

2014

## Review of Theresa Earenfight, *The King's Other Body: María of Castile and the Crown of Aragon*

Anne Marie Wolf

*University of Maine-Farmington, wolf@fake.com*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.asphs.net/bsphs>

---

### Recommended Citation

Wolf, Anne Marie (2014) "Review of Theresa Earenfight, *The King's Other Body: María of Castile and the Crown of Aragon*," *Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies*: Vol. 39 : Iss. 1 , Article 10.

<https://doi.org/10.26431/0739-182X.1181>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.asphs.net/bsphs/vol39/iss1/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Association for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies* by an authorized editor of Association for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies. For more information, please contact [jesus@udel.edu](mailto:jesus@udel.edu).

**Theresa Earenfight. *The King's Other Body: María of Castile and the Crown of Aragon*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010. 242 pp.**

María of Castile (1401-1458) was the oldest daughter of Enrique III of Castile (1379-1406) and Catalina de Lancaster (1372-1418) and the sister of Juan II of Castile (r. 1406-54). She was married at fourteen to her first cousin, Alfonso of Aragón, who became king a year later. For over half of their thirty-two married years, Alfonso was away conquering and ruling the kingdom of Naples. For twenty-six of these years, María governed Catalunya as lieutenant general (*lloctinent general*), invested by Alfonso with powers equal to his own. She maintained a separate royal court, presided over parliamentary assemblies, administered justice, granted constitutions, issued laws, appointed delegates and judges, and controlled governors, prelates, nobles, municipal officials, and the army. Uncommon elsewhere, the Aragonese institution of the king's lieutenant began in the thirteenth century, prompted by the rapid expansion of the Crown into the western Mediterranean. María, who had no children, was not the first queen to serve in this role, but the authority she wielded and the duration of her tenure were unparalleled.

Leaving over ten thousand relevant documents in the royal archives of Barcelona and Valencia unexamined, scholars have mostly been content to assume that María ruled in name only. Theresa Earenfight's meticulously researched study, firmly based on these bountiful archival sources, finally gives due attention to María's rule. The book is divided into six chapters which treat respectively the lieutenancy of María of Castile (an introduction to the office and the historiography); María's formation and education as princess and her marriage; the period from 1420-35 (beginning of her lieutenancy, her interactions with the Corts, the refinement of this system of long-distance rule); the years 1436-48 (in which, following the capture of Alfonso and many nobles after a defeat at Ponza, María stepped into public leadership more fully in her own right); the struggle on behalf of the *remença* peasants (1448-53); and a concluding chapter entitled "Queenship, Kingship, and the Dynamics of Monarchy." Earenfight's dogged pursuit of the details of María's rule yields much more than a biography of an astute ruler. This is a study of the monarchy as an institution, and it challenges several common beliefs.

Among them is the notion that Alfonso's absence from Catalunya dealt a fatal blow to the political and economic power of Aragon. This study handily shows that things ran smoothly with Alfonso in Naples, and in the end deteriorated not due to his absence, but to his decision to refuse manumission to the increasingly restless *remences*. María had strongly supported the peasants'

cause, which had been gathering momentum for decades, and had urged Alfonso to do the same. When he ignored her advice and revoked an earlier decree that would have ensured significant gains for the peasants, she resigned as his lieutenant (an unprecedented move). The *remença* revolt led directly to the civil war of 1462-72. Earenfight's analysis of María's handling of this dispute should interest not only historians of Spain, but scholars of social revolts far beyond it.

Her examination of the dynamics surrounding the *remença* issue puts the negotiated and discursive nature of monarchy in sharp relief. The extensive records this issue generated reveal heightened tensions around royal power, since Catalan nobles and prelates argued that freeing the peasants from their traditional servitude violated the lords' privileges and threatened the contractual kingship which had long defined Catalan governance. When Alfonso decided to accept a fee from the peasants in exchange for their manumission, the nobles moved to obstruct its collection (and were countered forcefully by María) until Alfonso returned home to rule, in accordance with their notions that legitimate rule required personal contact. One of the reasons Alfonso retreated from his decision on peasant manumission was that he refused to be held to such a condition. Up until his final decision to abandon this plan, María worked hard to implement his decisions, and he left the means to her. When nobles protested her methods directly to Alfonso, he backed her up. Monarchy required a dynamic, fluid partnership between king and queen.

One of the most intriguing elements in this study is how little role, at least overtly, gender seemed to play, especially in comparison to other queens, like Isabel of Castile, whose gender occasioned careful efforts to legitimize their rule. Earenfight shows that the Catalans seemed to harbor no hostility or reservation toward María based on her gender. Jurists' discussions centered on respect for traditional contractual governance. As the numerous court records, registers, and letters attest, María's decisions in her courts and appointments were not challenged. Also, the two immediate replacements Alfonso appointed when María resigned her position (both men) faced more opposition than she had.

This is an impressive contribution to the study of the history of Aragon, queens, and monarchy.

**Anne Marie Wolf**  
**University of Maine-Farmington**