

Review article. Medieval queenship: an overview

Article

Published Version

Gibbons, R. (1995) Review article. Medieval queenship: an overview. *Reading Medieval Studies*, XX. pp. 97-107. ISSN 0950-3129 Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/84626/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the [End User Agreement](#).

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online

Review Article

Medieval Queenship: an Overview

Rachel Gibbons
University of Reading

Women and Sovereignty. Edited by Louise Olga Fradenburg. Edinburgh University Press, 1992. 334 pp. £25.00

Medieval Queenship. Edited by John Carmi Parsons. Stroud, Alan Sutton, 1993. 264 pp. £35.00

Letters of the Queens of England, 1100-1547. Edited by Anne Crawford. Stroud, Alan Sutton, 1994. 250 pp. £18.99

One of the earliest pioneers into the unknown territory of women's history warned against trying to define a concept as elusive as the 'status' of medieval women. Eileen Power wrote that the position of any woman will always be 'one thing in theory, another in legal position, and yet another in everyday life'.¹ Yet, an exploration into political, marital, financial and ritual status is exactly what these three volumes are aiming to do for one of the surprisingly most neglected groups of women from the Middle Ages - its queens. Despite the prominence and recognised value of women's studies over the last twenty years, the study of queenship as an institution is one of the newest historical disciplines. Biographies of the most colourful and conspicuous royal women have enjoyed renewed popularity since the 1960s, but focus in these has tended to be placed on individual lives rather than the constants of the office of the queen. More recently, the study of women in power has lost some credibility in the vogue to 'restore real women to history'² that has led feminist historians to

concentrate on their largely anonymous, undocumented sisters of the towns and fields. Until the last decade, the medieval queen all too often was caught between two fields of study, shunned both by traditional political and administrative scholars and by socio-economic historians. This must be because of the very nature of the medieval queen, 'anomalous by her mere existence in the male-dominated world that she inhabited. She held one of the highest ranks in secular society, but was by definition in a dependent position because of her gender, and usually as consort to the king. Female and hence 'second-rate', but elevated by her royal status, the queen was a unique figure in medieval society because of the virtually unlimited potential of her position and the variety of roles that she could be called upon to play. These three volumes approach their common subject from quite different perspectives but, put together, perform a great service in re-establishing the medieval queen at the centre of her society, and continuing the fairly recent drive to promote the study of queenship at the heart of contemporary historical scholarship.

Anne Crawford's compilation of *Letters of the Queens of England, 1100-1547* is the newest of the three publications but perhaps the most traditional in structure, in that the main body of the book concentrates on the lives of individual queens. However, this is not mere biography: it is a unique documentary record because, by using their own correspondence as the basis of this study, Crawford has enabled these royal women 'to speak for themselves', for perhaps the first time. Many of the letters used have been in print before, either in Rymer's *Fœdera* or in Mary Anne Everett Wood's *Letters of Royal and Illustrious Ladies of Great Britain*, but the addition of biographical notes - brief or extensive, depending on surviving material and the relative importance of the woman concerned - along with editorial comment on the context and importance of the chosen correspondence make this volume a valuable source of reference for the historian as well as a delightful introduction to the study of queenship for the general reader. The work of the translators must be recognised in the compilation of this collection, as letters in medieval Latin, French and Spanish have been rendered into clear, readable English, which not only allows non-linguists to enjoy them but also transforms the queens into identifiable individuals for all anglophone readers. The book is illustrated beautifully by black-and-white photographs of various images of the queens, in portraits, funeral effigies and on their

seals. There are also photographs of some of the later manuscripts and of the signatures of ten of the later ladies, as well as five detailed genealogical tables and a full table of marriages.

All queens from Matilda of Flanders, wife of William the Conqueror to Henry VIII's sixth wife, Katherine Parr are included, as are four other royal ladies - the Empress Matilda, who should have been the first English queen regnant; Joan of Kent, wife of the Black Prince; Cecily Neville, duchess of York; and Margaret Beaufort, mother of Henry VII. Crawford admits that the selection of letters has not been easy: for the earlier queens, inevitably there is very little choice of material and anything, no matter how impersonal or mundane, has been included while, for many of the later queens, much that would be of interest has had to be left out. However, the selection that she has compiled makes an impressive case-study of the role of English queens, demonstrating the many political and social areas in which the king's wife expected, and was required by others, to participate and have influence. The introduction to *Letters of the Queens of England* demonstrates the importance of study into the institution of queenship as well as the individual incumbents of the throne, and is a natural development of Crawford's two earlier pieces on fifteenth-century English queens,³ expressing many of the same general points on the often forgotten influence of the consort. In the introduction Crawford describes the choice of his wife as 'the most important single decision ever made by any medieval king', emphasising the essential nature of a queen's fertility, adaptability, and the diplomatic value of her family connections. The cost of a queen to her new country through supporting her household and providing her with dower lands was more often than not outweighed by her value as a cultural ambassador, a pious example, a leader of fashion, a political arbitrator and, most importantly, as a worthy companion to her husband and the mother of his children. Although historians may have overlooked the importance of the queen, her contemporaries did not, which is the overriding message this volume presents to the reader - the issues and people affected by the character and behaviour of each queen come to life in her letters.

Women and Sovereignty is a completely different prospect for the scholar, being a collection of essays mainly taken from papers presented at a conference on Women and Sovereignty held at St.

Andrew's University in 1990. Most fall under the general theme of medieval and early modern queenship that links all three of the volumes under review, but others have distinctly sociological and anthropological roots, and seem ill at ease in a collection that advertises a predominantly historical perspective. The stated aim of the volume is to extend the parameters of thought on women and power by re-examining the connections between gender and the practice of sovereignty. Louise Fradenburg's introduction states that: 'Sovereignty, simply, does not exist apart from gender; sovereignty serves and pursues ends through the matrix of cultural constructions of gender, and it becomes a means of perpetuating and transforming those constructions', but paradoxically also concludes that there is a 'plasticity of gender in the field of sovereignty'. Fortunately, such over-complicated terminology is not continued through the whole collection, but, although the grouping of papers into sections is a means by which the interdisciplinary nature of the original conference could be preserved, it is not always easy to connect all contributions to the unifying theme. Some sections coalesce better than others, conclusions in several essays complement arguments in others, and all approach their own subject with flair and conviction. The quality and scholarship of all the papers as individual pieces is not in doubt, just the value of linking so many diverse ideas and fields of scholarship in one collection.

The first two papers address the complementary aspects of sovereignty and religious imagery. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne's study of vernacular hagiographic lives of English abbesses demonstrates the varied imagery used to describe these women, as mothers to their communities and as future queens of Heaven as the Brides of Christ. This imagery was not accidental: motherhood was no handicap to a vocation, especially in those of royal or noble blood as were many early abbesses. Rosemary Muir Wright explores images of the Queen of Heaven, the Virgin Mary, and the popularity of her depicted as a crowned queen. Visual parallels were drawn by royal women in need of a symbol of their lives, far removed as they were from the Christian ideals of virginity, meekness and poverty, but Wright is clear that artists juxtaposed Mary with symbols such as the Jesse Tree and the sun as raiment to separate her exalted status visually from that of earthly queens. The symbolism and ceremony of queenship is the focus also for the next three papers, which describe how queens were defined for and by their people. Louise Fradenburg uses the example

of the festivities surrounding the marriage of Margaret Tudor to James IV of Scotland to demonstrate the symbolic nature of the journey north and the entry into Scotland which made a queen from the foreign princess, and was a visible sign of the potential union of the two kingdoms. Abby Zanger's focus is the union between Louis XIV and Maria-Theresa of Spain, where the re-clothing of the Infanta in the French style and its implied suppression of her foreign identity has allegorical links with the military defeat of the Spanish Hapsburgs by the French in Flanders. John Carmi Parsons' study of ritual queenship in medieval England explains the roots of queenly power and how ritual enhanced rather than detracted from it. The Marian connotations of her regalia gave her a role as intercessor and fount of mercy for the people, while her usual site for audiences - her bedchamber - indicates the source of her right to power, as did the wearing of her wedding mantle as a funeral shroud. In life and in death, the emphasis on her marriage to a king was paramount.

The next group of four papers concentrates on the use of power by women. Charles Wood examines the contrast between the political participation of Queens Elizabeth Woodville and Elizabeth of York, the upstart mother who developed a solid power-base and the relatively powerless daughter who, despite (or more likely because) of her superior claim to the crown, was overshadowed by her usurping husband. Carla Freccero uses the part played by Margaret of Navarre as a marriage-broker for her daughter, trying to ally the interests of her husband, her own family as personified by the king of France, and the wishes of her child, to highlight the importance of the mother as a link between the vertical ladder of lineage and the horizontal ties of kinship. There are two studies on the image-development of two English queen-regnants, Elizabeth I and Mary II. Melinda Zook aims to resurrect Mary's image from the stereotypical 'betraying daughter' or 'obedient wife' and, through analysis of the queen's own writing, to prove that, although a reluctant queen, she was neither unwilling nor ineffective, while Diana Henderson concludes that initial anxiety over the gender of the new Tudor queen became a source of strength and a maturing mythology by the end of her reign, as Elizabeth managed to unify the symbolic, mediatory role of the queen with the direct official power of the king. The next three papers also deal with symbolism, but in the way that women asserted sovereignty in the field of early modern religion. Susanna Akerman presents the Catholic imagery surrounding the abdication of Queen Christina of Sweden, which has

portrayed her as laying down an earthly crown for spiritual reward in Heaven, and the difficulties this posed at the time, as she continued to exercise and expect royal prerogatives. Sharon Arnoult discusses the practical limitations of Protestant claims that individuals had sovereignty over their own souls and the actions taken through these beliefs during the English Civil War, as some women saw this sovereignty as a freedom of action and expression that entitled them to no longer be subject to hostile male authority. Elizabeth Kristofovich Zelinsky focuses on imagery surrounding Sofiia Alekseevna who acted as regent for her two brothers, the joint Tsars Ivan V and Peter I. The association of the princess with the biblical feminine personification of 'the Wisdom of God' defined her position and made her gender a source of strength for her powers.

Personification of sovereignty itself as a feminine concept is the linking thought behind the next three papers, which all present ideas with a definite anthropological base and consequently make a historically-educated reviewer feel slightly unable to judge their merits to their own field of scholarship. Dean Miller presents the theory that the male Byzantine sovereigns combined male and female symbolism: he relates the responsibilities of sovereignty to the feminine 'divine wisdom' as highlighted by Zelinsky, and judges that there are ritual ties to a 'marriage of sovereignty' motif, especially as three successive eleventh-century emperors held their position through marriage to the same imperial daughter. Miller compares this 'matrilineal' succession to practices in early Ireland, the subject of Maire Herbert's paper. She concludes that, although all sovereigns were male, sovereignty itself was female as was the kingdom as personified by the goddess of the land, using the myths of Queen Medb and the encounter of Niall with the maiden Sovereignty to illustrate her arguments. Emily Lyle also uses examples of Irish myth to explain her theories of an old-world cosmology, based on the marriage of the Sky-god and the Earth-goddess, as most commonly expressed in Greek mythology. Lyle considers descent from mother to daughter as the 'pivot of sovereignty', but whether her examples of sons-in-law and nephews succeeding fathers can really be labelled as female inheritance is dubious, and does not really even seem to convince her. The final two papers in the collection look at world ideas of sovereignty: M.C. Jedrej discusses the political power of rain makers in East Africa, emphasising the necessity of female lineage in transmission of these skills, while Andrew Duff-Cooper examines the develop-

ment of gender roles in Japan and Balinese Lombok, looking at the continued separate spheres of male and female influence, and the symmetry of each gender and its social conditions. The lack of unity between these last five papers and the rest of such an historically-based collection does not actually damage the value of the book as a whole, but the wisdom of including them here rather than developing a second volume of papers with a strong anthropological or sociological centre is questionable.

Medieval Queenship is a better total example of the way that study into this fledgling subject is progressing. As with the previous volume, it had its origins in a conference - a session on medieval queenship at the International Congress on Medieval Studies at Western Michigan University in 1989 - but half of the ten essays were submitted by the authors independently. This collection is a wide-ranging analysis of queenship across medieval Europe, all essays being written - as the editor is keen to emphasise - by historians, but none dependent solely on sources and the whole aiming to examine the subject from a broad geographical, chronological and social perspective. John Carmi Parsons sets the tone for the whole collection in his introduction: this book aims 'to dissect the ways in which queens pursued and exploited means to power, and how their actions were interpreted by others', and to 'help explain why the Middle Ages only slowly developed its vocabulary of gender and power'. Although the ten papers tackle various aspects of queenship in different kingdoms at different periods during the Middle Ages, there are some universal conclusions, which greatly enhance the value of this book as a unified collection, rather than as an assemblage of relatively unrelated pieces. Parsons labels the common fundamental as 'the familial context in which queens operated', an opinion that he explores in the introductory chapter and that is backed up by his contributors. The accounts of János Bak and Inge Skovgaard-Petersen (with Nanna Damsholt) on the little-documented and largely anonymous queens of medieval Hungary and Denmark also draw general conclusions on universal themes of queenship that are developed and applied to specific examples later in the collection. Both look at the family origins and choice of queens as well as their cosmopolitan influence on their new countries as 'cultural ambassadors' and the duties of their position.

The preference for male succession as well as the bureaucratising of administration in the High Middle Ages is often held to have relegated women to the fringes of power. Armin Wolf's essay on queens-regnant is only one of the contributions in the volume that challenges this view, as he charts the career of the twelve queens-regnant in Europe between 1350 and 1450. From the fact that these women succeeded at all, he concludes that, although male primogeniture was the first consideration, all other 'rules' of succession applied equally and validly for men and women, and that (for example) a legitimate, native-born, healthy, adult female was proved to be preferable to an illegitimate or foreign or crippled or underage male. It is clear that women did rule in medieval Europe, as queens-regnant, queens-regent or unofficially through the hidden influence of the queen-consort. Roger Collins focuses on princesses in tenth-century Léon and Navarre who maintained a power-base through regency because of the instability of succession customs and the importance of their close lineage to minor kings, while André Poulet and Elizabeth McCartney examine the development and slow acceptance of female regency in France. The ancestral Capetian disdain for female rule was modified of necessity as male lines dwindled and minor heirs became more common. By the sixteenth century, McCartney proves that a king's mother was accepted as the natural choice as regent, with neither ceremonial investiture nor previous designation considered essential to give her this right. The concept of a woman acting as regent for a minor male heir was accepted far earlier elsewhere in Europe and, in some eyes, depended upon as the only way a female ruler could be acceptable. The man who was the cause of a queen's royal status was never quite forgotten: Skovgaard-Petersen concludes that the standing of Margaret I as a ruling queen was conditional largely on her status as the daughter of the last king in Denmark and mother of the closest male heir in Norway/Sweden. This is further developed and ratified by Lois Huneycutt, who contrasts the theoretical misogyny of clerical writers with their actual support of public women. Focusing on the Empress Matilda and Melisande of Jerusalem, Huneycutt concludes that contemporaries could reluctantly overlook their gender in the desire to maintain the hereditary principle and that, despite claiming the throne and the right of rule in their own names, they were often seen almost as regents for their sons and representatives of their family line.

As mentioned earlier, all the essays in this collection emphasise the familial base and focus of women's ruling power. Janet Nelson

describes the gradual focus on the nucleus of the royal couple in Carolingian Francia rather than on the whole sprawling royal family, and explains how Charlemagne used the influence of his unmarried daughters - the 'crowned doves' - to curb familial rivalries and ambitions. Pauline Stafford looks at the wives and mothers of English kings who played prominent roles, and their literary representations. She concludes that the development of political language in the twelfth century coincided with more misogynistic views of influential queens who manoeuvred a niche for themselves in succession politics that, because of their familial nature, provided opportunities denied elsewhere. In his contribution, John Carmi Parsons highlights the importance of queens in the marriage plans and training of royal daughters, again stressing the familial aspect of traditional queenly spheres of influence. His deduction on this perennial link - one which serves as the conclusion of the whole volume - is that a medieval queen's social status was defined by multiple family links and any power that she developed was derived from her position within those families to which she owed allegiance and from which she elicited support. The fact that there are such strong unitary links between all the papers in this volume makes it a collection that will be of continual assistance, where essays almost resemble chapters in a one-subject book and will be of equal use to the scholar in this field rather than a collection to dip into and to discover only one or two relevant papers. The easy, intelligent style of the contributors makes it a pleasure to read as well as an excellent source of reference for the historian.

In response to the statement of Christopher Brooke that: 'The history of women in the Middle Ages is difficult to write',⁴ Patricia Skinner concludes: 'but only if we try to detach them from the world in which they lived'.⁵ This is too often a problem when approaching women's history - the failure to appreciate the historical and social context of the events and the people's lives that one is investigating. It is patently inaccurate and historically naive to suggest that medieval queens had less in common with men of their own class than with medieval peasants or even with women today just because they are all female. Consequently, I agree to a certain extent with Fradenburg's idea of sovereignty being neither exclusively 'masculine' nor 'feminine', but it does seem to follow that the concept of gender was not irrevocably intertwined with sovereignty, and in fact probably not an issue at all in the Middle Ages. A medieval queen

was a social position first, the individual who held that position second, and a woman last of all: her gender was an issue only in the requirement of her office to give birth to an heir. The nature of a queen-consort's powers of land-holding, patronage, and political influence were in no way different to those of a man, while her close proximity to the king opened up many unrecorded opportunities. If accepted as a ruler, the queen regnant had the theoretical authority of a king: although in a lot of the cases detailed in these volumes her power was dependent on her status as mother of the closest male heir, the power was real nonetheless and it was her individual talents and choices that determined whether she made full use of it. The dependence of a queen's success on her own capabilities was even more relevant for those who definitely held power in their own right: of the early modern examples taken by Henderson and Akerman in *Women and Sovereignty* Elizabeth I of England realised and exploited this, while Christina of Sweden did not.

As with all issues of women's history, the study of queens and queenship ought to be at the forefront of modern scholarship but only because it has been so neglected by past historians, not because the history of women necessarily excludes the study of all else. Isolating women from their society in order to study them has always been a dangerous occupation, and particularly so for medieval women, often creating more misrepresentation about their lives and status than it could ever correct. Women's history and feminism have progressed in tandem throughout the twentieth century, but feminist historians must accept that it is only contemporary emphasis on women's experiences that enables a re-examination of medieval history in this way. Although related originally to modern interpretations of medieval literature, the following statement of Marion Wynne-Davies could also usefully be absorbed by some of the contributors to these volumes:

We perforce bring our own ideological baggage with us Whatever our critical allegiances, it is essential to recognise that they are social, cultural, political and personal constructions, rather than immovable and unassailable certainties.⁶

The study of women can lead its scholars in two often opposing directions: either it can 'problematize' history, providing it with an entirely new and separate field of study, or it can revolutionise what is thought on 'traditional' history. Although the former is the most

likely path and probably easier to achieve, the latter tends to be more pertinent, certainly to the lives of the women that these three books promote with almost total success. Medieval queens were not cut off from the rest of their society; the study of them should not be either.

NOTES

- ¹ E. Power, *Medieval Women*, Cambridge 1975, p.9.
- ² R. Bridanthal, C. Koonz, S. Stuard, 'Introduction' in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, Boston, Mass. 1987, p.1.
- ³ 'The King's Burden? - The Consequences of Royal Marriages in Fifteenth-Century England' in *Patronage, the Crown and the Provinces in later Medieval England*, ed. R. Griffiths, Gloucestershire 1981, and 'The Piety of Late Medieval English Queens' in *The Church in Pre-Reformation Society: Essays in honour of F.R.H. Du Boulay*, ed. C. Barron and C. Harper-Bill, Suffolk 1985.
- ⁴ C. Brooke, 'Introduction' in *Medieval Women*, ed. D. Baker, Oxford 1978.
- ⁵ P. Skinner, 'Survey: Women's History' in *The Historian* 36, Winter 1992, p.12.
- ⁶ M. Wynne-Davies *Geoffrey Chaucer: 'The Tales of the Clerk and the Wife of Bath'*, London 1992, p.120.