

## BOOK REVIEWS



*The King's Other Body: María of Castile and the Crown of Aragon*, by Theresa Earenfight. The Middle Ages. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009. Pp. xi+242; 2 maps. ISBN (cloth): 9780812241853; ISBN (ebook): 9780812201833. \$49.95/£32.50 (cloth or ebook).

Theresa Earenfight's *The King's Other Body: María of Castile and the Crown of Aragon* represents the first full-length treatment of an extraordinarily important figure in medieval Iberian politics, María of Castile. Earenfight's work is a political biography with an institutional history at its core. The work relies on rich Iberian archival sources containing thousands of documents pertaining to María of Castile and her role in royal administration. Letters between Alfonso and María and their staff, legal briefs, and myriad written instructions allow Earenfight to reconstruct the workings of the Aragonese royal house on an almost daily basis. The records of the Catalan parliamentary assembly, which often worked against royal actions and prerogatives, allow a more complete picture of María's actions filtered through an unsympathetic source.

The wife of Alfonso V of Aragon, queen of Aragon from 1416–57, María governed Catalunya as queen–lieutenant for twenty-six years. Her assumption of rule was critical to the health of the crown, as Alfonso traveled to the Aragonese holdings in Italy both to administer government and to wage war. Earenfight's book includes a thorough examination of the office of lieutenantcy in the Kingdom of Aragon. This office constituted not merely an official representation of royal authority but its embodiment. In a document awarding María expanded rights over the financial business of the kingdom, Alfonso refers to his queen not only as his lieutenant, but as *de altera a parte nostri corporis* “part of his body” (78). The extensive and disjointed holdings of the Crown of Aragon, including Sicily, Naples, Corsica, and Sardinia, necessitated this joint rule.

After a brief first chapter, which discusses the sources for María's reign and the theory and practice of queenship, the next four chapters examine María's

life chronologically. Chapter 2 offers details from her childhood and early life in the Castilian court. Married at the relatively late age of fourteen, hers was a strategically important, but unhappy union. Alfonso and María were unable to produce an heir, a source of early tension that would arise intermittently during María's lifetime. The lack of children did not hinder María's political influence, and in fact furthered her opportunities for authority. In this chapter, Earenfight also examines the reasons for Alfonso's departure to Italy in 1420 and his unmistakable preference for Italian realms over Iberian.

Chapter 3 probes more deeply into the office of lieutenancy and its origins in light of María's first tenure in 1420-35. By the fourteenth century the far-flung nature of Aragonese holdings, many of them across the Mediterranean, had made the lieutenancy a necessary element of royal authority. An absent King of Aragon was more the rule than the exception. Earenfight follows the development of the contractual nature of Iberian kingship resulting from frequent royal absences. During her lieutenancy, María controlled all aspects of Catalan government, not as a regent, but in her own right. These included financial, civil, and legal aspects of government and, most significantly, allowed María to convene and preside over the Corts of Catalunya. The authority to convoke the Corts was a core element of kingship. Earenfight argues convincingly that its exercise by María, despite Alfonso's explicit *privilegios*, was both a cause of disquiet and an opportunity for the Catalan nobility to prevaricate. María's presence "substituted a female royal body for a male one" (15) and resulted in a flurry of Iberian legal literature that attempted to qualify and explain it. The legality of her power with regard to the Corts was at issue throughout her lieutenancy, not because of her gender, Earenfight argues, but because of legal issues surrounding a lieutenant's rights.

In chapter 4, Earenfight examines the shift to María's permanent lieutenancy, as it became clear that Alfonso would never return to his Iberian realms. Her influence and responsibilities increased as Alfonso sought to streamline and regularize his long-distance government. While this allowed María unprecedented power and influence, it also made her vulnerable to the stratagems of the Catalan nobility as they became increasingly frustrated with their absentee king. Alfonso's constant need for funds to underwrite his Italian wars was frequently answered through taxation of his Iberian holdings, a situation that enraged the Catalans and led to increased challenges to María's authority.

Chapter 5 outlines the eventual crisis of Alfonso's absentee reign that centered around the manumission of the *remença* peasants. The *remences* were held by serf-like ties to lay and ecclesiastical landlords and had been agitating for their

freedom since the fourteenth century. María supported the peasants' efforts, but the nobility of Barcelona were intractable and threatened violent revolt. Alfonso's policy vacillated as his need for funds led him to variously deprive the nobility of their rights over the *remences* and claim them for himself. Earenfight uses the *remença* dispute to analyze the interplay of contractual kingship, lieutenancy, and representative government. María's public and tenacious support of the peasants in the Cortes shows the reach of Aragonese queenship. Alfonso's eventual abandonment of the peasants in favor of the nobility resulted in María's extraordinary resignation as queen-lieutenant in 1453.

Earenfight's treatment of María of Castile allows her to analyze broader themes about the nature of monarchical power in chapter 6. Her contention that queenship is discursive and generative, a "daily act of reconstruction and interpretation," is supported by the sources that record María's reign (132). Not only was monarchical power collaborative, but it was transformed by María's practice of her office. Juridical theory regarding the legality of the office of lieutenant developed around her, as did those theories that addressed what constituted kingship and representation. Earenfight finds no overt evidence of misogyny in the sources as they address María of Castile, leading her to conclude that the Catalans were less concerned about a royal lieutenant's gender than they were about their king's absence. An institutional history of the office of queen-lieutenant shows that monarchical power was a "dynamic and shifting set of force relations that circulated and passed back and forth among political actors" (13).

Theresa Earenfight's *The King's Other Body* is a welcome and valuable addition to the scholarship of medieval queenship, monarchy, and institutional authority. Her study exploits underused archival sources that yield a detailed and complex portrait not only of María of Castile herself, but also of the medieval Iberian court and the dynamism of its institutions.

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