

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Dr. Ellie Woodacre, reader in Renaissance history at the University of Winchester and author of *Queens and Queenship* to discuss the power of influential queen mothers. So can we start with a bit of context around the typical role of a dowager queen?

EW: Yeah, so before we talk about dowager queens, I think it's important to talk about all these adjectives, all these labels, we have to give queens and Theresa Earenfight once famously said a queen needs an adjective. Like, we have to describe her role, is she a consort queen or she a reigning queen or a regnant queen, is she a regent queen, etc. So dowager queens are technically the widow of a previous king. Now a dowager queen can just be the widow. So like Joan of Navarre, who I wrote about, she was just the widow of Henry IV. She wasn't the mother of the next king. Or they could be also the queen mother. So in this case, obviously, what we're thinking about the power of queen mothers, we're thinking about women who are the widow of previous rulers and also the mother of the next one, which puts them in a really important position as kind of the pivot point between reigns.

AT: And similar to how we might discuss that a queen consort is sort of that intersection of wife and views on what a wife should be in perceptions about wifeliness. How does this play out in terms of the intersection of motherhood and monarchy?

EW: Yeah, so I think one of the presumptions that we tend to have is we tend to focus on queens when they are young, right? We tend to focus on them when they are getting married or being betrothed or bearing heirs, etc. And we have this presumption that older women are kind of marginalized or they're kind of passed their sell-by date or once they're a widow, they're kind of shoved off to the corner of the court or they're hived off to a nunnery or they're no longer kind of powerful or useful. But actually, one of the things as we start to look more at these women is actually these women become matriarchs. Sometimes they reach the apex of their power and authority in their later years. And that's one of the things that I think is really, really important. And it becomes even more important when you start to look at queenship and monarchy globally. And you look at the difference between like monogamous and polygamous monarchies. And here we can really see in lots of examples in both Europe and beyond that a lot of women, again, are at their most powerful. They actually increase in power as they age rather than decrease and kind of retire off.

AT: So it really undermines this idea that the role of a queen was just to bear the heir and reinforces that many of them were very influential outside of just that, I don't want to say broodmare, but that is sort of what it feels like, role.

EW: Yeah, well, I mean, it's kind of tied to that. I mean, obviously, we do focus on the bit when they are bearing the heirs and the pressure on women to bear heirs, etc. But I think part of that is for a woman, motherhood is where their power lies. And I think that there are two kind of ways in which that happens for, when we're looking at European kind of monarchies. European monarchy is kind of centered around what Fanny Cosandey called like l'trinité, the trinity of

monarchy, right? You've got the king, the queen, and the heir. And in that kind of scenario, that monogamous scenario, a woman plays a really important part as again, this pivot point between reigns she is the wife of one ruler. So she's very important in that reign. And she's also the transitional figure because she's the mother of the next ruler. And so this really helps her. She is the pivot point, the connection point, if you like, between one reign and another. And it can give her incredible power, particularly if her child's reign starts when they are in their minority, and so they can move into a regency position. And that point of connection between reigns again, legitimizes their role as a potential regent. That and this idea of maternal duty or maternal care that a woman would always put the needs of their child first before their own needs or ambition, etc. And so it gives them a great deal of power and authority. Like I said, it's this kind of point of connection and legitimizing point for the next reign. So that's the kind of monogamous factor that can give women power through maternity. And sometimes it can be an increase if you'd just been the consort or the wife, and then all of a sudden you're moved up to becoming the regent. That's a huge increase in kind of power and authority there. And a great example of that is like, say, Catherine de Medici, right, who had been, to some extent, marginalized in her husband's reign, particularly because of the power of his mistress, Diane de Poitiers. But then in her sons' reign, particularly her second son, Charles IX, she becomes the regent. And so she has incredible power. She kind of swells in importance after her husband dies in 1559. So we can really see that.

But if we switch to global monarchy, it becomes even more important. And one of the things that's really key with polygamous monarchy is that in a monogamous scenario, the king's wife is normally the most important, generally the most important woman or the premier woman of the realm. She's the other half of the ruling pair, if you like. But in a global monarchy, a ruler can have loads and loads of wives and loads and loads of consort and concubines, etc. So even the person who has this title of say Empress or Queen or something, she's not necessarily singular. But a king can only ever have one mother, or at least one biological mother. Sometimes it's an adopted mother. But again, that singularity gives her importance. And so that makes her the most important figure. And so in polygamous monarchies, we can see that motherhood becomes everything that the bearing of the air is really what gives you your power and authority. And whether your son comes to the throne as a minority and gives you the power of regency, or even if he comes into the throne as an adult, you often take on this senior role, you are the most important, the matriarchal figure, the empress dowager is the one who runs the inner palace, it's the valide sultan, the mother of the sultan in the Ottoman Empire that runs the inner court, etc. So these women have huge power and authority as the king's mother, the ruler's mother. So it's really, really interesting to see the kind of power that maternity provides in monarchy.

AT: And as we're talking about the symbol of the transition of power, I've actually just been thinking about the fact that a lot of these women weren't necessarily the queen. So the one that's really sticking out in my brain is Margaret Beaufort during the War of the Roses, who once her son came to power, I believe she insisted on the title, my lady, the king's mother, because she had never been a queen, but she was very politically involved, shall we say, both during his rise and his reign.

EW: Absolutely. And there's a whole bunch of really interesting women like that that are in that position of being a king's mother, but had never been queen. And so Margaret Beaufort, you're absolutely right. And for all extents and purposes, she acts as a queen mother, as if she had been queen during the reign of Henry VII. And obviously there's been a lot of controversy about her signature Margaret R, if that was Margaret Richmond, or if that's meant to be like Margaret Regina, so that she's signing herself like a queen. So she really does take on that apparatus and bearing of being a queen, even though she'd never held the title. So absolutely.

And I think a really interesting parallel of that is Louise de Savoie, the mother of Francois I in France. And obviously she had never been queen of France. But when her son becomes king, she is the king's mother. And she is, in many ways, his ruling partner. I mean, his two wives, Claude de France, and also Eleanor of Austria were very much kind of frozen out by Louise of Savoie. And also, Francois's mistresses. So they really didn't have a great deal of power and authority. I mean, Claude was the bearer of heirs. She was significant because she was the heiress of Brittany, from her mother. But they did not have a huge amount of power. Louise of Savoie was incredibly influential with Francis. Everyone recognized that, diplomats, etc., realized that the king's mother was the person you needed to talk to. And when Francois went to Italy on multiple times for campaigns, and particularly during the period in which he was detained in Spain after the Battle of Pavia, when he was captured, she was running France. So she was not only ruling the realm, but also dealing with negotiations for his release, et cetera. She hammered out the Peace of the Ladies with Margaret of Austria, for example, as well. So incredibly powerful, incredibly active woman. And again, was never queen herself. So yes, maternity can give you incredible power. You don't even need to have been a queen to exercise that power on your son's reign.

AT: And as we're talking about the Ottoman Empire and the Sultanate of Women with the valide sultans, there was an interesting case with Mihrimah. She was really interesting because again, she was never actually queen, but she was very influential during her father's reign and then her brother's and then her nephew's. So I'm assuming at least the nephew saw her as that maternal figure. But again, we're talking about a very influential female relative, but not actually the queen. And in this case, not actually the mother.

EW: Absolutely. I mean, I think I think one of the things is really significant about the Sultanate of Women period. And it's a period that kind of mirrors what's often called the monstrous regiment period in Europe, this period in the 16th and 17th century, where we have this plethora of powerful women, we have regnant queens, we have consorts, we have powerful regent queens like Catherine de Medici, who we were just talking about. And in the Ottoman Empire, we have this kind of glut of women from powerful wives like Hürrem Sultan, who breaks all the rules in terms of her relationship with Suleiman the Magnificent, becomes incredibly powerful. And then yes, Mihrimah, the daughter, who's incredibly powerful as a daughter of a Sultan, but also again, as the female relatives, you don't have to be a mother to have incredible power. And then of course, there is a series of regents as well, so many fabulous women in this period who are powerful in all sorts of ways. So whether it's powerful wives like Hürrem Sultan, powerful daughters and aunts like Mihrimah or powerful regent mothers and even grandmothers. I think

Kösem is also powerful as a grandmother as well. So these women were incredibly influential, incredibly powerful, again, both explicitly and implicitly. And I think it shows you again, this kind of presumption that situations like the harem that we again view as being kind of oversexualized and disempowering for women can actually provide a basis for female power and authority. And the women used female networks as well to increase their power. So many of the validate sultans were not only powerful because of their influential with their son, the Sultan, but they use their daughters as well to contract damad marriages where again, they kind of co-opted powerful men in the empire into their network through the marriages of their daughters as well and built the relationships, alliances in that way. So these women were incredibly savvy, incredibly powerful. And I think it would be kind of a false assumption to presume that just because they live within the walls of the harem meant that they were disempowered. I think the Sultanate of Women period really demonstrates what women can do in that environment.

AT: Now, last time you were here, we talked about the sexuality of queens and how that intersected with all sorts of social views on women's sexuality, god help us all. And what's interesting here is that it feels like being the mother of the ruler or a maternal figure is actually seen as a more socially acceptable form of power, though there will always be people who don't like women in power regardless of the circumstances. But in this case, one of the themes that you talk about in your writing is how it plays into the social values of filial piety, respecting your mother. And you know, the mother in that nurturing role as someone who can be trusted and only wants what's best for you, which of course is not necessarily always the case, depending on your interpretation. But it just seems like this was more socially acceptable. [Listen to our discussion of queens' sexuality](#), or [read the transcript](#).

EW: You're absolutely bang on there. And I would completely agree. I think one of the things that we talked about before is the kind of suspicion of women's power through intimacy, through their relationship with the king, through that influence they might have in pillow talk and intimate moments that other people couldn't access or see even, that dark matter kind of influence, if you like. And you're right, there's a complete difference there. There's a real difference in terms of women's role and as a mother and the power that they exercise. And Leslie Peirce, who worked on the Sultanate of Women talks about the power of the kind of post sexual woman, i.e. the mother after she has stopped being the bearer of heirs, stopped being a wife, stopped being a concubine or a consort, etc. And her power actually comes through maternity, it comes from this kind of post sexual status. And you're right, it fits in really nicely with societal values that respect and affirm the power of mothers or respect that should be given to mothers. So obviously even in a Christian framework, we can use the idea, the analogy of mother Mary or the Virgin Mary, again, Christ's mother, again, this idea of kind of mother and child, the Madonna, those kind of things that reinforce the value of motherhood, the importance of motherhood. But also, if we look more globally, there are societal frameworks that really affirm that one should respect, love and revere one's mother. And this really helps women to kind of reinforce the power that they have in a royal framework. So in Africa, for example, there's a proverb that says, mother is gold. Mother is your most precious thing, your most precious possession. There are Islamic hadiths,

which is the sayings of the prophet Muhammad, many of which reinforce this idea that one should respect and obey and revere one's mother. And as well, again, in Confucian ideals, and the ideal of filial piety that one should have utmost respect for one's mother and father, that you should listen to them, respect them, that really plays a huge role. So in China and Korea, for example, like the top dog is the dowager, the mother of the ruler, and or even sometimes the grandmother. And again, part of the rituals of the court is to go and pay homage to that individual every morning. I mean, the emperor would go every morning to see their mother or their grandmother and ask how she was doing and etc. So that that kind of built in societal respect for mothers, and this idea that you should listen to your mother, that you should respect your mother, etc., revere your mother, is something that women can use as a part of their power and authority, this matriarchal kind of idea of being the head of the family, and at least in the maternal way.

AT: And it does seem from what I've read that women are more acceptable ruling as regents. So they're ruling in the name of someone else, who is a child, who is absent, or who is incapacitated in some way, as opposed to women who are ruling in their own right. And I think we see this in activism as well, is I think women's activism tends to be more palatable when they're saying, "I am doing this on behalf of the children," as opposed to, "I just want this to make my life better for me, because I deserve to be treated like a human." So it is really interesting that when you look at situations like Eleanor of Aquitaine ruling while her son Richard was crusading, Halimah Sultan was regent for her mentally unfit son Mustafa. And I mean, so many women ruling for their young children, which we've mentioned before. Just seems like, again, that's more palatable, like motherhood makes a woman in power more palatable. And I think there's also this sense that they're just caretaking, like the real ruler is a man, and he'll be back, or we'll get another man in or something. But she's just, again, I don't want to say babysitting, but that's sort of how it feels.

EW: Yeah, no, absolutely. And there have been discussions about this, this idea that female authority is more palatable when she's seen as a placeholder. So even regnant queens, there's been a discussion that regnant queens are more palatable when a male heir, when she has a son, and it can be seen that this is just a temporary thing. There'll be a woman on the throne, but look, we can see the next reign will be a man, and we'll go back to normal kind of scenario. So absolutely, I think that regency, because it has a time limitation on it, in theory, especially if it's a minority scenario, it's seen as being acceptable, because it's for a particular period of time, it's for a particular reason. And again, a woman can sometimes be seen as the best person to do that job because of her maternal care, that she will always put their child first, that she will have no ambition to rule of herself. And again, if you look at the uncle, if you go to another male relative who has their own claim to the throne, there's always a danger there, there's always a danger that that individual can say, "you know what, I think I should be king anyway, forget my nephew." I mean, Richard III, obviously - I'm not going to get in the whole debate over whether he killed the princes in the tower, etc. But it does speak to that kind of scenario when if you put someone, entrust authority to someone who could take it for themselves, they may do so. And in Korea, almost the same time, there's a very similar story where there is a young king whose

uncle effectively takes the throne from him and eventually kills him. And one of the arguments that scholars of that period made, and again, it's the same period, in Korea and England, is that if he had, sadly, his mother was not alive and he had no female relatives to protect him and had that been the case, had those people been able to step in, that that young king may have survived and thrived. So, female regency is a way of protecting young monarchs, of having someone who's a safe pair of hands, who can look after them and protect their throne and not steal it from them.

AT: Sorry, I'm just trying not to laugh because on the assumption that, "oh, women won't do the bad thing." Isn't that how Catherine the Great came to power? And she just never gave the power to her son even after he came of age.

EW: Catherine the Great is a really interesting one. Of course, there are examples of women who who aren't a safe pair of hands and who do steal the throne from their sons. So yeah, Catherine the Great is a great example. Also, I think another great example of two women whose careers are very similar is Wu Zeitan in China and the Empress Irene in Byzantium and both of these women do effectively steal the throne from their sons. And, Empress Irene even has her son blinded after he kind of tries to push her out again. So, there are women who the maternal, the maternal love and duty doesn't always mean that they act, in their child's best interests. So absolutely, the presumption that that maternal love will always win out over ambition is erroneous, definitely.

AT: I mean, I've heard of mothers punishing their kids for talking back, but that seems a bit excessive.

EW: Yeah, definitely, definitely. I mean, Empress Irene is definitely not going to win any brownie points for mother love there. So, so yes, absolutely. So, there are always examples of women who who don't kind of fit that bill over the expectation. But again, the reason why these women were often able to be regents is that it was presumed that maternal love would be paramount. And in France it's been argued the reason why there becomes this tradition of regency in the Capetians, the Valois, the Bourbon, etc. is that because of the so-called Salic law, and don't even get me started on that, can be a whole other podcast that we can talk about Salic law. But because of this, this blockade against regnant queens, they are seen as again, the safe pair of hands because the woman cannot rule, full stop. And so she can be trusted because she cannot take the throne in her right. So therefore, she is definitely the safest pair of hands.

AT: I just picture these women saying "challenge accepted!" Now, we've touched on a couple of the themes that you write about, because you've written a chapter for an upcoming collection where you talk about the specific throughlines where you're seeing these commonalities both across Europe and then more globally. So do you want to just take us through those and maybe touch on how we see these connections across such a variety of times and places and cultures?

EW: Definitely. So we've talked about these, sometimes we get these groups of women where we start to get these traditions of female power and authority. And obviously, we've talked about the Sultanate of Women, we talked about France, the great traditions of regency there. But obviously in Asia, we have the kind of power of the queen or the empress dowager in China and Korea. Another place actually where we can see really interesting traditions of maternal power that are somewhat different is in Africa. And that's one of the things I think is really, really interesting, whereas we're talking about regency or the authority of the mother over the inner palace and that kind of thing. In Africa, we actually have traditions of co-rule between mother and son. And that's one thing that is really, really interesting to see. In fact, in the Swazi monarchy, the king is enthroned with his mother, not with a wife. And so that is an explicit co-rulership. So that's one thing I think is really important, the power of the queen mother, the queen mother as the ruler's mother. And sometimes even if she's not a biological mother, sometimes she's a female relative, an aunt, etc. And sometimes this idea of being the ohemaa, the mother of the clan as well, that gives them, again, this elder matriarchal authority to decide the succession, to be consulted in important matters, etc. So I think that is a really, really interesting kind of twist on maternal power as well, looking at kind of African monarchies and in a very different way than that kind of delimited regency type authority that we were talking about previously.

AT: And it is interesting when we're talking about going back to the polygamous versus monogamous, because obviously coming from western backgrounds, we are more familiar and perhaps more comfortable with the monogamous perspective. But something that I feel like has come up a couple times now is the adoption. So even if we're talking about, say, consorts and concubines and whatever other titles women in that situation may have, even if you do not bear the child, you can always just adopt the child. And it doesn't really matter who, well it doesn't necessarily matter, who gave birth to the child, but rather who claims them, who claims the motherhood and the power that comes with it.

EW: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. And I think there's some really interesting variations on the theme. So obviously biological motherhood is a really important factor. But it's not necessarily the most important factor. So you can have scenarios, say, for example, if we look at Imperial China, there have been scenarios when an empress has adopted the son of a consort or a concubine and made them the heir and favored them and acted as if they were their biological mother and therefore had that power of association with the next ruler. And so that's been significant. You can also have powerful grandmothers. And I think that's important, where sometimes the actual mother is sidestepped in favor of an elder. So again, that the most senior female has the power. And certainly that's the case in Korea when we have the first of the Joseon regent queen, Jeonghui. She's the grandmother. And actually, the mother is there. And actually, Jeonghui at very particular times tries to defer to the mother. And yet she is the preferred individual, is the most kind of senior kind of mother as well.

Bumbutai, the Kangxi Emperor's grandmother was also really important in his reign. But yes, you can also have aunts being important. You can have other female relatives. And again, Africa again shows that importance where it's not necessarily your biological mother who is the

co-ruler or the queen mother. It can be again, another kind of female relative, sometimes from the maternal or paternal side, etc, who has that power and kind of shares co-rule with you. So yes, it doesn't have to necessarily be the biological mother who can predicate this kind of maternal power.

AT: Well, there's an interesting case from, again, the Sultanate of Women, because that was a really fascinating period, where, and I think you mentioned this, Kösem Sultan was regent for her son from 1623 to 1640. And then she was regent again for his son, which caused all sorts of drama with her daughter-in-law. And I believe resulted in Kösem Sultan being murdered three years after becoming regent for her grandson. So there was a lot going on there is what I'm saying.

EW: Absolutely, absolutely. And that's that's a kind of scenario that my queenship students find really kind of interesting. This kind of bloodbath in the palace, this kind of fight between women for control. And absolutely, I think one of the things that is kind of a truism about polygamy is that the bonus of polygamy is that it kind of spreads the bearing of heirs among lots of women. So it's not one woman who's responsible for the bearing of heirs. So it increases the likelihood that the dynasty will continue and have heirs. The downside is that kind of rivalry, that infighting, not only between heirs and fratricide, but also between women to compete to put their child forward. And also when there is a child involved, who is going to have that power and authority. And again, this is where you can get the kind of mother and grandmother rivalry. We talked about Jeonghui in Korea who was deferring to the mother, even though she still kind of kept the role. But Kösem was completely the opposite- when she had power, she was not going to let go. So again, this is why, there's a whole soap opera, *The Magnificent Century*, that is basically, charts the struggles and the the infighting, if you like, within the dynasty in this fantastic period. And there's a whole spinoff about Kösem. And I think she deserves it, to be honest. She's an absolutely colorful character. So yes, bloodbath. Yeah, absolutely.

AT: And one of the other things we talked about in the previous episode was not just the perception of a queen's sexuality, but how much of her stability, her security on the throne depended on bearing an heir. And it seems to me like that is the most precarious aspect for a lot of queens, particularly a queen consort rather than a queen regnant. But even the queen regnants certainly had a lot of pressure in that regard as well. Mary Queen of Scots shows us that a queen regnant can easily be removed in favor of a literal infant as long as he's male. So it seems like the queen mothers who do choose to have power who do rise to have that level of influence, it seems like it would be a lot harder to knock them off that perch. Like they must be a lot more solid in their power and more difficult to undermine, I would think.

EW: Absolutely. And I think one of the things that we can see in a monogamous framework, obviously, a queen consort is under incredible pressure to bear the heir. And once she does so, her position as consort is more stable. She is less under threat. If she's produced the heir, then she's good, she's golden, right? And then she then can have power in the long term. It not only secures her in the short term, but it secures her in the long term because she knows she will not



only be powerful and influential in her husband's reign as the mother of the heir and the wife of the king, but she will then become the mother of the king. And she will have that kind of long term connection. Whereas if she's a childless widow, she's just the dowager, the relic of a previous king. And then the new king comes in with his wife, etc., or maybe his mother, who we were talking about like a Margaret Beaufort or Louise of Savoie figure, and she can be kind of pushed aside. So she loses her relevance, if you like. So it does give her long term security. And it's a lot harder, you're right, to dislodge a mother than it is to dislodge a wife, if you like, that they might know, especially one who's barren. But also in a polygamous framework, motherhood is really, really important. And one of the things that Evelyn Rawski kind of makes the point in Qing China, that the concubines and consorts who don't bear children or don't bear male children are kind of written out, they're forgotten, they're almost eliminated from the memory of the dynasty. They're not commemorated. They're like these disappearing voices, if you like, like almost like, were they even there? So absolutely, motherhood, bearing in heir is the way to kind of secure yourself, secure yourself in the short term, but also more importantly, in the long term. It means that you are not unassailable, but in a much stronger position. And you're right, it's harder to dislodge the king's mother unless the king falls out with his mother, than it is to dislodge a mistress or a wife or a consort or a concubine.

AT: So what we're saying is, don't mess with mama.

EW: Absolutely. Don't mess with mama, indeed.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast and remember well-behaved women rarely make history.