is a deliberate strategy to create a reading experience similar to that of d’Aragon’s contemporaries, who would have enjoyed reading her poetry precisely because it required some intellectual effort on their part. Moreover, as Hairston argues, the Petrarchist style that d’Aragon practiced “played with concepts of intellectual virtuosity in a way that often led to convoluted grammatical practice” (57). Hairston’s intelligent and precise translations will be especially valuable to scholars who are interested in the witty wordplay and rhetorical one-upmanship that often characterized poetic exchange in the sixteenth century. The footnotes throughout the text offer biographical information on d’Aragon’s literary contacts, explications of the poet’s erudite and sometimes opaque poetic imagery, and insight into Hairston’s translation strategy.

This volume, which scholars of women’s literary history have eagerly awaited, is a boon to a wide range of disciplines: from literary studies to gender studies, and almost everything in between. As she hoped, Hairston has not only provided a complete and accurate edition and translation of d’Aragon’s poems, but also illuminated the many complexities of d’Aragon’s lived life, literary career, and public persona.

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Carole Levin made her mark as a Tudor historian by studying the ways the virgin queen Elizabeth I of England was disparaged in her own time — accused of timing royal progresses to the countryside to allow her to hide her secret pregnancies and of concealing or murdering her illegitimate offspring, among other crimes. This volume is more adulatory, starting out from the premise that “Queens from the ancient period through the Renaissance have always held a special fascination” (1). Levin’s introduction is firmly grounded in second-wave feminism, with its assumption of patriarchy as the norm and queens made heroic through their struggle against it. Included in the volume are the mythic queen Hecuba of Troy, Boudicca of the Iceni (also known as Boadicea), who “fought the Romans to protect the freedoms of Celtic peoples,” Empress Matilda, who “fought to be queen
of England,” Margaret of Anjou, who “fought to hold England for her husband and her son” (1–2), and a host of others: Cleopatra of Egypt as represented in Elizabethan closet drama, Catherine of Aragon, Jane Dudley, a would-be queen-maker who backed the unfortunate Lady Jane Grey, Mary Queen of Scots, Elizabeth I, and (refreshingly) Grace O’Malley, the Sea Queen of Connaught, a sixteenth-century pirate queen who controlled significant parts of the west coast of Ireland.

The dominant tone of the volume is adulatory, even cloyingly so, especially in the rather labored poems and playlets commissioned to accompany the scholarly essays on each queen in the volume. The final essay, by Jo Eldridge Carney on “Poisoning Queens,” breaks the pattern by asking why women rulers have so often (and usually groundlessly) been suspected as poisoners. Carney notes that poisoning was considered an Italian specialty that arrived in northern Europe along with Catherine de Médicis, who ruled France as queen mother and regent during the lives of three sons. Most of the Italian poisoning women probably were probably innocent of the crime — even the notorious Lucrezia Borgia, who, Carney contends, was a poisoner only in the “popular imagination” (271). Carney considers the rumors that swirled around Anne Boleyn as a poisoner and around Catherine of Aragon and Elizabeth I as both perpetrators and potential victims and argues that these paranoid fantasies were by-products of “firmly entrenched cultural hysteria about capabilities of women in power” (281).

I would like to know more: surely the prominence of these rumors about poisoning gave people the illusion of mastery in an era of frequent sudden death under mysterious circumstances that could not be cleared up through a forensic science that had not yet been invented. And yet even in our own era poison is still held to be a woman’s weapon far more often than a man’s: is this generalization backed by statistical data, or is it based in the same paranoia that saw potential poisoners in every royal kitchen in the Renaissance? Or is the persistence of the rumor in both cases related to maternal roles in primary sustenance as givers of milk and food?

Most of the poems and plays about queens are fairly pedestrian, but the final poem, which follows the poisoning essay and concludes the volume, is the most successful of its literary offerings: Grace Bauer’s intriguingly broken meditation on queens and narrative in “The Kingdom if I Can.” Other essays of particular interest include Katarzyna Lecky’s “How the Iceni became British: Holinshed’s Boudicca and the Rhetoric of Naturalization,” which demonstrates how that ancient queen was used in Holinshed’s influential Chronicles of England,
Scotland, and Ireland (1577) to model the creation of a modern imperial “Britain” and “shared fiction of nationhood” (56) out of a diverse and disunited set of peoples. It is fascinating that Holinshed enlisted an ancient British queen to preside over such a “labile conception of the natural character” (56). Of course, Great Britain was not formally created until 1707, and James I was much more committed to “Britain” than the queen who preceded him or than most Elizabethans. Lecky would do well to remind readers that the task was not fulfilled until over a century after Holinshed, when Scotland was formally united with England.

Marguerite A. Tassi’s essay on “Tears for Hecuba: Empathy and Maternal Bereavement in Golding’s Translation of Ovid’s Metamorphoses” is also quite strong and up to date, in that it studies the creation of empathy as a particular tool of Renaissance rhetoric — a tool for which Hecuba, who suffered the loss of not only husband and kingdom, but all of her many children, served as a paradigmatic figure. The grieving Hecuba was a symbol of the emotion behind the power of tragedy for the Renaissance, a process of identification across genders that is, Tassi argues, supported in modern neurological research on “mirror neurons” in the brain. It is regrettable that both Lecky and Tassi’s essays focus on engravings that are discussed in detail but not supplied as illustrations for readers. The volume includes several other essays that deserve special mention, especially the study of Catherine of Aragon by Theresa Earenfight, Alyson Alvarez’s investigation of Mary Stuart’s self-presentations as widow, and Sonja Drimmer’s meditation on a “Pedigree Book and Queen Elizabeth’s Teeth.”

The editors are to be commended for including work by literary scholars, poets, historians, art historians, and graduate students in a single volume. What they are really celebrating, I suspect, is not the power of ancient and early modern queens so much as the power of modern women in those disciplines in the academy and the acts of recovery they have performed under the aegis of feminism. The frontispiece image by Julia Noyes says it all, depicting a woman in modern academic garb and flowing hair who points out salient features of enlarged miniatures of three early modern queens suspended before her, the central of whom is the young Elizabeth I. While the modern academic woman lectures animatedly about the queens, an obviously Elizabethan male courtier languishes in the foreground, his shield carelessly cast aside. The image is obviously based on Isaac Oliver’s famous portrait of Sir Edward Herbert as a melancholy lover. However, in Noyes’s version, the prone figure also calls to mind Sir Walter Raleigh, Elizabeth’s devoted courtier remembered in popular lore for feats of mythic devotion for the
queen, such as his reputed spreading of his cape over a puddle so the queen could walk dry-shod. Men pine; women opine, and shine. The image is not quite fair to the three male contributors to the volume, but it does suggest a critique of some of the more hagiographic moments in the collection, in that the animated female investigator is to be preferred over the supine devoté.

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Several decades ago, I frequently lamented the ways in which writings by early modern women were given so little space in the traditional classroom anthologies covering British Literature, even in those devoted to women’s writings such as the inaugural Norton Anthology of Literature by Women (1985). Some thirty years later, it would appear this wrong has been more than amply redressed: we have a new, four-volume anthology covering a wide range of women’s writings from 900 to 1650, a whopping 1700+ pages of them. Edited by Donald W. Foster with Michael O’Connell, Christine Reno, and Harriet Spiegel assisting on volume 1 and Tobian Banton assisting on volumes 3 and 4, the set offers a truly wide-ranging and thoughtful collection of women’s writings. As the editors describe it, “[v]olume one presents a smorgasbord of narrative verse, elegy, riddle, fable, romance, satire, song, correspondence, essay, medical handbook, court testimony, autobiography, and occasional verse” and, furthermore, “each succeeding volume is as rich as and varied as Volume one,” offering enough new materials “to keep thoughtful readers entertained and serious scholars occupied for quite some time” (xxv–xxvi).

Volume one spans 900–1550 and opens with parts of “The Red Book of Hergest” from the Brythonic period, followed by a section on the Anglo-Saxon period and Anglo-Norman period. It continues up through Anne Askew and Katherine Parr. Volume two picks up 1550–1603, covering from Jane Grey to the death of Queen Elizabeth, organized by topic: “Affairs of State,” featuring the writings of political figures ranging from Joane Lumley and Mary I through