

Blood Royal: Dynastic Politics in Medieval Europe. Robert Bartlett.

The James Lydon Lectures in Medieval History and Culture. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. xiv + 660 pp. \$34.95.

Blood Royal, an excursus on monarchy as the “family firm” (199), surveys royal and imperial dynasties in Latin Christendom and Byzantium between 500–1500. Bartlett’s focus is wide, with an emphasis on Britain, France, and the German Empire and forays into the Mediterranean and Eastern Europe. He recounts a familiar political narrative that keeps kings at the center of dynastic politics, arguing that marriage and warfare were necessary for the state. He pays close attention to aggressive bellicose kings and describes women as status objects, game pieces in dynastic strategies, and vehicles for marriage and childbearing. Part 1, “Life Cycle,” outlines what men do to create a royal family: choose a bride, wait for the sons to be born, and then teach their sons (no mention of mothers and daughters). Part 2, “A Sense of Dynasty,” discusses naming and numbering of kings; saints, public images, heraldry, family trees; dynastic uncertainty; new kingdoms; and non-dynastic monarchies. The organization is vexing, however. *Blood Royal* covers a long chronology and a wide geography—it is literally all over the place. The narrative is descriptive, and repetitive, moving from anecdote to anecdote, realm to realm, century to century, with stories of wicked uncles, adulterous queens, scheming mistresses, violently unhappy bastards, and murderous siblings.

The book claims to be about kinship, but there is no critical consideration of anthropological and sociological studies of family and monarchy. He notes that it was more likely for a Byzantine empress than her English or French counterparts to rule as a sovereign, but he does not analyze the different political cultures. His consideration of “bastard culture” (175) advises the reader on how to tell one son from another using naming patterns and heraldry, but does not seriously discuss important studies on why legitimacy mattered so much. Foreign queens are “homesick” (26) and bring with them strange practices, but he does not consider the impact of patrilineal customs on a woman who had to learn a new language and customs, change her identity, and sometimes her name, when she married, and overlooks the important transmission of cultures when brides move. He admits that an explanation is demanded when a king does not marry, but does not posit one, saying simply that there are not enough unmarried kings to study and does not ponder why.

More problematic, however, is the lack of serious engagement with theories of gender, sexuality, and power. Bartlett summarizes decades of queenship research, but it appears he was not paying close attention. He employs the discredited add-women-and-stir method but does not engage in any meaningful discussion of the patriarchal structures that shaped monarchy. This creates blind spots in the narrative. He ignores work that convincingly shows that queenship was an office with political authority and power. He discusses the political disruptions of interregna, father-son conflicts, and minorities but downplays the

political significance of queens-regent. The narrative is rife with casual sexism. He pays attention to women's beauty, rivalry, reputation, chastity, and sexuality, and notes without comment that royal brides were inspected physically. Men's sexuality, however, is mentioned briefly when trying to explain the lack of a male heir, and then only in terms of chaste marriages or possible homosexuality. The sexist language is particularly glaring when he blames queens who give birth to daughters and calls them "failed mothers" (64). This phrasing demeans the mothers themselves and ignores the work of geneticists who inform us that it is the father's DNA that determines the sex of the child. Bartlett feels the pain of the frustrated king who wanted a son, but is blind to the pain of the rejected mother, and he indulges in a flawed retrospective diagnosis when he deems a queen who does not have children as "sterile" (68). Bartlett is admirably steeped in the medieval sources, but his prose is an uncanny replication of the medieval men he quotes.

At its core, this book is predicated on a narrowly paternalistic definition of the term *political*. In the conclusion, Bartlett argues that "ruling dynasties were not biological units but political ones" (433). With this one phrase he undercuts the promising title of the book. For him, dynastic politics remain a king's domain and the blood of the "family firm" that matters most bears an XY chromosome.

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The Borgia Family: Rumor and Representation. Jennifer Mara DeSilva.
London: Routledge, 2020. xii + 304 pp. \$150.

True confessions time: I agreed to write this review because my department head's nickname for me used to be "Lucrezia," which was short for Lucrezia Borgia, because he said I had a poison pen. I decided it was time to find out whether there was any merit to that analogy. I was not disappointed: this book is an excellent surgical instrument for separating fact from fiction. The Borgia family, who were actually Spanish—*Borgia* is an Italianization of the original surname *Borja*—have done more to perpetuate the Black Legend of Spanish cruelty than any other single family through the centuries. I had visited their family home near Valencia, the most memorable aspect of which was Saint Ignatius Loyola's walking stick, permanently on display. His walking stick presumably ended up there because of San Francisco de Borja, one of his closest companions, who was instrumental in founding the Society of Jesus. But mention the Borgias among the general educated public, and Saint Francis is not the first person that comes to mind. In fact, most people would be surprised—to put it mildly—to learn that a canonized saint sprang from the same pool of DNA as this rogues' gallery of bastardy, murder, and intrigue.

The strong suit of this volume is its bridging of high and low culture, as well as its dual focus on pedagogy and scholarly research. (I never thought I'd be writing a review