Queenship and Voice in Medieval Northern Europe, by William Layher. Queenship and Power. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. Pp. 248, ill.
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Since at least the 1980s, with scholars such as Pauline Stafford and John Carmi Parsons, queenship studies have furthered scholarship on women, family, gender, lordship, and power. Scholars have published numerous books and articles on individual queens in the interim and have continued to present new inquiries right up through summer 2012, when the two major medieval studies conferences (Kalamazoo and Leeds) between them hosted six panels devoted specifically to research on queens and at least another ten panels that included papers on queens. Palgrave Macmillan has harnessed this popularity of interest in their Queenship and Power book series, in which William Layher's monograph, *Queenship and Voice in Medieval Northern Europe*, is a recent entry. The book's focus on three queens in late medieval Scandinavia helps to expand the geographic scope of queenship studies into the north, an area not well developed in the prevailing scholarship, while simultaneously advocating a new mode of inquiry, based on the study of literary patronage, for scholars interested in how medieval queens claimed political authority.

Layher's approach straddles the disciplines of history (discovering what the women actually did) and literary scholarship (analyzing the representations of powerful queens), though the emphasis is on the latter. In particular, Layher is interested in how Agnes of Denmark, Eufemia of Norway, and Margareta of Denmark employed their political voices during times of weak or absent kings. Layher contends that queens normally employed "soft power," influencing the decisions and actions of their kings, but when kings were absent or incapacitated, the literary outputs of these three queens' courts produced a political voice, which, he argues, expanded the queens' political roles. The point, Layher notes on pages 32–33, is that "the queen's voice can survive the act of proxying through others and still remain viable. . . . poets . . . were not merely speaking *for* the queens whose interests they represented, but in a real sense speaking *as* them."

While Layher does not steep the book in the scholarly literature on women's power and authority, he devotes the entire second chapter to theories about voice, making useful comparisons with modern scholarship on vision and the "gaze" to get at the issue of agency.[1] Because a person can choose to shut one's eyes to the visual representation before him, the gaze allows for a degree of autonomy. By contrast, aurality is involuntary, for once a sound is emitted everyone within the aural field is forced to hear it. In addition, sound, and indeed the

voice, can be manipulated by the producer, for example by choosing a language that only certain members of the aural field can understand. In this way, the literary works produced during the reigns of Agnes, Eufemia, and Margareta compelled their audiences to listen to political messages amenable to the queens.

While the first chapter introduces the reader to the basic biographies of the three case studies, the real argumentation begins with chapter 2, in which Layher discusses the theories—medieval and modern—of sound and voice. Although it is quite clear that many medieval scholars thought deeply about the subject of sound and its ability to relay power, Layher never connects these medieval theories to the specific societies of his case studies. Did the queens know these theories? Did their audience understand their place in the aural power play?

Chapter 3 uses Queen Agnes of Denmark and the German poems of Rumelant von Sachsen to introduce the idea that a queen's literary patronage was not limited to commissions that supported her husband's political agenda. In 1286, Agnes's husband, King Erik V, was murdered, causing a civil war that eventually resulted in Agnes gaining control of the country. In the interlude, however, Rumelant wrote a poem in middle German (which Layher asserts was well understood in Denmark at the time) recounting the murder and urging Danes to stand true to Agnes's cause. In his text, meant to be read aloud, Agnes's political position becomes oral and performative, thus her cultural patronage produced an active voice, but Layher's point about agency is hampered in that he never makes a strong connection between Agnes and Rumelant.

Of all the medieval works under examination in this book, only those analyzed in chapter 4 document a direct link between the queen, in this case Eufemia of Norway, and the courtly literature produced during her reign (each poem explicitly names Eufemia as the patron in the epilogue). Layher argues that Eufemia had three poems composed in Swedish in order to win over her subjects to the idea that her only child, a daughter, was set to marry a Swedish prince. Layher argues this was not merely cultural diplomacy (a gift to please the future Swedish son-in-law) but an intent to create a political message. The texts were written in Old Swedish using a style (end-rhymes) that was the pinnacle of cultural refinement on the continent, thereby sending the message that the princess's new Swedish subjects would help usher Norway into sophistication.

The final substantive chapter employs the greatest variety of genres—an Old Swedish allegorical poem, the retranslations of the visions of St. Birgitta from the Latin texts into her native Swedish, and the series of charters exchanged between Queen Margareta of Norway and Denmark and the Swedish ruling

elites, who preferred Margareta to their foreign Mecklenburg-born king, Albrecht IV. The documents all employ a common image of Sweden beset by predatory wolves from the outside, relating to the political reality of a native population ruled by a foreign king.

The family trees on pages 10-12 are essential to understand the myriad ways in which the various kings and their spouses were related, but their utility is hampered by the typographical errors misdating reigns (for example, marking 1385 rather than 1375 as the start of Olof Hákonsson's reign in Denmark) or switching between regnal dates for some monarchs and lifetimes for others. The scholarly apparatus is similarly weak, with only a brief two-and-a-half page index. More seriously, the text often meanders into tangents that do not advance the arguments, such as the lengthy discussion of Queen Eufemia's parentage on pages 19-21, which concludes that the medieval debate over the identification of her father began long after Eufemia's death and had no political repercussions on the events under study in this book anyway.

Ultimately, the primary utility of this book is the introduction of a new way to conceive of and study medieval women's agency. I am not convinced that the evidence presented here demonstrates female agency, particularly as there is no direct tie between two of these specific women and the literature of their times. Nonetheless, I am convinced that this literature did create a political space in which these women could (and, judging by their actions, did) act.

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NOTE

1. For a recent discussion of the important distinction between medieval women's power and authority, see Erin Jordan, "The 'Abduction' of Ida of Boulogne: Assessing Women's Agency in Thirteenth-Century France," *French Historical Studies* 30, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 1–20.