

Nuria Silleras-Fernandez. *Power, Piety and Patronage in Late Medieval Queenship: Maria de Luna.* The New Middle Ages Series. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. Pp. xx + 250. ISBN: 978-1-4039-7759-5.

MARIA DE LUNA (1358-1406), an “unexpected” queen, ruled the Crown of Aragon as a “partner in power”—the king’s “other self”—with her husband, Martí the Humane, from 1396 to 1406. A noblewoman in a time when the aristocracy from which she came was increasingly inhibited, a member of a noble family simultaneously immensely powerful and enervated, and of a gender increasingly subject to repressive expectations articulated in law, literature, and religious texts, Maria was a ruler with great authority and power. Dutiful, opportunistic, sometimes ruthless, pious, and partial to her favorites, Maria de Luna is the subject of this very fine study by Nuria Silleras-Fernandez.

Two key factors contributed to the particular quality of Maria de Luna’s queenship: the complex makeup of the Crown of Aragon (including, in Maria’s day, Valencia, Aragon, Catalunya and Perpignan, the Balearic Islands, Sardinia, Corsica, and Sicily), and the very special nature of the office of the king’s lieutenant, the *locum tenens*, which offered a public role for royal women otherwise denied inheritance or regency. Silleras-Fernandez’s exposition of Maria’s role as a queen-lieutenant above all contributes to current scholarly discussions about the nature of queenship and its relationship to monarchy in medieval and early modern Europe. Unique to the Crown of Aragon, the institution of the lieutenancy throws into high relief the particular limits and possibilities associated with women in positions of great authority and power. Silleras-Fernandez addresses this complicated theoretical potential admirably. While not a straightforward biography, her work supplies a great deal of detail about Maria’s life and the rarified nature of the highly political world she lived in, with frequent (but appropriate) comparisons to events or people elsewhere in early modern Europe, especially France, England, and Castile.

Silleras-Fernandez begins by examining the key elements of Maria’s background, upbringing, and marriage. As the Luna heiress, Maria’s life was circumscribed by both her father’s will (dedicated to preserving the Luna patrimony and lineage) and her marriage to Prince Martí, the younger son of Pere the Ceremonious and Elionor of Sicily. Maria’s upbringing in Elionor’s care and Martí’s company ensured her assimilation into the royal court but did not redirect her Luna fidelity. In 1392, Maria’s and Martí’s son married the Sicilian heiress Maria, and subsequently Martí departed Aragon with the prince in order to secure Sicily for the crown. Martí’s five-year absence marked a key period in

Maria's life. In the interim, the deaths first of Pere and then of her brother-in-law Joan in 1396 left Maria uniquely positioned to assume power as her absent, now-king husband's lieutenant.

A whole chapter is dedicated to the single, pivotal year of 1396-97, one which reveals the potential of female rulership and the particular problems facing the Crown of Aragon in the wake of the reigns of the scheming Pere and the profligate Joan I. Silleras-Fernandez claims that if it were not for Maria, Martí well could have lost his kingdom. Maria energetically quelled opposition to Martí's rule, facing down the claims of Violant de Bar (a showdown hinging on claims to power through motherhood), and the king's bellicose relatives, the Foix. Maria secured the constituencies of the Crown and coped with Martí's prolonged absence. Significantly, the fact of her gender did not inhibit Maria's authority.

The main themes of this study include Maria's relationship with her husband Martí; her motherhood; her experience as an administrator; kinship; and patronage, both secular and religious. Silleras-Fernandez repeatedly emphasizes that Maria and Martí's was a "fraternal" relationship, devoid of "passion," though why we should expect otherwise is unclear. It is of consequence, however, since Maria and Martí failed to take full advantage of their marriage to have many children. Three of their four children died as infants and Maria's mothering completely focused on her son Martí, both as a future king of Aragon, and as a Luna. By the time Maria came to be queen, she was already the administrator of an almost incredible agglomeration of estates, derived from her Luna inheritance as well as her marriage. This gave her great experience but also great resources, which she would draw upon especially for the Sicilian expedition, and then to quell opposition to Martí's succession.

In every life-stage, as a great heiress and then as a queen and mother, Maria's patronage was a key requirement for her maintenance of power. Her religious patronage was significant, especially of the Franciscan Order; Maria both used the Order to achieve her political ends and was strongly influenced by it. Maria and Martí were notably devout. Silleras-Fernandez wrestles with the (to me, false) distinction between Maria's "real" faith and her demonstrated practice. Why be cynical about what Maria believed? No doubt she acted in ways that were "correct" for the good of her public image and the extension of her power, but at the same time she demonstrated piety that went beyond the necessary (as Silleras-Fernandez illustrates nicely when juxtaposing Pere the Ceremonious' "cheating" during the Lenten Fast and Maria's disciplined observance even on her deathbed).

Silleras-Fernandez impressively describes secular patronage and court life, detailing the nature of Maria's court, its protocols, household structure, and ceremonial events—especially coronation and ritual entries. Luxury was an entitlement, but never without purpose: extravagance was essential to displaying power, authority, and the privileged, special nature of monarchy to multiple layers of society. Such display especially confirmed Maria's legitimate political power. Secular patronage was also deeply connected to Maria's practices of kinship. As the head of the Luna family, Maria certainly played favorites, helping her reckless sister Brianda, as well as making good use of her Luna connections (particularly relying on her half-brother Ferran, and exploiting her relationship with the Avignonese pope Benedict XIII, "Papa Luna"). Her limited kin network was simultaneously a source of power and a handicap for Maria; its very limitation furthermore allowed her greater scope as a woman.

Maria's life was lived on the cusp between the medieval and early modern worlds; in many ways she prefigures later women of power, notably Isabel of Castile, but also English and French queens. The institution of the queen-lieutenant, however, was unique. In Maria's own assessment, she was second only to the king, deferring to no other authority.

Silleras-Fernandez writes with confidence born of deep familiarity with the sources; she can tell a good story. Sometimes I wished for further analysis, and less detail: it's impressive to name all the noblewomen who comprised Maria's royal entourage—but what of it? How did these individuals participate in the networks of patronage that reinforced, accommodated, and placed a check on Maria? Overall the book is well conceived and well written; unfortunately a number of grammatical and punctuation errors were missed in the editing process. Regrettable as they are, such errors do not undermine the credibility of Silleras-Fernandez's remarkable knowledge of and fluency in interpreting Maria de Luna's remarkable life.

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