That constitutes a “good” queen in the Middle Ages? Does “bad kingship” result in “bad queenship”? Helen Maurer addresses these questions in a welcome book on Margaret of Anjou (1430-82), the French consort of Henry VI (ruled 1422-61) and one of the most unfairly vilified English queens. Married at fifteen, Margaret came to England with the promise of peace after a century of war, and died with that peace shattered by the War of the Roses. Marriage and motherhood dominated her life, but the ineffectual character of Henry’s rule, coupled with his intermittent bouts of mental instability, propelled Margaret into a controversial public role in the governance. Her skillful management of the realm fueled the animosity of restive nobles. And she suffered for her competency at an obligation she regarded as an extension of motherhood. The ending of the story is familiar to all who know Shakespeare’s Henry VI: the king is deposed, the queen maligned, the son killed in battle.

Margaret’s story is so compelling and rich that it is surprising that it has taken so long for someone to examine it with a fresh eye and a gendered analysis. In 1986, Patricia-Ann Lee broached the subject, but Maurer goes further by carefully and thoroughly contextualizing the primary and secondary sources, both English and French.¹ Her Margaret is more than an adjunct but less than the “overwhelmingly” powerful usurper as described both by contemporary male authors who feared her and opposed her, and by later scholars who argue from hindsight rather than the immediate context. This is not, however, a book for the casual reader. Maurer presumes a solid, sophisticated knowledge of the people and events of fifteenth-century England and France. She does not follow a conventional narrative, the
cast of characters is large, their allegiances unstable, and the events complex and shifting. Maurer's analysis prompts a reconsideration of key elements of the War of the Roses by questioning the problematic of weak kingship. If Henry had been a more effective king, would Margaret have been less reviled? Lee suggests this, but Maurer challenges Lee's premise that Margaret was a bad queen and argues the reverse, that it was success that bred problems. Maurer convincingly shows Margaret's skill at the "business as usual" of governance by delineating the limits of agency and the constraints of gendered political culture that privileged rule by men. By arguing that Margaret was deeply connected to politics in the broadest sense of the word, Maurer takes up a dilemma faced by all foreign-born queens-consort: Which family matters more, the natal or the marital? In negotiations for ceding Maine to the French at the close of the Hundred Years' War, she was both ally and enemy of her uncle, Charles VII of France. Her loyalty to England was questioned at the outset of her marriage and this prejudiced public perception of her later actions. Maurer's analysis, set within the context of politics and gender expectations of fifteenth-century England, highlights the dangerous political climate through which Margaret so skillfully maneuvered.

She seeks, and largely succeeds, to assess evenhandedly Margaret's role in Henry's reign. The discussion of the events until 1454 and her actions in Cade's rebellion is, however, both plausible and questionable. The problem lies not in Maurer's skill as a historian but rather in the sketchy nature of the sources for that early period. Her argument about the formulaic nature of the royal pardon for the rebels, however nuanced, could go either way. She clearly prefers to see Margaret's hand in the pardon. After 1454 and especially after 1456, the sources are clearer and more descriptive of her actions, and Maurer's tone becomes less tentative. Devoting considerable attention to the crucial years of 1453-59, she dismisses the adulterous "she-wolf" portrayal and shows us a loyal,
responsible queen concerned with safeguarding her husband and son. She challenges the conventional view that the war resulted from Margaret’s deliberate snub at York in the Coventry Parliament in summer 1459 and points out that the only source for that accusation is pro-Yorkist and uncorroborated by any other evidence. Only as York’s actions became more dangerous did she react in kind. Still, the argument for Margaret’s authority in the period 1456-60 involves a degree of “sleight of hand” (139)—always tricky—especially coming as it does on the heels of some very couldish, would-ish, evidence of the earlier period. One’s willingness to accept Maurer’s argument depends on three things: first, one’s own comfort level with circumstantial evidence couched in inferential language; second, an acceptance of her argument about gender roles that inflected the constraints and agency of English queenship; and last, the degree to which one accepts her reading of symbolic gestures (gifts, intercessory acts, the handholding on loveday) and the cultural anthropology theory underpinning it.

I am, for the most part, convinced but I have two quibbles with the book, one theoretical and one institutional. As for theory, Maurer regards Margaret as anomalous, ranking her among the “anachronistically prominent women” (3), but she never questions what it means for a queen to be an anomaly. But many queens-consort ruled in some capacity, so shouldn’t we consider them the “norm,” especially in light of recent scholarship that suggests that the true anomaly was the docile and absent queen? As for institutions, where is a discussion of her finances, especially the management of her queen’s lands? Her tenants make a cameo appearance but this must have been a significant political task, even if it was delegated. Could her supervision of the queen’s gold have been a source of animosity as well as wealth, authority, and power?

This provocative book left me wondering, in the end, to what extent is queenship practiced by foreign-born consorts the product of the culture of their birth rather than their adopted realms? Margaret’s
understanding of queenship and female rulership, particularly the assumption that a queen could and should act as regent for an incapacitated husband and a minor son, was closer to the French and Aragonese (her paternal grandmother) traditions than the English. How exactly did she gain knowledge of this sort? Were there handbooks for princesses, informal perhaps, like those for princes? What did she learn about queenship from her mother and grandmothers? Because the regency was not accepted in England as a temporary form of royal governance, can we attribute Margaret’s difficulties to a clash of cultures? Finally, a study of the reign of Margaret of Anjou can really be seen as a study in the dynamic of rulership, the way in which kingship and queenship work in tandem. Scholars of queenship tend rarely to discuss kingship, much like kingship scholars neglected queens, but Maurer’s book clearly suggests the importance of analyzing both, together, as part of the single entity of monarchy.

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END NOTE