

Jessica O’Leary, *ELITE WOMEN AS DIPLOMATIC AGENTS IN ITALY AND HUNGARY, 1470–1510. KINSHIP AND THE ARAGONESE DYNASTIC NETWORK* (Leeds: Arc Humanities Press, 2022), pp. 106; ISBN: 9781641892438

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In the past decade, the scholarship on the role of women in early modern diplomacy has gained significant momentum. The main driving force behind this trend is a change of focus within diplomatic history. The field is no longer preoccupied solely with sovereign states, institutions, and ambassadors – the spotlight has shifted toward the unofficial side of diplomacy and a wider variety of actors. Recent publications show that women were a much more critical part of informal diplomacy than previously acknowledged, and Jessica O’Leary’s book is another testimony to that. *Elite Women as Diplomatic Agents* follows the lives of Beatrice and Eleonora d’Aragona, daughters of Ferrante I, king of Naples, from the late 1470s to the early 1500s. Upon their marriages, both princesses gained new political agencies valuable to their family, with Eleonora becoming the grand duchess of Ferrara and Beatrice being crowned the queen of Hungary. By analyzing the sisters’ correspondence and other documents related to the Aragoneses stored in the State Archive of Modena, O’Leary demonstrates how the two women negotiated (often contradictory) familial and political duties within the dynastic diplomatic network.

The book is divided into four chapters. Chapter one examines Eleonora’s role as a mediator between her natal and marital families during two military conflicts – the Pazzi War (1478–1480) and the War of Ferrara (1482–1484). In the first case, her father and husband, Ercole I, fought on opposite sides; in the second, they were united against a common enemy. Chapter two addresses negotiations between Eleonora, Beatrice, and a set of diplomatic intermediaries to solve one of the biggest problems any early modern dynasty could have faced – the lack of an heir. Beatrice and Matthias Corvinus had no children, leaving Hungary open to another succession crisis. To remedy the situation, the queen wanted to adopt one of her sister’s sons, Ippolito d’Este. However, Eleonora never accepted this plan, and the idea eventually drove a wedge between the two women. The last two chapters build upon this issue and scrutinize the correlation between the ability to bear children and dynastic power by focusing closely on Beatrice’s fate after the death of her husband and the annulment of her second marriage with the subsequent king of Hungary, Władysław II. These sections discuss how a childless widowed queen could maintain a certain influence and authority despite no official title.

The primary aims of this study were to expose the role of women within the broader Aragonese diplomatic network, highlight the degrees of their agency within this network, and explore how dynastic fidelity was aligned with fertility and political climate. O'Leary delivered on all three promises and even more, as the book offers a compelling insight into the workings of the dynastic support system. The example of the intervention against the dissolution of Beatrice's second marriage illustrates how the family's help was organized step by step and that the rhetoric used to present the problem was crucial. Additionally, thanks to a meticulous analysis of the letters, the book sheds more light on the linguistic dynamics in elite familial interactions. The author skillfully shows how Eleonora and Beatrice (and their father) used a specific vocabulary to manipulate diplomatic situations in their favour, as their correspondence's wording and stylistic features altered depending on political circumstances.

Drawing on various sources and a wide array of secondary literature, *Elite Women as Diplomatic Agents* is a study that can prove interesting to diplomatic historians and to a broader readership. The arguments are well-structured and presented concisely. Furthermore, detailed genealogy charts and maps of late fifteenth-century Italy and Hungary placed at the beginning of the monograph facilitate a better understanding of the bonds of kinship between the main actors and the geographical space in which they operated. Finally, the book also contains an impressive bibliography on early modern dynastic politics, marriages, childhood, and queenship.

Without a doubt, Jessica O'Leary's work is a valuable contribution to the growing body of research on gender and diplomacy. It enriches our knowledge about female agency in premodern diplomatic and dynastic networks, and proves that diplomacy should not be viewed as an exclusive practice limited to the ambassador-only analysis model.