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Book Review: Leonora NEVILLE, Anna Komnene: The Life and Work of a Medieval Historian, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016

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Leonora NEVILLE, *Anna Komnene: The Life and Work of a Medieval Historian*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 240. ISBN 978 0 19 049817 7

Leonora Neville's latest book is a welcome addition to the growing literature dedicated to Byzantine historians and Byzantine historical writing. Neville's choice of subject, Anna Komnene, one of the most accomplished historians of the Byzantine Empire, requires no justification and quite fittingly follows on the heels of her previous book on Anna's husband, the historian Nikephoros Bryennios (2012). It also reflects an increased and well-deserved interest in the biography and oeuvre of Byzantium's only female historian –an imperial princess, esteemed intellectual and gifted author– from Thalia Gouma-Peterson's collective volume *Anna Komnene and her Times* (2000) to the more recent book by Penelope Buckley: *The Alexiad: Artistic Strategy in the Making of a Myth* (2014), which offers a literary analysis of Anna's epic history: the *Alexiad*.

Neville's highly readable and engaging book is neatly divided into two parts. Part I: 'A Good Historian and a Good Woman' investigates Anna's 'authorial persona', beginning with the socio-cultural restraints on female writers in the Greek historiographical tradition (chapter 1) and proceeding to reconstruct how Anna attempted to reconcile and promote her roles as an historian (usually a man of classical education and political experience) and a woman, who was expected to be submissive, virtuous, modest, and prone to emotionality. Neville argues persuasively that Anna consciously combined authorizing statements (i.e. her credentials for writing history, her first-hand knowledge, her sources and impartiality) with humbling expressions of misery and anguish that were expected of a grieving daughter and widow so as to present herself *both* as a reliable historian and a 'good' woman (chapter 2). She shows how Anna attempted –albeit not entirely successfully– to reconcile her devotion to her father Alexios, and also to her mother Eirene and to her husband Nikephoros (again something expected of a good

daughter and wife) and her objectivity as an historian who supposedly adheres to the truth. Thus Anna's laudatory portrait of the emperor does not omit his failures but rather embellishes them in such a way so that he always emerges in a positive light, e.g. by performing a daring escape from the battlefield at Dyrrachion after a disastrous defeat (chapter 3). Overall, Neville convincingly demonstrates that the issues of womanly modesty, historical reliability, and filial devotion are the keys to unraveling the authorial persona constructed by Anna in the *Alexiad*. Her gendered reading presents Anna in a fresh new light and demonstrates exactly how and why this important author has been misunderstood for so long.

Part II: 'A Power Hungry Conspirator'? endeavors to deconstruct the standard narrative of Anna's thwarted imperial ambitions, which have for long influenced conceptions of her life and approaches to her work (see chapter 10) so that, as Neville claims, it is 'impossible to identify her primarily as an author and intellectual' (6). Therefore Neville challenges the narrative that gave rise to Anna's picture as a ruthless and ambitious woman: the *History* of Niketas Choniates (pp. 101-112). Neville is certainly right that Choniates firmly upheld his culture's belief in female submissiveness and that he was hostile towards Anna (as well as other women) to the point of being derogatory. She is also right that his narrative of Anna's failed coups tied in with his picture of the destructive rivalry of the Komnenian dynasty. But Choniates did not conceive of fictitious events in his *History*; he embellished very real ones. Earlier sources support Choniates: John Zonaras concurs that the empress Eirene wanted her son-in-law Nikephoros and her daughter Anna to succeed Alexios and George Tornikes hints at Anna's involvement in the troubled succession of 1118 if only by denial that she was her brother's rival. Anna herself confirms her opposition to her brother John when, in speaking of her sources, she swears that she has been kept away from her father's men for *thirty years* since those in power condemned her to obscurity and that many have passed away while others have been prevented from speaking to her by fear (*Alexiad*, XVI.7.6).

Having said that, my intention is not to uphold Anna's image as an ambitious, scheming woman, but rather to simply point out that Anna Komnene, the historian and gifted author, could and most probably did plot to gain her brother's throne. Consequently, I see no need to try and establish that she enjoyed a good relationship with her brother John (chapter 9) when there is ample evidence that points to the contrary and should in any case be irrelevant to the analysis of the *Alexiad* (as should her coup attempts) since the text narrates the reign of her father Alexios and not that of her brother John. Beyond this problematic issue, Neville's important

chapter on court rhetoric (7) allows us to see and understand Anna as ‘a loving mother, devoted wife, but overwhelmingly as a remarkable intellectual’ (p. 114). Neville demonstrates that Anna was primarily known in her own time for her philosophical endeavors and her patronage of learning and that her esteemed reputation as such survived into the following generations and well beyond. Finally, Neville also conducts an in-depth analysis of George Tornikes’ portrait of Anna in his funeral oration –a source of the highest importance– and shows how Anna took advantage of her residence in a monastery to cultivate her interests and activities (chapter 8). These two chapters offer important new insights into Anna’s life and work. It is precisely through such insights and the novel gendered reading of the *Alexiad* put forward by Neville that Anna Komnene, the gifted historian and remarkable woman, shines through.

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