from across the globe with case studies from the book and television series. In the first chapter, James J. Hudson explores the career of the Dowager Empress Cixi of China as a context for the character of Cersei Lannister, providing an interesting juxtaposition of a nonWestern ruler for comparison. Hudson argues for further consideration of "other historical dowagers in global histories" (18) when considering the queens of *Game of Thrones*, and this chapter is a strong foundation for the investigation of global queenship. Chapter Two sees Kavita Mudan Finn analyse Cersei further by considering Martin's medievalism and the realism of the series. As Finn highlights, the character of Cersei incorporates all the negative medieval stereotypes of medieval women at once (41), and this chapter acutely raises the issues writers face when they attempt to present a realistic depiction of the medieval period. In Chapter Three Sylwia Borowska-Szerszun offers a striking interrogation of perceptions and depictions of medieval queens, where the portrayals of Cersei and Margaery Tyrell as suitable rulers is measured in terms of sexual reputation, a trope which continues to pervade depictions of medieval women. The fourth chapter on Brienne of Tarth, knighthood, and chivalry by Iain A. MacInnes challenges our understanding of chivalry and knightly bonds in the Westerosi context. This first section of the volume brings together

some of the core themes and aspects of queenship well, though the MacInnes chapter would be more suited to the following section given its focus. In the introduction, this chapter is noted as opening the second section, therefore it is unclear if there was a final printing error with the publication.

In the second section, 'Female Agency,' Kris Swank explores the theme of "peaceweaving queens," drawing upon a comparison with the poem *Beowulf*. Though the study of queens as peacemakers is interesting as a whole, the connections with *Beowulf* are not entirely clear or convincing at points. The next chapter by Curtis Runstedler returns to the character of Cersei and her commissions, taking the role of queen regent and delving into the world of alchemy, drawing strong parallels with alchemy in medieval England. In Chapter Seven Mikayla Hunter provides a strong interrogation of Eastern faith and feminine power in both the television and book series. Hunter highlights that although Martin's inclusion of more diverse societies and cultures is praiseworthy in comparison to other tales in the genre, his conformity to "modern Western orientalist notions of the East" (162) is problematic, demonstrating another angle in which the series can be controversial when depicting female figures. Chapter Eight considers Daenerys' rule in Meereen, one of the fictional kingdoms of Essos: an excellent discussion by Shiloh Carroll provides an analysis on the issues facing medieval and fictional rulers when badly counselled. It draws together an appropriate comparison between Daenerys and Æthelred the Unready. As with the MacInnes chapter, its place in the overall structure of the volume is questionable: the introduction highlights that it should be the opening chapter of section three, where it is better suited, however it is situated in the final chapter of section two.

Section Three opens with a thought-provoking investigation of royal minorities in *Game of Thrones*, drawing upon a comparison with the minority rule of Joffrey and Tommen Baratheon and several of the minority kingships in medieval Western Europe by Charles Beem. Beem's exploration of the role of queen regents in reality and fiction demonstrates the many obstacles they faced in ruling, with a compelling analysis of Cersei's regency. In Chapter Ten Sheilagh Ilona O'Brien explores the role of witches as advisors in *A Song of Ice and Fire* and *Game of Thrones*, a fascinating look at the theme of evil advice and how it utilises the popular conceptions of witchcraft in early modern Europe, and a useful analysis for scholars working in this area. This section is the strongest and most tightly bound of the collection, offering interpretations that go beyond queenship studies and would be of relevance to other political historians.

As a whole volume, this collection brings together something rather different than the many other scholarly works that have been written as analyses of *A Song of Ice and Fire* and its successor, *Game of Thrones*. It draws together many aspects of queenship and gender studies across several compelling studies and is an important read for medievalism and royal studies scholars. By contrasting the depictions of female power and queenship on screen with historical figures, the authors provide not only further insights into the exercise of premodern queenship on a global scale, but also its representations in mass media. Given mass media is a primary outlet for the public consumption of history, the analysis of queens on screen in such an impactful series is worthwhile. The worlds of historical scholarship and

depictions of history in media are not in isolation: studies such as this demonstrate the influences and uses of history for popular entertainment whilst retaining links to our premodern past. The main quibble the reviewer holds with the volume is its structure: the inclusion of a foreword and afterword is a laudable approach as it strengthens the collection in its entirety, however the discrepancies between the introduction and the actual structure of the book in the hard copy creates a slight jarring effect when considering it as a whole. Nevertheless, it is an innovative work, and one that will pique the interests of any readers who are interested in *A Song of Ice and Fire*, *Game of Thrones*, royal studies, and gender studies, with its diverse range of topics and analyses.

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