Janna Bianchini, *The Queen’s Hand: Power and Authority in the Reign of Berenguela of Castile*

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Janna Bianchini’s *The Queen’s Hand* examines the reign of one of the most powerful women in late medieval Europe, Berenguela of Castile. In seven chapters, arranged chronologically, Bianchini is primarily concerned with demonstrating the nature and extent of Berenguela’s power and authority as Queen of Castile. The book persuasively argues that Berenguela was a crucial figure in the history of medieval Iberia, responsible for the permanent unification of Castile and Leon in 1230 and for many of the accomplishments achieved by her son, King Fernando III. Bianchini does an impressive job with the available evidence, using charters and other surviving royal documents to examine the extent of Berenguela’s influence, and supplementing these charters with near contemporary medieval chronicles, which broadly affirm Berenguela’s pivotal and impressive role in thirteenth-century European political life.

The first chapter considers Berenguela’s upbringing (1180-1197) and the opportunities that Castile’s plural monarchy offered women, through an examination of the challenges Castilian King Alfonso VIII faced in trying to forge a dynasty and maintain its rule near the end of the twelfth century. When Alfonso’s first-born son died in 1188, Berenguela became the next in line to the throne, and her parents rushed to find their eight-year old daughter a suitable spouse, settling on Frederick Barbarossa’s son, Conrad. However, when Queen Leonor gave birth to a son less than a year later, Berenguela’s marriage was called off, as it no longer fit into either the family’s nor the Hohenstaufen’s plans. Instead, at seventeen, Berenguela married the King of Leon, Alfonso IX in 1197 in an attempt to secure peace between the kingdoms of Leon and Castile (chapter 2: Queen of Leon, 1197-1204). Bianchini effectively analyzes charters, diplomas, and various receipts of patronage to argue that during Berenguela’s seven-year reign as Queen of Leon, she was an “active and authoritative queen,” who exercised her lordship through patronage and by providing justice.

Bianchini does an admirable job in these first few chapters of illustrating the rapidity with which elites could rise or fall within the Castilian nobility. In 1204, Pope Innocent III annulled Berenguela’s marriage to King Alfonso IX of Leon, leaving her unmarried and her son disinherited from the Leonese crown. Twice betrothed and divorced by the age of 24, Berenguela found herself for more than a decade in an unenviable position as an unwed, former queen with no promising political prospects (1204-1217, the subject of chapters 3 and 4). It wasn’t until the accidental death of her brother, Enrique, in 1217 that Berenguela returned to a position of authority. In that year, she became Queen of Castile and the mother of the King of Castile, the sixteen-year old Fernando III.

The rest of the book focuses on what was effectively the three-decade co-rule of Castile’s powerful mother-son plural monarchy. Chapter five examines the first part of Berenguela and Fernando’s reign (1217-1230), during which time, according to Bianchini, the mother-son ruling relationship was symbiotic, with Berenguela providing Fernando with legitimacy and experience, and Fernando supplying the Queen with a male co-ruler, which was needed to calm anxious nobles and
ecclesiastical authorities. In this chapter, Bianchini convincingly demonstrates the extent of Berenguela’s power as Queen of Castile: she helped quash rebellions, negotiated with foreign powers, including the Almohads, influenced her son’s military affairs, and arranged marriages with royal families throughout Europe. Surviving medieval chronicles all make clear that the Queen’s wisdom and judgment were widely admired by her peers and that she regularly consulted with and provided counsel to her son. Most importantly, this chapter helps explain how plural monarchy functioned in the thirteenth century: Berenguela and Fernando shared authority and pursued a common agenda. At the same time, each had sovereign authority in matters of justice and in negotiations with foreign powers, and both maintained their own courts, administrators, and clients. Bianchini argues that Berenguela and Fernando maintained a “strikingly unified front over decades of shared rule” (179), and attributes much of their success to their ability to work together for the kingdom’s benefit.

The subject of chapter six is the Leonese succession in 1230, where Berenguela played the crucial role in the permanent unification of Castile and Leon. Following the death of Fernando III’s father, Alfonso the IX, a battle for succession was waged for the crown of Leon. Bianchini carefully illustrates the vital role Berenguela played in securing the Leonese lands and in working with her son to seize the contested throne. The final chapter examines the last sixteen years of her life as Queen of Castile and Leon (1230-1246). While traditionally, the historiography has downplayed Berenguela’s role in the plural monarchy after the events of 1230, this chapter demonstrates that Berenguela remained Fernando’s most trusted confidant throughout her life and seems to have had equal say in many cases of royal justice. While Fernando may have had more formal power as King, Berenguela and her son worked together in defending the realm, aligning successors, brokering marriage alliances, and strengthening their collective position.

Overall, this is a well-argued and documented book that sheds new light on an underappreciated monarch, demonstrating that Berenguela deserves recognition as one of the most powerful women in medieval political history. More broadly, this book strengthens our understanding of the nature of plural monarchy and the subtle yet impressive ways in which leading medieval women asserted their political power and governed in a deeply misogynistic and patriarchal world. This book is recommended for specialists in Iberian political history as well as medieval women’s history. For non-specialists, the book provides a fascinating examination of late medieval Europe and its key players from the perspective of western Iberia.

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