

Queenship Studies Comes of Age

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I'D LIKE TO start off our discussion on where we are going with questions of "women and power" by looking back at where we've been, using queenship studies as my lens. In the fall of 1986, I was a beginning graduate student enrolled in a research seminar directed by C. Warren Hollister. I had come to graduate school thinking that I wanted to work on elite women of the twelfth century and thought that a scholarly biography of Eleanor of Aquitaine might make a good dissertation project. I intended to start with a paper on Eleanor's role as queen consort in England. My first research report provided me with an opportunity to wax eloquent about what an extraordinary woman and queen Eleanor of Aquitaine really was, and I pointed out all the really unique and exceptional things that she had done during her tenure as England's queen. Hollister listened politely, then asked, "How do you know?" I was baffled by the question. Of course Eleanor was extraordinary, exceptional, and unique! Katharine Hepburn, after all, had played her that way, and besides, Amy Kelly's book said so!¹ Hollister continued probing—"What," he asked, "had Eleanor done differently from her predecessors? What did queens usually do? What were the things that a queen was supposed to do? How could one tell whether a queen was successful or not, if one had no baseline from which to judge?"

How indeed?

1. I am of course referring to Hepburn's portrayal of Eleanor in the 1968 film "The Lion in Winter," as well as to Amy Kelly, *Eleanor of Aquitaine and the Four Kings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950), works that, for all their faults, are nevertheless responsible for pointing a great number of future scholars to the study of the medieval era.

Of course these questions sent me right back to the proverbial drawing board, and I decided that I would begin my search by seeking out biographies of royal women in England who'd reigned prior to Eleanor. There were very few written in the twentieth century. Nor was there a subject category of "queenship" in the *International Medieval Bibliography*. I did find a few biographical articles on Emma, one on Edith, and another on Aethelflaed of Mercia from the 1970s. The only article that approached the idea of queenship synthetically was Marion F. Facinger's 1968 study of the Capetian queens.² Marjorie Chibnall was rumored to be working on a biography of the Empress Matilda. There were two works by Pauline Stafford: a 1981 article on "The Queen's Wife in Wessex" in *Past and Present*, and her then recent *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers: The King's Wife in the Early Middle Ages*.³ I decided that what I needed to do was a kind of "King's Wife in Anglo-Norman England" study for that seminar paper, for, I reasoned, in order to appreciate the true genius of Eleanor of Aquitaine, I would need to understand queenship as it had existed in the Anglo-Norman context. I thought that I would toss off a seminar paper for background and take up Eleanor the

2. Marion F. Facinger, "A Study of Medieval Queenship: Capetian France, 987-1328," *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History* 5 (New York, NY: AMS Press, 1968): 3-48.

3. On Emma, see Miles W. Campbell, "Queen Emma and Ælfgifu of Northampton: Canute the Great's Women," *Medieval Scandinavia* 4 (1971): 66-79; "Emma, reine d'Angleterre, mère dénaturée ou femme vindicative?" *Annales de normandie* 23 (1973): 97-114; and "The Encomium Emmae Reginae: Personal Panegyric or Political Propaganda," *Annuaire Mediavale* 19 (1979): 27-45. For Edith, see Kenneth E. Cutler, "Edith, Queen of England, 1045-1066," *Mediaeval Studies* 35 (1973): 222-31, doi:10.1484/J.MS.2.306138. On Aethelflaed, see Frederick Threlfall Wainwright, "Æthelflæd, Lady of the Mercians," in *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, ed. Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 44-55. On Matilda, see Marjorie Chibnall, *The Empress Matilda: Queen Consort, Queen Mother, and Lady of the English* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991); Pauline Stafford, *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers: The King's Wife in the Early Middle Ages* (London: Batsford, 1983) and "The King's Wife in Wessex, 800-1066," *Past and Present* 91 (1981): 3-27, doi:10.1093/past/91.1.3. The essays by Janet Nelson, Pauline Stafford, Sir Steven Runciman, Bernard Hamilton, and Derek Baker in Derek Baker, ed., *Medieval Women* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978) should also be mentioned here.

next year. By the end of the seminar, I had become persuaded that there was much more to be learned about Anglo-Norman queenship than I had originally guessed, and I resigned myself to the fact that Eleanor would have to wait for another day.⁴

The next year (1987), the *International Medieval Bibliography* started using “queenship” as a subject heading.⁵ There were two entries. By 1991, that number had grown to two digits, where it has remained ever since for fully entered years.⁶ The last year that has been fully indexed is 2011, with just thirteen articles. The peak year was 2005, with forty-seven entries, mostly English language, but also articles in Spanish, German, Hungarian, French, Italian, and Polish.⁷ The *IMB* only indexes periodical literature, but a list of books would show an equally impressive growth—not only were there several important collections of articles in the 1990s, but since then individual queens and aspects of queenship

4. At the time the best single scholarly piece on Eleanor was Elizabeth A. R. Brown, “Eleanor of Aquitaine, Parent, Queen, and Duchess,” in William W. Kibler, ed., *Eleanor of Aquitaine, Patron and Politician* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976), 9–34. Stephanie Tarbin’s 1997 bibliography on ORB (<http://www.the-orb.net/bibliographies/eleanor.htm>) remains a useful introduction but misses newer works such as Ralph V. Turner, *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Queen of France, Queen of England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler, eds., *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Lord and Lady* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), Jean Flori, *Eleanor of Aquitaine, Queen and Rebel* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2008), and Michael Evans, *Inventing Eleanor: The Medieval and Post-Medieval Images of Eleanor of Aquitaine* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

5. In her early Spanish language work, Nuria Silleras-Fernandez used the term “*reginalidad*” to describe Spanish queenship, a term that was not then recognized by the Spanish language academy. Thanks to the work of Silleras-Fernandez and others, that term is now generally accepted in Spanish language scholarship (personal communication, 2004).

6. Getting a count on the *IMB* maintained by Brepols is now more difficult because the electronic entries for one year can change as more data are added. The counts here were accurate as of 28 August 2014. There were only seven titles listed for 2012, and two for 2013, numbers that will undoubtedly grow as the indexing for those years continues. [Editorial note. As of 17 February 2016 the numbers are: 2011, 21; 2012, 22; 2013, 15; and 2014, 9.]

7. Accessed 22 May 2009.

in literature, history, and art have been and continue to be the subjects of excellent monographs.⁸

Where in 1986 the number of articles about medieval queens could be listed on a single sheet of paper, by now maintaining such a list is a significant undertaking, as is compiling a database of books on medieval queenship. Theresa Earenfight's bibliographical database at <http://theresaearnfight.com/comprehensive-bibliography/> runs to forty-five printed pages containing nearly seven hundred entries. As further signs of the health of the field, Palgrave Macmillan's decade-old "Queen-ship and Power" series, edited by Charles Beem and Carole Levin, had twenty-eight titles in print in 2015, there are courses on medieval queenship regularly taught at universities all over the world, and Theresa Earenfight has produced a textbook on medieval queenship that should enjoy widespread adoption not only in queenship courses, but also in general women's history courses.⁹

Early on, some doubted that "queenship" had a history outside of the lives of individual queens.¹⁰ Few today would dispute that understanding

8. The late 1980s and early 1990s saw the publication of several important compilations as scholars working on similar topics began to collaborate with sessions at the International Medieval Congress in Kalamazoo as well as several topical conferences held in North America and Scotland. See Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski, eds., *Women and Power in the Middle Ages* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988); Louise O. Fradenburg, ed., *Women and Sovereignty* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991); John Carmi Parsons, ed., *Medieval Queenship* (New York, 1993); and Anne Duggan, ed., *Queens and Queenship in Medieval Europe* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1997). John Carmi Parsons, then at the University of Toronto, deserves a great deal of credit for organizing early sessions at a number of conferences, as well as for his work in one of the early conferences dedicated to women and power, "Power of the Weak?" at the Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Toronto, in 1990. Selected papers from that conference appeared in *Power of the Weak: Studies on Medieval Women*, ed. Jennifer Carpenter and Sally-Beth MacLean (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995). For an excellent extended historiographical treatment of queenship studies, see Attila Bárány, "Medieval Queens and Queenship: A Retrospective on Income and Power," *Annual of Medieval Studies at CEU* 19 (2013): 149-99.

9. Theresa Earenfight, *Queenship in Medieval Europe* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

10. As a personal example, two of my first grant proposals, to the National

reginal activity is essential in reconstructing the dynamics of family structure, kingship, and statecraft during the medieval era. A sort of consensus narrative has emerged, which sounds something like this: The queen's role changed over time, and also differed depending on the area of Europe in which she lived. There were few formal or constitutional roles for a queen, so much depended on her individual interests and abilities, her relationship to the king, the financial resources she had at her disposal, and her ability to produce a suitable heir to the throne. In general, the early medieval queen enjoyed physical proximity to the court and the sources of political power, but her status was insecure and much depended on her relationships with her male relatives. By the Carolingian era Christian familial ideals had made her status somewhat more secure, although she usually could be replaced fairly easily if she proved infertile or otherwise unsuitable. The eleventh and early twelfth centuries represent a high point in the queen's independent authority and ability to control the power structures in place within her realm.¹¹ But even after the rise of administrative kingship in the later twelfth and thirteenth centuries, individual queens managed to leave their marks on the political, cultural, and ecclesiastical life of their realms.¹²

Endowment of Humanities and the University of Missouri Board, came back with comments indicating that "medieval queenship" was an unlikely field of enquiry from both feminist scholars and traditional political scholars. My anonymous feminist reader was concerned that queens were too elite and narrow a group of women from which to learn much that was useful, and the political historian was concerned that there must be a hidden feminist agenda in my work, and that whatever the contribution of queens might have been, knowing those contributions would be unlikely to add much to our knowledge of medieval political history. Upon resubmission, I was eventually granted funding from both agencies in order to continue my work.

11. The overall decline in women's effective power after the high point in the eleventh and twelfth centuries is probably the most contested part of the narrative I have just offered, and I would be remiss in not mentioning the pioneering essay of Jo Ann McNamara and Suzanne Wemple, "The Power of Women through the Family, 500-1100," originally published in *Feminist Studies* 1 (1973): 126-41 and reprinted several times since. See also McNamara, "Women and Power through the Family Revisited," in Mary C. Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski, eds., *Gendering the Master Narrative: Women and Power in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).

12. Although this essay concentrates on "queenship" as an organizing device, it should be pointed out that the study of noble women exercising power, particularly

Those interested in pursuing questions of queenship have also moved beyond the study of individuals, and have studied queenship not only to broaden our understanding of medieval political and ecclesiastical history, but also because to read medieval authors writing about queens and queenship is often to hear medieval authors discussing women and women's roles in a far broader context. Queenship studies is no longer just about queens, but also about the "creation of ideologies of gender, family, spirituality, and politics which were instantiated in and extended far beyond the rarified realm of the royal palace."¹³

So where next? I think that we can take the basis of what we have learned in the last thirty years or so and begin to build on that knowledge. First of all, I think that the most dynamic challenges and refinements to the received consensus are coming in studies that focus on the late medieval and early modern periods. Several papers and the roundtable discussion at the recent "Beyond Exceptionalism" conference on elite women challenged the notion that later medieval and early modern queens generally played little role in governance. Not only do we need a new history of women and power in later-medieval realms, we also need a new political history of Europe between the Black Death and the Protestant Reformation.¹⁴ Secondly, queenship studies have forced us to think about what we mean by "power" in the first place. I have recently

countesses, enjoyed a similar trajectory in the 1990s and beyond. Kimberly LoPrete's dissertation on Adela of Blois appeared in 1992 and was published as a monograph in 2007. Kimberly A. LoPrete, *Adela of Blois: Countess and Lord (c. 1067-1137)* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2007). See also Erin L. Jordan, *Women, Power, and Religious Patronage in the Middle Ages* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); and Louise J. Wilkinson, *Eleanor de Montfort: A Rebel Countess in Medieval England* (London: Continuum, 2012), as well as Kathy M. Krause's contribution to this issue.

13. Stacy S. Klein, *Ruling Women: Queenship and Gender in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 4.

14. The conference, organized by Heather Tanner and held at The Ohio State University, Mansfield, Ohio, 18-19 September 2015, featured both senior and emerging scholars and aimed to stimulate discussion on how the scholarship of the last thirty years or so on medieval elite women is and is not being integrated into master narratives. See Lois L. Huneycutt, "Conference Report," *Royal Studies Journal* Official Blog, <https://royalstudiesjournal.wordpress.com/2015/10/05/conference-report-beyond-exceptionalism/>, accessed 8 January 2016. The participants are in the process of preparing a volume of collected essays from the conference.

talked in terms of personal autonomy, implying control over one's own body, *potestas*, the ability to compel others to carry out one's will, and *auctoritas*, the holding of legitimately constituted offices such as queen, countess, or abbess.¹⁵ Too often, I think, we have narrowly defined power as *auctoritas*, and I do think we are getting a fairly good handle on how women functioned in those roles throughout Western Europe, perhaps most fully in Britain and the Iberian peninsula. German empresses and individual French queens remain surprisingly understudied. And, although there are still unanswered questions, women in need of full biographical treatments, and geographic areas that are understudied, I think that we can also begin to look at power more broadly and perhaps look at things like personal autonomy and how it functioned (or mostly didn't function) for both men and women in the medieval world. I think there is much to be learned from new areas like spatial studies and memory studies, and I think we can continue to learn from looking at material culture, especially the objects women owned, used, and passed on.¹⁶ We need to integrate what we already know about Jewish women, Byzantine women, and Muslim women into our master narrative, and we need to know more.¹⁷ I think in expanding our geographic range, we will be challenged in terms of what we have come to understand as “norms” within our study of western Europe. For instance, we are quite

15. Lois L. Huneycutt, “Power: Medieval Women’s Power through Authority, Autonomy, and Influence,” in Kim M. Phillips, ed., *A Cultural History of Women in the Middle Ages, 1000-1500*, A Cultural History of Women, vol. 2 (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

16. See Roberta Gilchrist, “Women’s Archaeology? Political Feminism, Gender Theory, and Historical Revision,” *Antiquity* 65 (1991): 495-501; Mickey Abel and Jennifer Way, “Placing the Middle Ages: Towards a Geography of Material Culture,” *Peregrinations* 2, no. 3/4 (2009): 1-18, open access journal, http://peregrinations.kenyon.edu/vol2_3_and_4.pdf. See also Elisabeth van Houts, *Memory and Gender in Medieval Europe, 900-1200* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).

17. Starting points include Lynda Garland, *Byzantine Empresses: Women and Power in Byzantium, AD 527-1204* (London: Routledge, 1999) and Judith Herrin, *Women in Purple: Rulers of Medieval Byzantium* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004); Avraham Grossman, *Pious and Rebellious: Jewish Women in Medieval Europe* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2004); and Gavin R. G. Hambly, ed., *Women in the Medieval Islamic World: Power, Patronage, and Piety* (New York, NY: St. Martin’s, 1998).

accustomed to the use of the term “virago” in gendered discussions of women and power and to seeing medieval people transgress norms as men voluntarily entered into submissive roles, and women took on positions of authority.¹⁸ But understudied texts such as the *Life of St Nino* offer us new ways of thinking about female power. In this particular piece of hagiography, the Georgian saint, considered “equal to the apostles” in the orthodox tradition, performs miracles, administers the sacraments, and preaches powerful sermons. Her activities are not described by her female hagiographer Salome of Ujarma in terms of a female harnessing male forms of power, but rather as someone acting with the strength of a female eagle and a lioness.¹⁹ It will remain to the next generation of feminist scholars to discover more such texts and to undertake the linguistic, paleographical, and literary study necessary to really explore, understand, and integrate these non-western traditions. There are exciting days ahead.

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18. The starting point here is Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982). See also Lois L. Huneycutt, “Female Succession and the Language of Power in the Writings of Twelfth-Century Churchmen,” in Parsons, *Medieval Queenship*, 189-202. Medieval masculinity studies are an exciting branch of gender studies, but one which also moves our focus away from women.

19. Margery Wardrop, ed. and trans., *Life of St Nino* (Piscataway, NJ, 2006; repr. of 1903 original edition published in *Studia Biblica et Ecclesiastica* 3). The images in question are from pp. 10-11, as Nino’s (female) mentor prophesies that Nino will have the “strength of a lioness, whose roar is louder than any four-footed animal,” and that of the female eagle, “soaring in the highest air, beyond the male.” See also Paul Crego, “St Nino and the Role of Women in the Evangelization of the Georgians,” *The St Nina Quarterly: A Journal Exploring the Ministry of Women in the Eastern Orthodox Church* 3: 1, accessed online <http://www.stnina.org/st-nina/her-life/st-nino-and-role-women-evangelization-georgians>, 28 August 2014.