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*The Return of the Queen*

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## BOOK REVIEWS

### *The Return of the Queen*

Tracy Adams. *The Life and Afterlife of Isabeau of Bavaria*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010. xxvi + 338 pp.; ill. ISBN 0-8018-9625-8 (cl).

Janna Bianchini. *The Queen's Hand: Power and Authority in the Reign of Berenguela of Castile*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012. x + 350 pp.; ill. ISBN 978-0-8122-4433-5 (cl).

Kathleen Wellman. *Queens and Mistresses of Renaissance France*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013. xiv + 433 pp.; ill. ISBN 978-0-300-17885-2 (cl).

**Jennifer C. Edwards**

Scholars interested in the dynamics of gender and power are reconsidering the history of medieval and early modern queens, a subject that historians once dismissed as the study of “women worthies.” These three books accomplish two important tasks: they present new biographies of royal women; they examine critically legends about these women that persist in the scholarship; and they showcase the central role of queens in the courts, their kingdoms, and the histories of their period. The results complicate our understanding of how women claimed and wielded authority in the premodern world. The authors investigate royal women with notorious reputations marred by scandal, cupidity, and claims of improper mothering, or those whose life stories historians have neglected; these monographs, in turn, demonstrate the intersections of these lives with key political, diplomatic, and cultural histories of Europe. The authors’ arguments are primarily historiographical: Tracy Adams reexamines the reign of the well-known but poorly understood Isabeau of Bavaria, while Janna Bianchini establishes the significance of the neglected Berenguela of Castile. Kathleen Wellman looks at notorious queens and mistresses as well as royal sisters and mothers, demonstrating that scholars have accepted too easily supposed truths about court women like Isabeau of Bavaria’s promiscuity or Catherine de Medici’s assault on Protestants. All three scholars demonstrate that historiography focused on negative portrayals of notorious queens or on the achievements of men have blotted out the lives and contributions of these royal women. In considering the construction of the “black legend” of Isabeau of Bavaria—which cast her as wanton, greedy, fickle, incompetent,

and power-hungry—Adams argues that this negative portrayal appeared only after Isabeau's death, and that it remained persistent in scholarship despite demonstrations that Isabeau was popular and well regarded during her lifetime. Bianchini's challenge is the reverse: many studies of Iberia overlook Berenguela of Castile in favor of her son, Fernando III, or her sister, Blanche of Castile, despite significant archival evidence that Fernando and Berenguela constituted a plural monarchy and that he often deferred to his mother. Wellman demonstrates that Renaissance queens and official royal mistresses in the French court acted well beyond their expected roles. These women took on political power as advisors and regents for the king, and they became symbols of the monarchy to the people, even as such roles were controversial. Positions as queen and mistress obviously placed women in adversarial relationships, yet Wellman shows how royal women divided responsibilities in the court among themselves in complementary and not always oppositional ways.

Key to these studies is each author's careful work with primary sources. Wellman, Adams, and Bianchini elicit nuanced interpretations through their meticulous attention to chronology, location, signature, and language. As Wellman notes, "Royal women . . . have been intensely important to ideological debates but have generally been written out of standard narratives"; so a return to the sources is essential for understanding the lives behind their reputations (18). While Wellman's evidence is not archival, her reinterpretation of well-known, published primary sources demonstrates how historians have misinterpreted or misunderstood these women. Adams is particularly attentive to the nuanced wording of documents, demonstrating Isabeau's sophisticated strategies to maintain power in the fiercely divided and explosive political environment of fifteenth-century France. Since Castilian and Leonese rulers frequently co-issued documents with family members, Bianchini's careful analysis of references to royal women in charters, as well as to their omission, reveals a great deal about royal family planning, inheritance patterns, and female authority. Subtle changes in the language of these charters marked shifts in the political status of queens and royal heirs. Wellman combines a careful reading of chronicles and royal charters with an analysis of her subjects' representations in portraiture. All three authors use such careful archival, literary, or art historical analysis to revise historiographical narratives that vilify, neglect, or misrepresent these women.

In *Queens and Mistresses of Renaissance France*, Wellman contrasts the stories of queens and officially designated mistresses (*maîtresses en titre*) to examine the differing types of power available to women in the French court. She argues that the queen and royal mistress defined the Renaissance in