



*Queens Around the World, 1520–1620: A Century of Female Power.*

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**Abstract:** Review of *Queens Around the World, 1520–1620: A Century of Female Power*, by Dror Ze'evi (Palgrave Macmillan, 2024).



***Queens Around the World, 1520–1620: A Century of Female Power*. By Dror Ze’evi. Palgrave Macmillan, 2024. ISBN 978-3-031-58633-0. xv + 293 pp. £24.99**

This book by Dror Ze’evi sets out to prove that the century-long period between 1520 to 1620 was “an unprecedented—an unparalleled to this day—era of female rule” (250). To make his case, the author brings chapters on royal women from the great Islamic empires of Eurasia together with chapters on England and France, as well as a study of several influential Jewish women of the period. While this book is published by Palgrave Macmillan, it is not a part of the well-regarded *Queenship and Power* series and has been marketed as a ‘textbook,’ though there is no indication as to what level of student this ‘textbook’ is aimed at. The lack of a clear audience for this book is one of the difficulties in reviewing it; the book reads much more like a work intended for a wider public audience—rather than a scholarly or student reader—with a heavy emphasis on narrativity and little criticality, analysis, or real engagement with scholarship in the field of queenship studies.

The positive aspect of this book is that it brings together women from within and beyond Europe. As the author, who is an expert on the Ottoman world notes, the boundary between East and West is “largely artificial” and even “misleading” (252). Bringing studies of global royal women together in this book is very useful to break down the idea that the so-called period of the “Monstrous Regiment” of female power in the early modern era was a purely European phenomenon. The inclusion of the Safavid royal women, who have generally not received as much consideration as their counterparts in the Ottoman and Mughal empires, is another strength of the book. Finally, another key element of the book which is to be applauded is the attempt to demonstrate the connections between these royal women in Europe and Asia, particularly in matters of diplomacy and trade. The author also brings in other lesser known but influential women of the period, including several prominent Jewish businesswomen and political players as well as Grace O’Malley of Ireland. While these women are certainly historically significant, including them in a book which is ostensibly about queens and “queendom” does not work as they were not operating in the same constraints or situation as their royal counterparts.

While the book has some positive elements, there are also serious flaws which need to be addressed. Again, if this was a book aimed at a trade publisher and a wider audience, some of these issues might be glossed over, including several admittedly fictionalised

passages or “imagined descriptions” which are inserted, almost like a docudrama series, into the text (see examples on 107 and 118). If this was a textbook for a younger student, in secondary school rather than university, the lack of criticality and emphasis on storytelling could also be understood to some extent. However, there would still be problematic ideas to address, even if the intended reader was not a scholar. At the book’s heart is the claim that this was an “unprecedented” and “unparalleled” period. To make this claim, the author omits significant powerful women and female rulers both before and after his chosen period or makes sweeping generalizations, such as claiming that Anne of Austria’s regency was a “feeble attempt” and that she merely handed all power to Mazarin (212). Major eras of female power, such as the twelfth century which saw ruling women all over the Mediterranean and Near East, or the sixth to eleventh century which saw significant female rulers across Asia, including Wu Zetian, Seondeok of Silla, Japan’s regnant empresses, and powerful regents across several Chinese and Steppe dynasties are ignored. In spite of the title, *Queens Around the World*, whole regions of the globe are ignored, including Africa, the Americas, and Polynesia, as well as the Indian Ocean region, which Stefan Amirell’s research demonstrates had far more ruling women than the realms and empires which Dror Ze’evi decided to focus on.

Queenship studies as a discipline is largely ignored, as is much of the key scholarship and theories around female rule, with the author instead deciding to coin his own moniker of “queendom” which is largely undefined but seems to allude to women holding power. In places, the author relies heavily on one source or dated material and ignores newer approaches, like revisionist work on the reign of Mary I, which leads to a lack of nuance or balance in his appraisals. There are several troublesome statements including his summary that “sex was the highway to power” (253) for women in Islamic monarchies, in spite of Leslie Peirce’s arguments in *The Imperial Harem* that powerful women in the Ottoman Empire were “postsexual” and his own examples of powerful sisters, aunts and daughters (largely unmarried) in the Mughal and Safavid empires in chapters three and four. Other issues include factual slippage and the use of outdated maps and genealogical charts from Wikipedia, all of which would make me hesitate to recommend this textbook to my own students.

While the tone of this review has been critical, I would again applaud the author for his decision to bring women from Western Europe and central Asia together, challenging the notion that only European women possessed significant power in this period. The century he has elected to focus on is an important era in terms of international politics,

developing empires, and global trade and he has positioned these women as key players in these movements. Acknowledging the power and influence of so many interesting and important women in this period like Shahzada Sultanum or Beatriz de Luna who have received less attention or are less well-known is a positive contribution. This book has a great deal of potential, but it is hamstrung by its determination to make the argument about this period being so unique that any evidence to the contrary is swept away dismissively or ignored completely. The idea that women were able to triumph in “queendom” for a single century before men retook and retained power is completely inaccurate. If the book had been reframed to highlight these powerful women, while placing them in context with the royal women who held power in other regions and eras, it could have been a valuable textbook. As it stands, this book is an engaging read which might be valuable to inspire younger students and members of the wider public to find out more about these interesting (royal) women, but it is too problematic to be wholeheartedly recommended to the scholarly community.

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