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Elite Women as Diplomatic Agents in Italy and Hungary, 1470-1510

Kinship and the Aragonese Dynastic Network

By Jessica O'Leary

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In recent years scholarship has increasingly focused on Renaissance diplomacy, exploring various questions, ranging from political interactions among states to information gathering and management, the development ceremonials, the use of spaces, and so on. However, women mostly remained at the back of research. But for few exceptions, scholarship often considered women as tools through which rulers conducted their marriage policies and strengthened their diplomatic relationships with foreign powers and other governmental dynasties. On the contrary, in her brief but incisive monograph *Elite Women as Diplomatic Agents in Italy and Hungary, 1470-1510*, Jessica O'Leary argues that, far from being mere pawns in the hands of their fathers and brothers, during the Renaissance dynastic women played an active role in the diplomatic network. These women not only acted as mediators between their "their natal and marital families throughout the duration of their marriage" (9), but also operated as informants through frequent correspondence with their distant relatives. Moreover, dynastic women developed their own political agendas, which often fit more with the purposes of their husbands rather than of their fathers, while their multiple identities—as members of both their natal and marital houses—allowed them to manoeuvre cleverly among political and diplomatic crisis.

To support her argument, O' Leary examines the correspondence of Eleonora and Beatrice of Aragon with their father Ferdinand I of Naples (1458-94), known as Ferrante, and other relatives and individuals. These letters demonstrate that both Eleonora and Beatrice played an active role within the Aragonese dynastic network, in particular as mediators between their father and their husbands, respectively the duke of Ferrara Ercole d'Este (1471-1505) and the King of Hungary Matthias Corvinus (1458-1490). After an introduction examining the main themes of the monograph and relevant bibliography, the book consists of four chapters that, by following a chronological order, enucleate four distinct but interconnected events, which in turn show the development of the diplomatic and political strategies of the two sisters.

O'Leary initially focuses on the role of Eleonora of Aragon on occasion of two distinct conflicts: the Pazzi War (1478-1480) and the War of Ferrara (1482-1484). In the first case, she acted as a mediator between her father and her husband Ercole, with the latter acting as Captain-general of the Italian league (Florence, Milan, and Venice), and the former leading the Papal army in Tuscany. After unsuccessfully meeting her father in Naples in 1479, Eleonora actively contributed to negotiate peace between the Este and the Aragonese. In this capacity, she wrote the instructions to his chamberlain Brandelise Trotti who was supposed to submit to Eleonora's brother Alfonso II. As argued by O'Leary, these instructions show that "her thoughts are clear and her advice sound, listing over several pages both parties' grievances while offering herself as the conduit for administering a resolution" (32), demonstrating a peculiar attention to linguistic style. Correspondence also shows the strong relationship between Eleonora and her brother Alfonso, which would have proved crucial at the time of the Venetian invasion of Ferrara, when the Aragonese gave their support to Ercole d'Este.

One of the most interesting aspects emerging here relies on the double identity of Eleonora as a member of both the Aragonese and the Este families. Rather than a weakness, this double identity was critical for mediating between different parties. However, the common Aragonese identity of Beatrice and Eleonora did not necessarily facilitate the mediation between the two sisters. Childless, Beatrice negotiated with her sister to secure the guardianship of her sister's third child Ippolito, which—supported by her husband Matthias Corvinus—she finally obtained by giving her nephew the powerful archbishopric of Esztergom, in Hungary. Interestingly, on this occasion the diplomatic relationships between the two sisters took the shape of a double intertwined channel of communication. Firstly, the written word, with the two sisters exchanging a number of letters to discuss Ippolito's guardianship and the economic matters related to his transfer to Hungary; secondly, oral communication, which took place with the dispatch of the Este agent Bartolomeo Bresciano to Hungary, who operated "to substitute Eleonora, rather than the Duke" (47). He had to examine the matter in more detail and to verify Beatrice's suitability as a guardian. The complexity of this negotiation depended on the different strategies of the two sisters, with Beatrice looking for a protector in the event of her husband's

death, and Eleonora acting with the main purpose of bringing her son back to Italy as soon as possible.

The divisions between the sisters emerged even more clearly in the events following the death of Matthias Corvinus, with Eleonora's identity more evidently shifting from her Aragonese background to the Este House. In the attempt of preserving her hold over Hungary, Beatrice made an agreement with the King of Bohemia Władysław and married him in 1490. However, this strategy was unsuccessful. After obtaining the Crown by the Hungarian Diet, Władysław schemed to obtain the annulment of his marriage with Beatrice, a situation that dominated the diplomatic correspondence of the period. While leading his political battle for impeding the papal annulment and stopping Ludovico Sforza's attempt to marry his daughter to the new King of Hungary, King Ferrante of Naples tried to exploit the diplomatic network of his daughter Eleonora. The latter was supposed to spread the information that Beatrice's marriage with Władysław had been consummated. Yet this request clashed with Eleonora's own political agency, and she de facto ignored her father's letter on the subject. Having two of her children married to the Sforza family, Eleonora could not scheme against Ludovico Sforza, while she was also successfully planning to secure a cardinalate in Italy to her son Ippolito, thus opposing the agendas of both her father and sister.

The dynastic women's multiplicity of identities should be considered not only as a means to achieve their political agendas, but also as a tool of survival. In this sense, the multiple identities of Beatrice of Aragon were critical to last through the deaths of her sister Eleonora (1493) and her father Ferrante (1494), as well as the dramatic political crisis in Hungary and the French invasion of the Kingdom of Naples (1394-1395). From being a dynastic woman of the House of Aragon, Beatrice had become Queen of Hungary and later the adoptive mother of the powerful cardinal Ippolito d'Este, and thus even a relative of the latter's natal family. After the annulment of her marriage with Władysław in 1500, Beatrice finally left Hungary and returned to Naples, from where she corresponded with Ippolito d'Este and her niece Isabella to obtain financial help and political support to protect her assets in Hungary. It was however her natal Aragonese identity that provided the solutions to her problems. After the conquest of Naples by Ferdinand II of Aragon (1504), Beatrice

gained the latter's protection, through which she regained some political relevancy in Italy, as attested by her correspondence with the new duchess of Ferrara, Lucrezia Borgia.

In summary, this book sheds a light on the often-neglected role of dynastic women in the broader political and diplomatic network of Renaissance Europe. Thanks to the existing letters, the examples of Eleonora and Beatrice of Aragon reveal the strategies dynastic women pursued independently from their fathers, husbands, and other relatives to meet their own agendas, and in turn to what extent those strategies contributed to their families' diplomatic and political relationships. This short monograph would have significantly benefitted from a documentary appendix including a selection of the correspondence of Eleonora and Beatrice. Although there are several documentary references scattered across the book, the original texts of the two sisters could have given readers first-hand, vivid demonstrations of their diplomatic skills and rhetorical abilities.

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