

## **Power: Paradigms, Parameters, and Possibilities**

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Let me begin first of all by saying welcome, everyone! We're so delighted to see you "here", and we've been looking forward to this for ages! As you all know, this is what we're calling a "distributed conference", and I really hope for more of these as we move forward. Although the idea for this approach was born out of necessity imposed by the pandemic, I think it does have a few *advantages*. And I'll tell you right up front the biggest advantage to me personally. I took on the position of Dean of Arts a couple of years ago, and imagine my chagrin when I discovered there was actually a lot of work associated with the position – who knew? So I'm perpetually late with everything these days, and I knew I was getting down to the wire with preparing this paper, but I had set aside all last weekend to work on it. Only to receive the irresistible message from the President's office that all day Saturday and all day Sunday had to be spent in interviews. So back to my big advantage: I haven't yet done all the homework I wanted to do, expected to do, and should have done – but the distributed nature of the conference means that I will have time to copy all of yours.

The theme of our conference is power and royal Hellenistic women, though we've stretched the parameters a bit to allow for other elite women and a glance into the Roman period. What I'd like to do with this opening paper is lay out some of the thoughts that the organizing committee had in framing the core theme of this

conference in the first place, and the kind of questions we'd like our discussions to pursue. In order to do so, I'm going to return briefly to our original call for papers, and start with a work of scholarship that decades ago, in my snotty scholarly youth, I curled my lip at slightly, but which I now recognize as a massive and innovative contribution [advance]: Grace Harriet Macurdy's *Hellenistic Queens: A Study of Woman-Power in Macedonia, Seleucid Syria, and Ptolemaic Egypt*, first published in 1932.

I used to turn my nose up at Macurdy's groundbreaking work because I thought myself exceedingly clever to have learned that "older" works of scholarship regularly suffered from outdated information and outmoded attitudes, and that we should all be relying solely on the most brand-spanking-new cutting-edge research, preferably published within the past five minutes. Now that I'm older and, I hope, less clever but more wise – not to mention conscious that my own first article was published over thirty years ago – I've come around to appreciating *Hellenistic Queens* for the amazing work it is. In the past few years, my respect for it has been helped along by the late Barbara McManus's fascinating biography of Grace Macurdy [advance], *The Drunken Duchess of Vassar*, which came out in 2017.

The title of Macurdy's treatise on Hellenistic queens indicates that the concept of "power" was core to her work, but Macurdy tends to *describe* power (or individual manifestations of it) rather than define it. Moreover, the structure of her work focuses on individual queens arranged by their particular dynasties; discussion of the question

of power is parsed out among these various case studies, rather than embedded in a topical discussion of its own. Many others, myself included, have done the same thing: given the state of our sources, any exploration of the lives and actions of these women presents numerous challenges as it is. Nevertheless, it seemed to us that there's room for – and perhaps even evidence to sustain – an in-depth examination of what is meant by “power” in the context of ancient royal women.

I don't know where we'll end up with this exploration, so it's a good thing we have several months to work on it together [advance]. There may be an inherent *danger* in seeking too hard to *define* the word “power” as a single lexical entry in the English language – we could end up strait-jacketing ourselves and creating mistakenly rigid and exclusionary categories. After all, “defining” something means – by definition (hahaha) – putting limits on it. I suspect that we'll be looking at several different facets of the same concept, or at least a concept to which, for convenience' sake, we apply the same generalized term. What I hope we can achieve is, first of all [advance], some sense of what *paradigms* of power might look like – what constitutes “power”, what shapes does it take?; second [advance], what the *parameters* of power might be – how do we measure its presence and its absence? I had reserved a third category of “possibilities” for scenarios and situations we might explore, but I confess the paper was getting too long, so I think we'll just work together as we move forward on what those possibilities might be.

I know you must be fed up with the alliteration by now, but I'm going to insist on one more bit of alliterative cheekiness before I let it go. As I was conceptualizing how we could approach the concept, I started thinking about P-lato [advance]. Which explains why I suddenly have a slide here with Raphael's *School of Athens* on it. I liked the idea of initially taking an indefinite approach [advance], with true power being an existential thing that we understand best by approaching it through its various imperfect or incomplete manifestations [advance]. Perhaps by the end of our conference, we might feel confident about creating something that approximates a Definition of the True Form – on the other hand, maybe we'll have decided that trying to define the term is an unproductive exercise [advance]. Maybe this will turn out to be an aporetic Socratic chat, rather than a fully-fledged Platonic revelation of truth. Either way, I think the true value for us will lie in having the conversations around it.

To play it safe for the moment, I think I'll defer to the *Oxford English Dictionary* in briefly discussing these somewhat randomly selected paradigms of power [advance]. By no means do I intend to suggest that this discussion will be exhaustive, exclusive, or even persuasive. I simply wanted to give some examples of the kinds of models or typologies power might take. Most of these terms are defined in the *OED* via reference to the exercise of power. I also set myself the task of attaching one or two examples of Hellenistic queens to these terms, just by way of illustration.

So let's just begin with "capacity" [**advance**]. Once you get past all the *OED* entries referring to batteries, the meanings are "mental or intellectual power; mental ability or talent; the power, ability, or faculty for anything in particular". So "ability" is core to the sense of "capacity"; but I would also add "resources", whether we would consider them mental (hence, ability or talent) or *physical*, such as personnel support or finances. Ability without resources doesn't get one very far on the path to power. On the other hand – unfortunately – resources alone, without mental capacity, may allow one to claim and retain power indefinitely; I don't think I need to offer any specific illustrations on that. But as for the question of capacity in the sense of ability, I think we could say that a number of Hellenistic queens appear to have had the capacity to hold power. Alexander's sister Cleopatra, judging from her successful sole rule in Molossia, was capable; but she is also an example of capacity being powerless when it's denied opportunity (i.e., resources). As a prisoner of Antigonos the One-Eyed, she was unable to employ her capacity or assert what power it may have represented. So the question that leaves for me is, how do we assess the "power" of a queen who we deem has natural ability but who is without resources?

The next randomly selected term is "agency" [**advance**], which the *OED* defines similarly to "capacity", but with a greater implication of action: the "ability or capacity to act or exert power". If *capacity* might be latent – and hence could be stymied by the action of others, as Alexander's sister Cleopatra was stymied – to say that a queen had

*agency* may carry a stronger suggestion that she *was* able to act in her own right. We do certainly see Hellenistic queens taking action, but perhaps the difficult question for us in this respect is determining to what extent that agency is being *independently* asserted. For example, we have a fair amount of epigraphic evidence for the interactions between the Greek cities in Asia Minor and Laodike III, the wife of Antiochos III. Laodike wrote to the cities in her own name [**advance**], and she provided benefactions from, presumably, her own estates. On the other hand, the language in which her thoughts and actions are couched very much aligns her with – and perhaps subordinates her to – the king:

- [**advance**] **In the same way his sister and queen Laodike constantly shares the same view as the king** in [all circumstances] . . . and in good deeds towards the city she shows [herself] eager and zealous to perform benefactions, and the people has received the greatest / [blessings] from both of them... (Decree of Teos voting honours to Antiochos and Laodike, 204/3 BCE; Austin 191).
- [**advance**] Queen Laodike to the council and people of Iasos, greetings... **since it is my policy to act in accordance with [my brother's] zeal and eagerness** ... I will try to help in securing in every way the other benefits I intend to confer, **acting in accordance with / the wishes of my brother**. (Letter of Laodike to Iasos, 196/5 BCE; Austin 198).

Now, there are no doubt better illustrations we could use, where a queen's *independent* agency might be more clear – Cleopatra II is probably a good example, and we'll come to her later – but I use Laodike III here precisely to ask the question, whether our sources always in fact *allow* us to determine the degree of a queen's own agency?

It may be that Laodike's actions – at least as they are laid out in these inscriptions – are more suitably described by our next random term, "authority" [**advance**]. Here the most salient fact about the "power" implied is that it is "power derived from or conferred by another; the right to act in a specified way, delegated from one person or organization to another." Here, the power is not necessarily innate (it may have nothing to do with capacity or ability); rather it is externally bestowed, whether through right of office and formal investiture, socially and politically constituted structures, or casual delegation. In this regard it may be relevant to consider that Antiochos apparently publicly proclaimed Laodike "queen", in some kind of ceremony that was separate from their wedding. There *are* certain roles and activities associated with Hellenistic queens that probably arose out of custom and tradition, and perhaps by declaring her as his queen, Antiochos was signaling that he was trusting her with this role and the activities associated with it.

To turn now to "influence" [**advance**], it is defined as "the capacity or faculty of producing effects ... *without* the employment of material force or the exercise of formal authority"; so, "moral power *over* or *with* a person." This has to be one of the most

challenging of our paradigms: “influence”, in my opinion, is the kind of power ancient queens were actually most likely to have had on a regular basis – but it is at one and the same time both the most invisible in our sources, *and* – when it does appear – the most distorted. I know some of you will be addressing the matter of prejudice against queens “behaving badly”, and it’s in this realm that we see our ancient sources gleefully imagining pillow talk and curtain lectures between king and queen. [advance] Memnon of Herakleia gives us an example: “Lysimachos, **by the cajolery of Arsinoë** (περιδρομήτι Ἀρσινόης – she literally did an end run around him) slew Agathokles, the best and elder of his sons, initially with a hidden poison but when that had been disgorged thanks to foreknowledge, through the most shameless resolve. He threw him into prison, charged him falsely with a plot against himself, and ordered him to be cut to pieces.” (BNJ 434 F1 5.6). The moral of the story, of course, is that women partnered with royal men have dangerous and illegitimate access to power.

[advance] Finally, for “control”, the *OED* gives us “to exercise power or authority over; to determine the behaviour or action of, to direct or command; to regulate or govern; to dominate or direct other people.” Unlike “authority”, there is no implication that control is something one has by right of office; but unlike “influence”, there is no implication that control is *not* something one has by right of office. The term seems simply to refer to the active expression of power, a factual statement of the

realities of a relationship(s), regardless of philosophical or constitutional rights or the lack thereof.

As I think about “control”, I’m drawn again to negative literary portraits of queens. [advance] A prominent one that comes to mind is Cleopatra Thea and the control she allegedly exerted over her son, the Seleukid ruler Antiochos VIII Grypos. If we believe Justin (39.2.7-8), the drama unfolded as follows: “After recovering his father’s throne and being freed from threats from abroad, [advance] Grypos became the target of his mother’s treachery. Through her lust for power (*cupiditate dominationis*) she had already betrayed her husband, Demetrios, and killed her other son; now she took it ill that her prestige was diminished by Grypos’ victory, and so she set before him a cup of poison when he was returning from exercise. Grypos, however, had been forewarned of the plot and, pretending to challenge his mother on a point of courtesy, bade her drink it herself. She refused, and he insisted... So the queen was beaten by a crime that recoiled on its author, and died by the poison which she had prepared for another.”

This last example is a clear demonstration of one of the chief challenges that we face in assessing royal female power: wherever and whenever a queen was conceived to hold some kind of power, whether influence or outright control, our ancient reporters tend to paint her exercise of that power in pejorative terms. As I said earlier, I know that at least some of our sessions will be exploring this issue of prejudice against active female power, not only in antiquity, but still today. [advance] Some of the epithets

hurled against Hillary Clinton during the 2016 election, including claims that she was literally the devil, are illustrative of the gut-level fear and outrage that seems to be inspired by the notion of a woman in power.

Anyway, that little exercise in so-called paradigms was not intended to suggest that everyone has to follow this approach, or that it's necessary to agree with any of *my* suggestions on how to understand the nuanced differences between them. It was more a way of illustrating that "power" can be understood in a variety of ways, and since queens' power is in any case a challenge to tease out, that we need to employ a flexibility of understanding, and that we *consistently* need to be questioning our assumptions and our vocabulary.

If we move on now to parameters [advance], I think we should be asking ourselves, how do we measure a queen's power? [advance] How is power manifested? What kind of evidence do we need? In this context, I'd like to reference the example of Arsinoë II [advance]. Here's what Grace Macurdy had to say of her: "Of the three [Olympias, Arsinoë II, Cleopatra VII], [advance] Arsinoë was the greatest politically... Arsinoë was more like the men of her line in her power of planning and the definiteness of her political aims... she was destined in Egypt to be a queen exercising the power of a king." (112, 116). This was the canonical vision of Arsinoë for many decades, a vision that was significantly challenged by Stan Burstein in the early 1980s in his paper "Arsinoe II Philadelphos: A Revisionist View".<sup>1</sup> Burstein demonstrated that evidence

for Arsinoë's *political* power, even in the form of *influence*, is thin to non-existent. What Burstein does acknowledge is that Arsinoë II was undeniably *extremely* prominent as queen and even more so after her death, given her appearance in the material record and other cultural artefacts (coins, sculpture, literature) and the emphasis placed on her in cult. But I would argue that this kind of prominence is not in and of itself a trustworthy measure of power – and I'm totally prepared to have you all disagree with me on that!

I freely admit to being rather stingy with ascribing power to queens, but I suspect I'm a bit stingy with ascribing it to kings as well. One of the biggest challenges that I always think of in estimating the degree of power a queen might hold is the matter of the *alignment* of the queen with the king [**advance**]. As I mentioned earlier, Laodike III, who was *also* a prominent queen, advertised very clearly her alignment with her husband and his policies. So we *could* likewise argue that Arsinoë simply upheld all of Ptolemy II's policies; this position would be the inverse of older scholarly assumptions that she was "a managing woman", who told her brother-husband what all his policies were supposed to be in the first place. So when I look to understand how much power a Hellenistic queen might have had, I feel the need to seek out metrics associated with *independence* [**advance**].

In my stinginess, I tend to favour cases where queens exhibit what I call orthogonal behaviours – that is to say, how successful are they at pursuing their own

goals when those goals are *not* aligned with, or even oppose, the king's? I pick Cleopatra II here, because she was successful for at least a few years in a dynastic struggle between herself and her creepy brother-husband Ptolemy VIII [**advance**]. In 131 BCE, she successfully ousted him from Alexandria, and began a period of sole rule. That's pretty orthogonal as behaviours go. Her source of power, naturally, was the support of a sufficient proportion of the local population and the military: exactly the same kind of sources that a king would draw on. In the long run, Cleopatra was not successful in sustaining her independence, largely because Ptolemy himself had a significant source of support in the native Egyptian population. But neither could *Ptolemy* exercise completely independent power. He had retaken Alexandria by 127/6 BCE, but while he had an alternate wife-ruler in his niece, Cleopatra III, not to mention five children by her, he could not free himself of Cleopatra II. By 124 BCE, the triple monarchy of Ptolemy VIII, Cleopatra II, and Cleopatra III had been reinstated, and I expect it was the support Cleopatra II enjoyed in Alexandria that prevented her brother from simply having her killed.

The case of Cleopatra II allows me to put forward my own particular theory of power, with which I thought I'd close. Some of you will have heard me on this before, so my apologies for boring you with it again. I want to quote here Edmund Burke [**advance**], the British statesman and philosopher, famous for his ruminations on the French Revolution: "All authority, in a great degree, exists in opinion: royal authority

most of all.” Or [advance], in the words of Lord Varys, “Power resides where men believe it resides. It’s a trick. A shadow on the wall.” And double and triple apologies to my colleagues for using this same old *Game of Thrones* example – I promise I’ll start collecting some new cultural referents one of these days. In any case, to me, power, no matter what its shape or its extent, its paradigm or its parameters, is always a contract between dominator and dominated. If Arsinoë II influenced her husband Lysimachos, it is only because he *allowed* himself to be influenced. Of course, royal power may employ *force* to get its way; but power can only do so if the individual or body applying that force also agrees to keep to the contract. Adea-Eurydike, the wife of Philip III Arrhidaios, was powerful until her troops deserted her rather than fight Alexander’s mother Olympias.

This has been a somewhat random and rambling opening paper, precisely because I didn’t want to use it to close any doors. I’ve mostly just asked questions to get the ball rolling. My hesitation in using some terms, or in equating them with “power”, may not be – in fact probably won’t be – shared by many of you. AND – you may not agree with my characterization of the various paradigms I chose. That’s just fine, because the whole idea of this gathering is to explore these ideas together. So now, with a final nod to Lord Varys, I’m going to hand it back to Tim.

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<sup>1</sup> W.L. Adams/E.N. Borza. 1982. *Philip II, Alexander the Great, and the Macedonian Heritage*, 197-212. Washington DC.