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

Michelle Armstrong-Partida
University of Texas- El Paso, armstrong@fake.com

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Janna Bianchini. *The Queen's Hand: Power and Authority in the Reign of Berenguela of Castile*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012. 368 pp.

Berenguela of Castile dominated the political landscape of Castile and León in the first half of the thirteenth century and ruled jointly as a sovereign with her son, Fernando III, for nearly thirty years. Although the practice of the plural monarchy, which allowed members of the royal family to participate in royal authority, had a long tradition in Castile and León, Berenguela's role as queen of Castile and later León was unique. She did not claim royal authority as queen-consort or as queen-mother, but as Bianchini convincingly demonstrates, Berenguela exercised joint sovereign authority with her son as queen of Castile in her own right.

The book is organized chronologically based on key political phases of Berenguela's life and focuses on showing how Berenguela developed and deployed her royal authority as the heir of Alfonso VIII, the queen and working partner of Alfonso IX, and as co-ruler with Fernando III. Bianchini addresses some of the latest scholarship on royal women and power in the introduction, and also discusses the chronicles and chroniclers that are relevant to the study of Berenguela. The first three chapters underscore Berenguela's role as a mediator between her father and her husband during periods of intense hostilities between Castile and León, and shows how Berenguela's lordship of her arras properties in the Tierra de Campos, a disputed territory between Castile and León that held great economic, military and strategic value, was crucial to building a patrimonial power base as the new queen of León. Berenguela's lordship of the Tierra de Campos and her ability to award tenancies from her own lands that secured bonds of personal loyalty to her would in later years prove crucial in establishing herself as queen of Castile and in gaining the crown of León for her son Fernando III. Chapter four deals with Berenguela's failed regency for her brother Enrique in the face of noble opposition and her success in regaining the throne of Castile after the death of Enrique with the loyal support of the magnates of Tierra de Campos. Here, Bianchini tackles the question of whether Berenguela had abdicated the throne in favor of her son and proves definitively that she had not. Berenguela's hereditary right to Castile had legitimized Fernando's kingship and the dual monarchy between mother and son went beyond the tradition of plural monarchy in Iberia. Although Berenguela needed a man at her side to keep the kingdom she inherited, it is clear that Berenguela's "queenship depended on much on Fernando III as his kingship depended on her" (178).

The three remaining chapters of the book show how Berenguela ruled as a monarch and emphasize how her sovereign authority was not only recognized in

Castile and León, but also by foreign rulers like the Almohads, the queen of France, Thibault, king of Navarre and count of Champagne, Pope Honorius III and Pope Gregory IX. While Berenguela and her son shared royal authority, she frequently acted independently of Fernando in her own right, not through association with him. She was involved in all levels of ruling – she defeated the noble rebellions in the early years of their reign, negotiated truces, dealt with foreign rulers, heard court cases, and managed the crown’s daily affairs while Fernando campaigned in al-Andalus. Bianchini even shows how involved Berenguela was in Fernando’s crusade against the Muslims in the south – a role that is confirmed in the accounts of chroniclers who attributed Fernando’s success in conquering Córdoba in part to Berenguela’s “skill” not only governing the kingdom in his absence, but also in managing the supply and provisioning of the royal army. Bianchini notes that Berenguela played such an indispensable role in ruling that “Fernando III voluntarily ceded authority to her in León, even though she had no legitimate claim to it. Once again, mother and son gave each other a kingdom, and ruled it according to the long-established patterns of their extraordinary collaboration” (251).

This book is an impressive and solid piece of research, if a bit tedious at times in the sheer amount of information provided. Bianchini’s argument that the plural monarchy in Iberia could accommodate a female ruler as long as a man closely associated with the monarch shared her authority is convincing. Sancha and Dulce of Portugal did not lose their bid for the crown of León because they were women; they lost it to Berenguela, whose aptitude in commanding male allies and experience overcame the infantas’ efforts to maintain their Leonese allies. Fernando III, then, gained the crown of León from his half-sisters, not because of his gender, but due to his mother’s authority and lordship along the Leonese-Castilian border. It was Berenguela who made the reunification of Castile and León possible.

Michelle Armstrong-Partida
University of Texas-El Paso