Highly Visible, Often Obscured: The Difficulty of Seeing Queens and Noble Women

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Medieval noble women and queens are everywhere, aren't they? They appear in illuminated manuscripts, Boccaccio and John Gower and John of Salisbury write about them. Queens process through cities and the countryside and have elaborate coronation ceremonies. Noble women bestow hospitality to the king and queen who demand room and board on their processions throughout the countryside. As patrons of artists they commission chapels, church sculpture, and books of hours. As queens, they wear crowns and sumptuous clothing and never travel alone. In their dotage they enter the convents they endowed when they were younger. Some are publicly visible as regents and guardians of their young sons, often seen in public places as they govern as regent. They sign documents and leave behind a mountain of parchment and paper.

So how can I say that elite and royal women were obscured? How can someone so public, so visible, be obscured? How can we miss them? First and most obvious, they are obscured by simple, plain vanilla misogyny. I encountered this when I began preliminary research for my dissertation on a fifteenth-century Spanish queen, Maria of Castile. I knew very little about her, even though she was a queen and somebody should have written something about her, right? I had scattered references in a couple of modern studies of the period and a handful of archival references from footnotes and that was all. So there I am, in Barcelona sitting in office of the royal archivist, a magisterial and supremely confident man, and he listens to my research plan, smiles at me as though I'm an idiot, and tells me that he doesn't think there is much for me to see. I am crushed. I was planning to spend two months in Spain and now it appeared that there was nothing for me to look at. I went back to my rooms and thought, now what?

I could have gone home, I could have gone to the beach for two months, I could have spent the summer watching the Olympics—it was 1992. But I knew from Susan Stuard's *Women in Medieval Society* (1976) that it took tenacity and cleverness and a new approach to archival research to make women visible. So I didn't go straight to the beach. I listened to other voices. Sue's chapter on medieval women in *Becoming Visible* was published in the first year of my coursework at Fordham and a year later Maryanne Kowaleski and Mary Erler published their collection of essays, *Women and Power in the Middle Ages* (1988).

And so I just kept asking for registers from her reign. Before I went back to the US, I learned why the verb in the title of the book, *Becoming Visible*, is a gerund. It's about a progress, an act not yet complete. It has a hopeful quality, a promise of something about to happen, emergent and optimistic. Coupled with that optimism is another lesson from feminism—tenacity matters. So I kept going. I found a female archivist who led the way. Two months later, register after register, we knew that her boss was wrong. I located 200 registers in a single archive, each with roughly 200 folios that contained just a part of the orders and letters issued by Maria as queen-lieutenant of the Crown of Aragon. With my small act of tenacity, Maria was becoming visible.

But even feminist scholars missed queens and elite women for most of the 1970s and '80s because they were influenced by Marxist studies, focused on empirical studies of peasants and townspeople. It's an odd thing, but there was a stigma attached to noble women that still inflects scholarship today. Judith Bennett in *History Matters* (2007) devotes about as much attention to the upper echelons, what I like to call the "privileged oppressed," as nineteenth-century historians did—roughly three paragraphs. When I was in graduate school and wanted to work on a queen, I had to convince my advisors that my subject was as worthy as non-elite women in Coventry.

But elite women were becoming more visible. When I got back from Barcelona, the flood began. John Carmi Parsons' edited collection on queens and queenship, *Medieval Queenship*, appeared in 1993 and now queens and elite women are everywhere thanks

to Margaret Howell, Pauline Stafford, Janet Nelson, Miriam Shadis, Marjorie Chibnall, Lois Huneycutt, Stacey Klein, Peggy Liss, Barbara Weissberger, Kim LoPrete, Brigitte Bedoz-Rezak, Amy Livingstone, Frederic Cheyette, Jane Martindale, Peggy McCracken, Jo Ann McNamara and Suzanne Wemple. And this was just the beginning. Queens are in good company. Collections on elite women—edited by Jennifer Carpenter and Sally-Beth MacLean, Anne Duggan, William Kibler, Louise Fradenburg, and Bonnie Wheeler—literally shed light on women who didn't make it into the textbooks before the 1970s. They are everywhere and they are busy: diplomacy, hospitality, patronage, visual and literary representations of and by queens and elite women, piety, motherhood, widowhood, childhood, needlework, education. About the only things elite women weren't involved in were plowing, cooking, brewing, and butchering.

But they are still only partly visible. My own experience studying a queen is a typical case of how elite women's public visibility can mask them. Maria governed Catalunya while her husband conquered and governed the kingdom of Naples. For twenty-six years, assisted by a royal council separate from the king's, she had full royal authority in Catalunya. And she left behind that mountain of documentation. María governed during a difficult period in Catalan history, filled with warfare and peasant unrest, but despite this considerable power and authority, she is unfamiliar, even to scholars of medieval Spain. Chroniclers writing after her death focused on the king's exploits in Italy and mentioned her only as Alfonso's wife. Nineteenth-century studies were brief, almost hagiographical, and prone to the romantic impulse to find examples of "valores madres," or valiant women ancestors. Only three modern historians paid any attention to her, and two of them, early in the twentieth century, wrote short articles written. Her sole biographer in the 1950s was interested in her court and patronage of religious institutions, which is an important part of her life but leaves untouched the main body of the queen's work.

María was also obscured because of national antipathy not only because she was a woman but also because she was a

Castilian. In this neglect, she is not alone. Catalan historians have long considered Alfonso an "Italian" king with a Renaissance sensibility and have played down his role in Iberian politics, while Italian historians rarely concern themselves with his non-Italian activities.

But once elite women are found, what do we see when we see them? Do we see agency or oppression? And what do we mean by agency? The ability to act like a man? The ability to act independently of men? The ability to commission a work of art or make one? Read a book or write one? Choose to marry or not? Sign contracts or order one drawn up? Manage the whole estate or just the household? Act as a judge or have legal standing? Go to war? Work independently or with her husband, brother, son, uncle, or father? What sort of resistance or acceptance does she encounter? From whom? More importantly, what would a woman in the Middle Ages have to say about "agency"?

And what does oppression mean to a woman of privilege? What does that glass ceiling look like? How high is it? Where are the holes in it? How does this affect both women and men lower down the social ladder? If Sarah Hanley is correct, and I think she is, we need to pay close attention to elite women to know more about how the norms and behaviors at the top of the heap trickled downward. What are the boundaries of class? What is permitted to some and denied to others?

How do we square all this with what we know to be true about patriarchal societies? Where do we fit these privileged but oppressed, publicly visible but privately obscured women? Are they exceptions, and if so, what's the rule? Why do they have some power in some places and not others, in some times and not others? I wonder if class is a universal that trumps all other categories. Is the glass ceiling more permeable or just a little higher for elite women? Does this help us resolve the problem of exceptionality? Is class the rule that determines who can and cannot have agency or power or simply the ability to live a life as a woman sees fit? Finally, is the exercise of public political or economic power still the best way to analyze all the archival material that we have been collecting? I tell my students that I

want them to tell me what my blindness has led me to miss. I want them to come to Kalamazoo and tell me I got it wrong.

Now that elite women are more visible, what are we still missing?

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