

**Jan Rüdiger, *All the King's Women. Polygyny and Politics in Europe, 900–1250*. Translated by Tim Barnwell, Leiden (Brill Academic Publishers) 2020, XII–452 p. (The Northern World, 88), ISBN 978-90-04-34951-3, EUR 125,00.**

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**David S. Bachrach, Durham, NH**

Originally published as »Der König und seine Frauen. Polygynie und politische Kultur in Europa (9.–13. Jahrhundert)« in 2015, and ably translated into English by Tim Barnwell, »All the King's Women« challenges the traditional historiographical emphasis on the role of marriage in elite political relationships, and offers a much broader and more nuanced examination of a range of relationships with women in which elite men engaged. In particular, Rüdiger argues that the static model of the primacy of a »wife« in comparison to a »concubine«, which is based largely on legal sources, fails to explain ways in which rulers and other magnates made use of polygyny, which he defines simply as serial or simultaneous relationships with multiple women.

The main focus of the study is on Scandinavia, the associated regions of the Baltic and North Sea littoral, as well as England. However, Rüdiger also draws comparisons between practices in the north, and those in parts of western and southern Europe. This division is reflected in the organization of the volume. The main body of the book consists of seven chapters, which are divided into two unequal parts. The first five chapters focus on the northern lands. Chapters six and seven are intended to provide a comparative perspective, that focus, in turn, on the »core« of Europe in greater Francia and then on Iberia. In his treatment of the northern lands, Rüdiger draws largely on information provided in sagas, which he complements to a limited degree with legal texts.

Reflecting the much larger source base that is available in other regions of Europe, Rüdiger uses a much broader range of written works in his discussion of greater Francia and Iberia, including Latin historiographical texts and documents. However, he also devotes considerable attention to literary works, particularly in the vernacular. As is fitting for a study that is intended to disrupt a long-established scholarly tradition regarding elite political culture, Rüdiger begins his book with a lengthy introduction that sets out the historiographical lacuna with respect to polygyny among elite men as a social-political phenomenon. Rüdiger then offers what amounts to a second introduction, which offers a detailed analysis of the use of sagas for the writing of social and political history.

In part one of the book, Rüdiger identifies five aspects of polygyny, each of which is the focus of an individual chapter. He begins



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with the »generative aspect«, which concerns the production of heirs or potential heirs. In this context, Rüdiger describes the peculiarly northern, and particularly Norwegian practice of an open competition among all of the sons of a ruler or magnate for their father's office, irrespective of the social or legal status of an individual son's mother. Rüdiger argues that the polygynous practices of elite northern men meant that they often had many sons, whose own political success was dependent upon their own ambition and talent, as well as the perceived strong character of their mothers. Consequently, a slave woman with the requisite character, as described in sagas, could have a positive impact on her son's success whereas a daughter of a magnate without the necessary »masculine« qualities could impede her son's success.

In chapter two, Rüdiger turns to the »habitus« of polygyny, which he describes as the creation of a public image for the purpose of acquiring social capital. Here, Rüdiger describes a wide range of relationships between chieftains, men of elite status, and rulers in which the acquisition of a female relative created, affirmed, or renewed political ties. Drawing on scholarship that indicates preferential female infanticide in Scandinavia with a concomitant scarcity of women, Rüdiger also argues that having multiple, simultaneous relationships with women signified the superior status and power of a chief. In a similar vein, he contends that one important way in which important men demonstrated their power was to provide women for their followers. Connecting these social practices of polygyny to the surviving sources, Rüdiger contends that it was essential for leading men to employ skalds so that the deeds of the patrons, including their successful polygyny, would be made known to a wide audience.

The third chapter focuses on the »agonistic« aspect of polygyny, and particularly the role that success or failure in the competition for a particular woman played in the political reputations and success of elite men. Rüdiger argues that competition among elite men, including competition over women, can be seen in sources from throughout medieval Europe. However, what makes the north different is that competitions over women are depicted in sagas as central political events. Through a series of case studies, Rüdiger traces out the harm to the reputation and, in some cases, the political fortunes of men who failed in their effort to secure a particular woman.

In chapter four Rüdiger discusses the »expressive« aspect of polygyny, which deals with the practical value to elite men of establishing multiple relationships. He returns to his criticism, made in the introduction, regarding the historiographical tradition that polygyny with women other than the wife of the ruler or magnate should be seen in purely sexual or emotional terms, and not as an element of political discourse. He argues that the model of the superiority of the relationship of marriage is at odds with evidence from northern sources, and particularly the sagas, which are unparalleled in Europe for the prosopographical precision with which they record the names, families, and histories of the



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women with whom important men had relationships, particularly when sons were produced. This detailed information was provided about the women irrespective of their status as a »wife«. Through the course of a dozen case studies, Rüdiger concludes that the expressive form of polygyny is exemplified in the way that relationships with numerous women, most of whom were not denoted as wives, could be used as signs of political relationships or signals about dominance as part of a semiotic system.

The fifth chapter, which is the most theoretical of the first section, turns to the »performative« aspect of polygyny. Rüdiger describes the performative aspect as one that unfolds through the act, itself, as contrasted with the expressive aspect as one that is dependent upon its future reception by others, e. g. through hearing about it in a skaldic verse. However, Rüdiger's detailed discussion in this chapter of the career of the jarl Hákon in the mid- to late 10<sup>th</sup> century, which can be developed through information provided in 13<sup>th</sup> century sagas, does not make clear how the performative aspect really differed from either the habitus or expressive aspects of polygyny.

In chapters six and seven, Rüdiger draws on the insights that he developed regarding the importance of polygyny in elite social-political relationships in the north to ask whether polygyny may have played similar roles in other parts of Europe. In support of his contention that there were, in fact, similarities Rüdiger points to the career of King Henry I of England, who famously had sexual relationships with numerous women, which resulted in many illegitimate children. In analyzing the nature of Henry I's polygynous relationships, Rüdiger points out that many of the women, who can be identified, were from important families in strategically important regions throughout the Anglo-Norman realm, which suggests that Henry pursued a type of both generative and expressive polygyny that was similar to that of northern magnates and rulers. In addition, Henry I subsequently married off several of these women to important men in strategic locations, thereby strengthening even further networks of support for the ruler. However, there were also important differences. Chief among these was the fact that none of Henry's illegitimate children were in a position to claim his offices, while in Norway all of the male offspring could have done so. Consequently, it appears that normative monogamism was more powerful in England (and Normandy) than in Norway.

Rüdiger also devotes considerable attention to King James the Conqueror of Aragon, and the ways in which contemporary sources, including his own autobiography, depict his relationships with women. Rüdiger begins with the famous contract of »concubinage« with Countess Aurembiaix of Urgel, which he argues put into writing a relationship that would have been very familiar to a ruler such as Cnut the Great or Harald Haardrada. However, he also points out the difficulties inherent in utilizing polygyny as a political tool in Iberia, when confronting the hostile Muslim »other« where polygyny was the norm for elite men.



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In the final section of the book, which serves partly as a conclusion and partly as a call to future scholarship, Rüdiger turns again to the problem of marriage, and how scholars can overcome what he sees as an insufficiently nuanced understanding of this type of relationship. He argues that marriage was not the opposite of polygyny in medieval Europe, but rather one of its subsets. He also argues that the ongoing negotiable status of marriage as one of many types of relationships between elite men and women of various social statuses must be understood as a Christian practice rather than a holdover from pagan society. Rüdiger does see the amorphous nature of marriage in practice, as contrasted with the treatment of marriage in legal texts, coming to an end in the 13<sup>th</sup> century with the concomitant transition of polygyny from a central element of elite political culture to an adornment of elite social life. He suggests that this transition had something to do with a broader transition in European society, including an increasingly effective use of law by rulers, but leaves the question open for future research.

Overall, this is a fascinating study that reveals a much greater flexibility than scholars heretofore have recognized in the ways in which elite men could use relationships with women of a variety of social and legal statuses to achieve a range of political goals. Although the majority of the study focuses on the north and draws on sources that are unique to the north, Rüdiger is successful in drawing significant parallels with other regions of Europe, despite the persistence of important cultural differences. In light of Rüdiger's findings, it is now incumbent upon historians of elite social and political history to reconsider the traditional focus on marriage as the only type of »legitimate« union for rulers and magnates in other parts of Europe.



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