



*Royal Mothers and their ruling
Children. Wielding Political Authority
from Antiquity to Early Modern Era,*

Elena Woodacre and Carey Fleiner eds.

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Motherhood is a tricky research topic. It has not yet received much systematic scholarly attention as an historical practice – perhaps because it defies the common understanding of a biological, universal, and therefore “ahistorical” constant. The anthology *Royal Mothers and their Ruling Children* is an important starting point for addressing this gap, focusing on an aspect that has surprisingly been neglected in most studies on motherhood and mothering: the fact that being a mother can only be understood as a relationship – with the children.

The volume is the first of a two-part collection on the “theme of royal motherhood, ambition, and authority” (Acknowledgments) and gathers ten case studies from different contexts ranging from the Roman Empire to the seventeenth century and from Aragon to China. It is part of the *Queenship and Power* series, and opens up a new field of research with rich potential for queenship specialists, since motherhood can be identified as a major power resource for royal women in premodern times.

The short introduction by editor Elena Woodacre sketches the architecture of the anthology, organized in three parts: “maternal ambition”, “maternal authority”, and “maternal influence”. For the category “ambition” she offers the differentiation between ambition for the offspring and “personal ambition to exercise authority” (2). Particularly interesting is Woodacre’s reflection on aspects in common between the case studies, such as the position of royal mothers whilst securing their child’s succession; negotiating a positive relationship with their offspring; dealing with changing relations because of age; and maintaining a balance between partnership and rivalry. It becomes clear that motherhood was a potent resource, but one that was constantly reshaped and threatened.

The case studies reconstruct the diverse contexts that royal mothers had to deal with and that deeply affected their position and agency. In the first part (“ambition”), Germán Gamero Igea, who examines the fifteenth-century Aragonese queen Juana Enríquez, shows that her motherhood cannot be understood without considering her relationship with her children and her position as a daughter, including her familial background and the juridical context of the Aragonese monarchy. In this particular situation, the mother-child relationship became a central strategy of the queen’s political staging, and at the same time a target for attacks by her adversaries. Likewise, Sarah Betts’ study on three Stuart mother-figures that shaped seventeenth-century politics by negotiating relations to their children and favouring their careers,

demonstrates the importance of the children's age and of other significant relationships with, for example, the brother and king. The example of Elizabeth Stuart is particularly interesting since the Bohemian queen showed only interest in her children when they were already grown-ups, and probably had a closer relationship with her nieces and nephews in England than with her own children – suggested by her lifelong preference for her natal family.

The second part (“maternal authority”) focuses mainly on motherly regents. Hang Lin's chapter on “Nomadic Mothers as Rulers in China” is the only study situated outside of the European continent. It depicts four cases of imperial mothers who ruled in a very patriarchal world. He connects these cases of maternal power to the regional endogamous marriage system, and highlights the conflicting tensions between sons and their mothers – the latter could act as military commanders and sometimes violently defended their power. Similarly, Carey Fleiner's study on Agrippina, the mother of Nero, whom he had famously murdered, shows that the ideal Roman mother-son relationship – nurturing and supporting, but not necessarily loving – was a dominant narrative used in political discourse, but not a guarantee for an harmonious bond. On the other hand, Penelope Nash analyzes the tenth-century empress Adelheid and points out that the correspondence with her daughter reveals the close connection between familial and political relationships. At the same time, the chapter illustrates the intersection of motherhood with other resources of power, such as property, ancestry, and marriage.

Finally, the last section on “influence” starts with an illuminating study by Kathleen Wellman on Louise of Savoy, the sixteenth-century French regent and mother to King Francis I. Wellman points out the central importance of Louise's motherhood for her legitimacy as regent, since she could not claim the status of queen herself. Here, mother and son acted as “political partners” (182), which helped to define the role of the motherly regent in the long term. The next French female regent, Catherine of Medici, whose relationship to her son Henry III is analyzed by Estelle Paranque, similarly based her position on her motherhood – expressed towards her children as well as towards the State. Paranque shows that it was Catherine who inspired Henry III to become a fatherly figure; by doing so she became an example of a mother who successfully navigated her position.

The collection of diverse case studies seems to strive for a homogenizing treatment at first sight, with the introductory remark that “we can still identify with their struggles and ambitions, triumphs and tragedies” (Acknowledgments) suggesting a sympathetic approach to all mothers in history. Yet the architecture of the book also invites us to think further about similarities and differences, since the chapters show very clearly that (royal)

motherhood calls for a consideration of the varying practices, discourses, and contexts. It is in this respect that the strength and the great potential of this volume becomes most apparent.

However, it is not clearly stated why the anthology is arranged around the categories of ambition, authority, and influence. These categories suggest a differentiation between what we could call “formal” and “informal” power, but this is not reflected methodologically. Moreover, as several chapters make it very clear, “ambition” and “influence” are usually negative attributes of powerful mothers, and as such are products of historical narratives with a surprisingly long tradition, as the example of Agrippina (chapter 7) shows. By using these categories, one risks reproducing them instead of taking the chance to historicize these narratives.

Finally, although the anthology gathers together several interesting cases about royal motherhood, it misses the chance to start a more fundamental conceptual and methodological discussion. Findings from anthropological research on mothers, for example, might prove fruitful for historical reflection – such as the methodological differentiation between motherhood as an institution and mothering as a (not always sex-bound) practice. Obviously, but not always explicitly, most of the studies take it as a starting point that motherhood is a biological fact. This sometimes leads to assumptions, such as maternal “instinct” (12) or the “affective behavior that goes beyond any political debate” (20), as suggested by Diana Pelaz Flores’s argument. At the same time, all of these studies offer evidence that biology is not enough for becoming a royal mother – it is instead a process of negotiating and reshaping relationships. There are several examples of mothers and children fighting or even killing each other, which clearly contradicts our understanding of motherly love as a “natural” fact rooted in biology. This could be a useful point with which to question and historicize broader assumptions of motherhood. The present volume, though certainly opening up a new field, only partly exploits this potential. It might prove to be a productive approach for the upcoming second volume to take up this perspective.

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