

two and clearing the way. He moved on for a mile or so, became very drunk, and lay down.

When those in the rear came to where the snake was, they found an old woman crying in the night. Someone asked her why, and the old woman said, "I was crying because someone killed my son." The man asked, "Why was your son killed?" The old woman said, "My son was the son of the White Emperor. He changed into a snake to block the way, but the son of the Red Emperor cut him in half.⁴ That was why I cried." The man did not believe that the old woman was telling the truth, and he was about to punish her, when the old woman suddenly disappeared. The man caught up with Gaozu, who woke up and was informed about the old woman. The story secretly pleased Gaozu and made him think much of himself. His followers grew in greater awe of him day by day.

[The rest of the chapter describes the wars that Gaozu fought to become emperor and found the Han dynasty. It concludes with the following explicit comments by Sima Qian, who refers to himself as the Grand Astrologer.]

The Grand Astrologer comments: The governing of the Xia dynasty [ca. 2205–ca. 1766 BCE] was distinguished by good faith, but over time it deteriorated, to the point that small-minded people made it go out of control. Therefore, the men of the Shang dynasty [ca. 1766–ca. 1045 BCE], who took over rule from the Xia, emphasized respect. But respect deteriorated into ritual, so that the small-minded people turned it into superstition. For that reason, the people of the Zhou dynasty [ca. 1045–256 BCE], who succeeded the Shang, turned to knowledge of literature as a tool for governing. When this knowledge of literature deteriorated, the small-minded people made it meaningless. What was needed to combat this meaninglessness was a return to good faith, for the way of the Three Dynasties is cyclical: The end comes back to the beginning.

The knowledge of literature as a tool for governing definitely deteriorated further between the end of the Zhou dynasty and the Qin dynasty [221–207 BCE]. The government of Qin nevertheless did not change its policies. Instead, it added its own cruel punishments and rules. Was this not truly a serious mistake?

For this reason, when the Han dynasty reached its full power [206 BCE], it inherited the causes of decay of the previous dynasties.

Despite this, it worked to improve things and make reforms, requiring people to exert themselves tirelessly. As a result, it finally achieved the order that Heaven dictates. Gaozu convened the court in the tenth month [to have his subordinates around the country pay their respects for the coming year]. The curtains and the top of his carriage were yellow, with plumes on the left side. He was buried in the place called Long Burial Mound.

10

A Woman in Power: Empress Lü

This chapter of the "Basic Annals" section focuses on Empress Lü (r. 188–180 BCE), raising the issue of gender relations in Han China and the appeal that power holds for women as well as men. It also brings to the fore the importance of family as a motive for action. Given the bloody violence that the empress employed to satisfy her ambition, why would Sima Qian offer a seemingly positive evaluation of her rule in "The Grand Astrologer comments" section? What conclusions might he have wanted his audience to reach?

Empress Lü was the consort of Gaozu from the time when he was still a commoner. She bore him Emperor Hui the Loyal Son and Princess Yuan of Lü. When Gaozu became king of Han, he took into his service Lady Qi of Dingtao, whom he loved dearly. She bore him a son, Liu Ruyi, king of Zhao, posthumously known by the name Yin. Emperor Hui was by nature weak and softhearted. Gaozu was convinced that the boy had an entirely different temperament from his own, and so he wanted to remove him from the position of heir apparent and instead make Ruyi, son of Lady Qi, his heir. "For Ruyi is just like me," he would say. Lady Qi, happy to be favored, frequently accompanied Gaozu on his trips going east of the pass. She kept weeping day and night, begging for her son to become heir apparent. Empress Lü, being well along in years, always stayed behind in the capital. She rarely saw the emperor, and they became more and more estranged. Ruyi was made king of Zhao and subsequently several times came

⁴Colors were used to designate different ruling regimes and factions.

From Sima Qian, *The Records of the Historian*, chap. 9.

very near to replacing the future Emperor Hui as heir apparent. But because of the objections of the high officials and the strategy devised by Zhang, a noble of [the state of] Liu, the heir apparent was not removed from his position.

Empress Lü was a woman of very strong will. She aided Gaozu in the conquest of the empire, and many of the great ministers who were executed were the victims of her power. She had two older brothers, both of whom were generals. . . . In the twelfth year of his reign [195 BCE], Emperor Gaozu passed away in the Palace of Lasting Joy. The heir apparent, Hui, became emperor. . . .

Empress Lü intensely hated Lady Qi and her son, the king of Zhao. She gave orders for Lady Qi to be imprisoned in the Long Halls and summoned the king of Zhao to court. Three times messengers were sent back and forth, but the prime minister of Zhao, Zhou Chang, the noble of Jianping,¹ told them, "Gaozu entrusted the king of Zhao to my care, and he is still very young. Rumors have reached me that Empress Lü hates Lady Qi and wishes to summon her son, the king of Zhao, so that she can kill both of them. I do not dare to send the king! Moreover, he is ill and cannot obey the summons." Empress Lü was furious and proceeded to send a messenger to summon Zhou Chang himself. When Zhou Chang obeyed her order and arrived in Changan,² she dispatched someone to summon the king of Zhao once more. The king set out, but before he reached the capital, Emperor Hui, compassionate by nature and aware of his mother's hatred for the king of Zhao, went in person to meet him at the Ba River and accompanied him back to the palace. The emperor looked out for the boy and kept him by his side, eating and sleeping with him, so that although Empress Lü wished to kill him, she could find no opportunity.

In the first year of Emperor Hui's reign, . . . the emperor rose at dawn one morning to go out hunting, but the king of Zhao, being very young, could not get up so early. When Empress Lü heard that he was in the room alone, she sent someone to give him poison to drink. By the time Emperor Hui returned, the king of Zhao was dead. After this, Yu, the king of Huaiyang, was transferred to the position of king of Zhao. . . .

Empress Lü later cut off Lady Qi's hands and feet, plucked out her eyes, burned her ears, gave her a potion to drink that made her mute,

¹The region that the emperor entrusted to Zhou Chang to control as his own property from which to draw income.

²The ancient capital city.

and had her thrown into the latrine, calling her the "human pig." After a few days, she sent for Emperor Hui and showed him the "human pig." Staring at her, he asked who the person was, and only then did he realize that it was Lady Qi. Thereupon he wept so bitterly that he grew ill, and for over a year he could not leave his bed. He sent a messenger to report to his mother, "No human being could have done such a cruel deed as this! Since I am your son, I will never be fit to rule the empire." From this time on, Emperor Hui gave himself up to wine each day and no longer took part in governing, and so his illness grew worse.

In the second year of Emperor Hui's reign [193 BCE], King Yuan of Chu and King Dao Hui of Qi came to court. In the tenth month, Emperor Hui held a banquet for the king of Qi that the empress attended. Because the king of Qi was his elder brother, Emperor Hui seated him in the place of honor and treated him with the courtesy customary among members of the same family. Empress Lü was furious at this and ordered two goblets to be prepared with poison and placed before the king of Qi. Then she instructed the king to rise and propose a toast. When he did so, Emperor Hui also rose and picked up the other goblet, intending to join in the toast. Empress Lü, terrified, rose from her own place and overturned Emperor Hui's goblet. The king of Qi grew suspicious and did not dare to drink any more. Pretending to be drunk, he left the banquet. Later, when he learned that the goblet had indeed contained poison, he began to fear that he would not be able to escape from the court at Changan. Shi, the internal secretary of Qi, spoke to the king, saying, "Empress Lü has only two children, the emperor and Princess Yuan of Lu. Now Your Majesty possesses over seventy cities, while the princess receives the revenue from only a very few. If you were willing to donate one province to the empress that could be assigned to the princess as her 'bath-town,'³ then the empress would surely be pleased and you would have nothing more to fear." The king of Qi accordingly donated the province of Chengyang and honored the princess with the title "Empress Lü." Her mother, Empress Lü, accepted these honors with delight and held a banquet at the state residence of Qi.⁴ When the drinking and rejoicing were over, she sent the king of Qi back to his kingdom. . . .

In the seventh year [188 BCE], Emperor Hui the Loyal Son died. Mourning was announced, and Empress Lü lamented, but no tears fell

³Property from which income would be derived for personal expenses.

⁴This was an official residence in the capital, which served as a kind of embassy for the subordinate states.

from her eyes. Zhang Piqiang, the son of the noble Zhang, was a page in the palace, and although he was only fifteen, he said to the prime minister, "Empress Lü had only this one son, Emperor Hui. Yet now that he has passed away, she laments but does not seem to express real grief. Can you solve this riddle, my lord?" The prime minister answered, "How would you explain it?" Zhang Piqiang said, "Emperor Hui left no grown sons, and so Empress Lü is afraid of you and the others. I would suggest now that you honor Lü Tai, Lü Chan, and Lü Lu⁵ with the rank of general, put them in charge of the soldiers in the northern and southern garrisons, and allow the various members of the Lü family to enter the palace and take part in the government. If this is done, Empress Lü will feel more at ease, and you and the other ministers may be fortunate enough to escape disaster." The prime minister did as the boy suggested. Empress Lü was pleased, and her lamentations took on an air of genuine sorrow. This was the start of the Lü family's rise to power. A general amnesty was proclaimed in the empire, and in the ninth month . . . Emperor Hui was buried. The heir apparent succeeded to the throne and became emperor, paying his respects at the funerary temple of Emperor Gaozu.

In the first year, all orders issued from Empress Lü, and she called them "decrees," in the manner of an emperor. Then she began deliberations with the idea of making kings of the members of her own family, asking the Chancellor of the Right Wang Ling what he thought of such a step. "Emperor Gaozu killed a white horse and had us all swear, 'If anyone not of the Liu family becomes a king, the empire will unite in attacking him.' Now if members of the Lü family were to be made kings, it would be a violation of this agreement!" Empress Lü was displeased and consulted Chen Ping, the Chancellor of the Left, and Zhou Buō, the noble of Jiang. Zhou Buō and the others replied, "When Emperor Gaozu conquered the world, he made kings of his sons and younger brothers. Now that the empress is issuing decrees in the manner of an emperor, if she wishes to make kings of her brothers, we cannot see that there is any objection." Empress Lü was pleased and dismissed the court.

When the proceedings were over, Wang Ling began to berate Chen Ping and Zhou Buō. "Were you not present when Emperor Gaozu and the rest of us smeared our lips with the blood of the white horse and swore our agreement?" he said. "Now that Emperor Gaozu has passed away, Empress Lü has made herself ruler and wants to elevate the

⁵These were relatives of Empress Lü.

members of her family to be kings. All of you think perhaps you can ignore your oath and flatter the will of the empress. But how will you dare to face Emperor Gaozu in the world beneath?" "When it comes to opposing the ruler and speaking out in court," replied Chen Ping and Zhou Buō, "we are no match for you. But in preserving the altars of the dynasty and ensuring the continuation of the Liu family, it is possible that you are no match for us." Wang Ling had no answer to this. . . .

The daughter of the noble of Xuanping had been made queen, the wife of Emperor Hui. When the queen failed to bear a son, she pretended to be pregnant. Substituting an infant born to one of the emperor's ladies in waiting, she called it her own. Then she murdered the mother and installed the child as heir apparent. When Emperor Hui died, this child became emperor. As the emperor grew a little older, he began to hear rumors that his mother had been killed and that he was not the real son of Emperor Hui's wife. "What right had the queen to kill my mother and call me her son?" he declared. "I am not old enough now, but when I grow up, things will change!" Empress Lü heard of this, and she became worried for fear that he might start a revolt. She therefore locked him in the Long Halls and announced that the emperor was seriously ill. None of the officials were allowed to see him. Then Empress Lü proclaimed, "He who holds possession of the empire and rules the destinies of the multitude must shelter them like the heavens and support them like the earth. The ruler must bring peace to the people with a joyous heart, and the people in gladness must serve their ruler. When this joy and gladness mingle together, then the empire will be well governed. Now the emperor's illness has continued for a long time without stopping, so much so that he has lost his mind and become demented. He is not fit to carry on the imperial line and perform the sacrifices in the ancestral temples, and he cannot be trusted with the care of the empire. Let him be replaced!" . . .

The emperor was removed from his position, and Empress Lü had him secretly murdered. In the fifth month of the fourth year [184 BCE], . . . Yi, the king of Changshan, was made emperor, and his name was changed to Heng. The year was not designated as the first year of a new reign because Empress Lü was directing the government of the empire.

In the first month of the seventh year [181 BCE], Empress Lü summoned Yiu, the king of Zhao, to the capital. Yiu had taken a daughter of the Lü family as his queen, but he had no love for her and favored a

47th
Noble
Heir
Emperor

concubine instead. The daughter of the Lü family, consumed with jealousy, left him and began to slander him to Empress Lü. She accused him of disloyalty and reported that he had said, "What right has the Lü family to become kings? When Empress Lü's days are over, I will certainly attack them!" The empress was furious, and for this reason she called the king of Zhao to the capital. When he arrived, she kept him at the state residence of Zhao and would not see him. She ordered the place surrounded by guards and refused to send him food. When some of the officials secretly sent him provisions, she had them immediately arrested and condemned to punishment.

When the king of Zhao was starving, he composed this song: "The Lü clan controls all affairs; the Liu clan is in peril. They have oppressed the nobles and forced this wife upon me, a wife who in her jealousy speaks pure evil of me. A slanderer will undo the state, for those in power are blind. Though I lack loyal ministers, why should I cast away my kingdom? If I killed myself in the open fields, blue Heaven would speak the justice of my cause. Oh, it is too late for regret; it is better if I end it immediately. A king and yet to starve to death—who will pity one like me? The Lü clan has overturned justice; I call on Heaven for my revenge!"

The king of Zhao died while locked away. He was buried with the rituals for a commoner in the graveyard of the common people of Chang'an. On [March 4, 181 BCE], there was an eclipse of the sun, and the day grew dark. Empress Lü was upset by this event, and her heart grew uneasy. Turning to those about her, she said, "This has happened because of me!" . . .

Liu Hui, the king of Liang, was deeply disturbed by being transferred to the position of king of Zhao. Empress Lü had given him the daughter of Lü Chan to be his queen, and all of her attendants and ministers were members of the Lü family. They used their power in a completely arbitrary way and secretly spied on the king, so that he could do nothing as he wished. The king had a concubine whom he loved dearly, but the queen sent someone to poison her. The king, deeply aggrieved, composed in her memory a song in four stanzas and ordered his musicians to sing it. In the sixth month, he committed suicide. When Empress Lü received the news, she declared that he was guilty of abandoning his duties to his ancestral temples by committing suicide for the sake of a woman, and she deprived his heir of the royal title. . . .

During the third month [of 180 BCE], Empress Lü was returning from a sacrifice when, at the Zhi pass, she saw a creature in the form

of a blue dog that seized her under her arm. It then suddenly disappeared. A diviner was called to interpret the incident, and it was determined that it was the manifestation of the angry spirit of Liu Ruyi, the king of Zhao. The empress soon grew ill from the wound under her arm. . . .

During the seventh month, Empress Lü's illness grew worse. She appointed Lü Lu, the new king of Zhao, as supreme commander of the army and ordered him to the northern garrison. She ordered Lü Chan, the king of Lu, to take over the southern garrison. "When Emperor Gaozu conquered the empire," she warned them, "he made an agreement with his followers that if anyone not of the Liu family became a king, the empire should join together in attacking him. Now the members of the Lü family have become kings, and the great ministers are displeased. The emperor is very young, and I fear that when I die, the ministers will make trouble for you. You must bring your soldiers over to guard the palace. Take care not to accompany the funeral procession. Do not allow yourselves to be coerced by others!"

Empress Lü died [in 180 BCE]. In her will, she left fifty-five pounds of gold to each of the kings who had been advanced from the rank of noble, as well as grants of gold to the generals, ministers, nobles, and palace officials according to their ranks, and she issued a general pardon all across the empire. She appointed Lü Chan, the king of Lu, as prime minister, and she made the daughter of Lü Lu the empress to the boy ruler.

[The remainder of the chapter tells the story of the violent suppression of the Lü family.]

The Grand Astrologer comments: During the time of Emperor Hui the Loyal Son and Empress Lü, the black-headed people left behind the sufferings of the period of the Warring States,⁶ and all the subordinate lords and vassals observed nonaction as their governing policy. Emperor Hui therefore let his sleeves fall and folded his arms in front of him. Empress Lü, as a woman ruler, proclaimed that she would issue imperial decrees and arranged to rule without leaving her rooms in the palace. The world was at peace, punishments and penalties were rarely imposed, and criminals became few. The people devoted themselves to planting and harvesting, and clothing and food became more and more plentiful.

⁶The period from 476 BCE to the unification of China by the First Emperor of Qin in 221 BCE.