Visions of Medieval Queenship: Gender and Genre in *La Estoire de Seint Aedward le Rei*

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The *Estoire de Seint Aedward le Rei*, composed between 1236 and 1245 and attributed to the St. Albans chronicler Matthew Paris, has much to offer studies of thirteenth-century England. Though closely modeled on earlier lives of Edward the Confessor (1003–1066), including the anonymous *Vita Aedwardi Regis qui apud Westmonasterium requiescit* (ca. 1065–67) and lives by Osbert of Clare (ca. 1138), Aelred of Rievaulx (ca. 1163), and the Nun of Barking (ca. 1163–89), the *Estoire* also develops these narratives in ways that shed light on specifically thirteenth-century concerns about genealogy, sanctity, and kingship.


While William MacBain has argued that the anonymous Nun of Barking is actually Clemence of Barking, who wrote the Anglo-Norman *Vie de sainte Catherine d’Alexandrie*, most scholars have rejected this attribution. See William MacBain, “The Literary Apprenticeship of Clemence of Barking,” *AUMLA Journal of the Australian Universities Language and Literature Association* 9 (1958): 3–22; Jennifer N.
Moreover, the rich illuminations of the single manuscript that preserves Paris’s work, Cambridge University Library MS Ee.3.59 (ca. 1255), offer art historians insight into the visual culture of the period. While scholars have extensively explored aspects of royal sainthood and visuality in the Estoire, they have largely overlooked the importance of queenship in the manuscript. Not only did Matthew Paris dedicate his text to Queen Eleanor of Provence, the wife of Henry III, but the only surviving copy of his work, the Cambridge manuscript, may have been a gift for Eleanor of Castile, the original dedicatee’s daughter-in-law. As a manuscript


5. For a discussion of Eleanor of Castile’s possible ownership of the Estoire, see Binski, “Reflections,” 339.
conceived for one queen and possibly copied for another, the Estoire invites a consideration of gender and queenship, which scholarship has previously neglected.6

In this essay, I suggest that the Estoire manuscript’s ambivalent portrayal of Edward’s queen, Edith, is both a product and an agent of its participation in the genres of romance, hagiography, and history. This work’s generic hybridity appears in its very title, La Estoire de Seint Aedward le Rei, which replaces the standard vita or vie of earlier lives of Edward with estoire, meaning “history” or “story.” While this first word prepares the audience for a history or romance, the designated subject of the narrative, Seint Aedward, suggests a hagiography, challenging the audience’s “horizon of expectation.”7 Though the coexistence of genres in a medieval text is not, in itself, remarkable, a study of competing generic modes in the Estoire helps to illuminate its more unusual treatment of gender.8 By focusing on the two central moments in which Queen Edith appears, her coronation and Edward’s death, I argue that, on the one hand, conventions derived from romance and hagiography incorporate her into a traditional gender hierarchy and encourage contemporary queens to follow her example. At the same time, Paris’s use of the history genre in his portrayal of Edith adds a counter voice to this narrative of passive femininity. Since history writing emphasizes heredity and


7. “Horizon of expectation” is a term used by Hans Robert Jauss to describe the historical situation and literary context upon which a reader’s response depends. Hans Robert Jauss, Toward an Aesthetic of Reception, trans. Timothy Bakhti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

multiplicity of records, its use in the *Estoire’s* depiction of Edith draws attention to gaps in the royal line of descent between Edward and Henry III and to the capacity of contemporary queens like Eleanor of Provence and Eleanor of Castile to destabilize their husbands’ authority through their personal ownership of property and acts of intercession. Therefore, the intersection of multiple genres in the seemingly marginal portrayals of Queen Edith, who, as a woman with power, is already ontologically unstable, exposes the *Estoire’s* double-consciousness as it reveals the very narratives of female agency it also aims to suppress.

The genres of romance, history and hagiography converge to represent competing perspectives on Queen Edith, as well as, I will suggest, on queens Eleanor of Provence and Eleanor of Castile, as early as her first appearance, in which she is likened to a romance heroine. When introducing Edith, whom Edward’s barons have pressured him to marry, Aelred of Rievaulx, Paris’s principle source, writes that her “schooling in holiness came from the spirit of God” (147), emphasizing her piety as a complement to Edward’s sanctity. Paris, on the other hand, as Jocelyn Wogan-Browne has noted, initially minimizes Edith’s spiritual devotion in order to accentuate qualities that liken her to a romance heroine. The *Estoire* introduces her as Godwin’s “mut bele, / Bein entetchee damoisele” (1148-49) [very beautiful, well-bred daughter who had been taught to comport herself graciously (68)] and then continues to extol her courtly graces: she is intelligent “en lettrure” (1155) [in letters (68)] and embroiders fine likenesses of men, birds, animals, and flowers.

While Aelred portrays this embroidery as representative of spiritual

9. Aelred had reason to highlight Edith’s spirituality since his work was written shortly after Edward’s canonization in 1161 and coincided with the 1163 translation of the king’s relics to Westminster Abbey. See Marsha L. Dutton, introduction to *Aelred of Rievaulx: The Historical Works*, trans. Jane Patricia Freeland, ed. Marsha L. Dutton (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2005), 20–24.


11. Quotations from the *Estoire* are from *La Estoire de Seint Aedward le Rei*, ed. Wallace and are cited by line number; translations are from Fenster and Wogan-Browne, *History of Saint Edward* and are cited by page number.
work, Paris instead treats it as evidence of Edith’s aristocratic refinement. The Cambridge manuscript’s rubric, which appears as a caption below an illumination of Edward’s barons begging him to find a wife (11r), complements the text’s portrayal of her courtly graces, as it states, “Edith, ki fille Godwin, / De grant sen fu e bon engin,” [Edith, Godwin’s daughter had great wit and cleverness] and adding, “K’endoctrinee ert en lecture / E apprise de portraiture, / En uveraine riche e noble, / N’out per gest k’en Constantinoble” (4777-82) [she had been taught to read and to make portraits; in noble and rich work there was not her equal all the way to Constantinople (68)]. In this superlative formulation of Edith’s accomplishments, Paris further constitutes her as a romance heroine. If Edward is the most chivalrous knight “puis le tens Arthur” (908) [since the time of Arthur (65)], Edith, in Paris’s text, has become his courtly lady.

This romance characterization of Edith largely suppresses her individual agency, rendering her a passive object in the narrative of Edward’s kingship. Her lack of subject status is evident in the narrator’s description of the “vers curtois” (1173) [courtly verse (69)] that has been written about her. The most famous line about Edith, the narrator says, is “Sicut spina rosam / Genuit Godwinus Editham” (1175-76) [As the rose comes from the thorn, Edith came from Godwin (68)], which separates Edith from her father’s traitorous reputation. This verse closely resembles one cited in the Nun of Barking’s life of Edward: “la rose ist de l’espine” (line 1257) [the rose is from the thorn]. The syntax of these lines is, however, inverted, for while the Nun of Barking’s text puts Edith (“la rose”) in the subject position, as Wogan-Browne notes, Paris puts her


13. This fusion of romance and hagiography to form ‘hagiographic romance’ is typical of the period. See, for instance, Amy V. Ogden, Hagiography, Romance and the Vie de Sainte Eufrosine, Edward C. Armstrong Monographs on Medieval Literature 13 (Princeton, NJ: The Edward C. Armstrong Monographs in Medieval Literature, 2003).

(“rosam”) in the accusative case, thereby emphasizing her lack of agency.\(^\text{15}\) Thus, in a narrative probably conceived for a female community, romance motifs function to figure Edith as an active subject while in Paris’s account, which was also possibly intended for a female reader, these same generic conventions portray the queen as a passive object within the seemingly more compelling narrative of her father’s treachery and Edward’s chivalry.

This romance framework of Edith’s passivity is disrupted, however, by Paris’s simultaneous evocation of history writing. When the narrator compares Edith to a rose sprung from her family’s thornbush, he not only accesses cultural memories of romance but also, by introducing the name of Godwin, brings the text into a historical mode, reminding readers of more worrisome aspects of Edward’s rule. Though his marriage to Edith was politically advantageous at the time, five years afterwards, in what Frank Barlow calls an effort “to get the Godwins off his back,” Edward accused Edith’s father of plotting against the throne and of being responsible for the death of his brother Alfred.\(^\text{16}\) Moreover, Edith’s brother Harold, who, as Paris later relates, seized power after Edward’s death, would fail to protect the kingdom against the Norman invasion. Edith herself was later charged with conspiring in the Northern Rebellion, and, in the next century, William of Malmesbury added to negative views about the queen by suggesting that Edward had not consummated the marriage because of his extreme hatred for Edith’s family.\(^\text{17}\) Aelred explicitly refuted this hearsay, writing, “some, knowing only flesh and blood, imputed it to royal simplicity that the king, having been compelled to join himself to a child of traitors, would refrain from the marriage act lest he beget traitors” (149). Paris goes even further to cleanse both Edward’s and Edith’s reputations by entirely omitting these alternative histories and failing to implicate Edith when he later critiques

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\(^{15}\) Wogan-Browne, “Clerc u lai,” 69.


her brother and father. Yet, even as he insists that a rose comes from a thornbush, the unsettling side of Edward’s conjugal union lingers in his choice to remind readers of Edith’s heritage.

Paris’s description of Edith’s roots may equally have recalled the problem of her personal ownership of property, an issue of concern both in Edward’s time and during the thirteenth century. As John Carmi Parsons writes, “to an ardently patriarchal society suspicious of women’s power, medieval queens were a disturbing anomaly.”

Edith’s control of land invested her with agency that may have contributed to this latent uneasiness since, as the Domesday Book indicates, she inherited property from her father and thus may have wielded a kind of independent sovereignty. Sources further suggest that, after 1066, she continued to hold lands, possibly posing a threat to the power of the new King William.

Other lives of Edward directly address the anxiety surrounding this queen’s independent wealth. According to the anonymous Vita of Edward, the public was troubled by the “many kinds of embroidered robes” with which she arrayed her husband. Paris, however, omits such details from his descriptions of the queen. His choice to minimize her historical agency is mirrored by the miniature at the top of folio 11r, which portrays the enthroned Edward instead of Edith, who is described in the text and rubric below. This inconsistency between text and image reflects the discrepancy we find between the text’s use of romance conventions to suppress reminders of events that may have drawn attention to Edith’s lineage and the threat her independent power posed to Edward’s kingship.

While folio 11r fails to depict the arrival of the queen at the royal court, the next page (folio 11v; fig. 1) figures her twice, reinforcing the text’s generic oscillation between passivity and unsettling presence. On the left side of the miniature, Edith kneels before Edward, their clasped


19. The Domesday Book lists, on folios 100v and 87, Edith’s landholdings under the subheading “Queen Edith held the lands written below”; cited in Pauline Stafford, Queen Emma and Queen Edith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 125, 127.
hands and interlocked gazes signifying shared courtliness. As we read this image from left to right, Edward’s regality, like the blue wash of his robes, seems to flow down to his future queen, whose kneeling posture emphasizes her subordination to him, representing the idealized marriage of romance narratives. The two men who whisper behind the enthroned king, however, gesture towards a darker view of the union, recalling perhaps the objections to Edith’s family. The right frame of the image, which shows Edith’s coronation, encodes even further ambivalence. On the one hand, the balanced composition and rhythmic alternation of colored washes in this scene enact visually the harmony suggested by Paris’s romance-influenced textual description as Edith is symmetrically flanked by bishops on one side and by lay people on the left. At the same time, the queen’s centrality in this image foregrounds her in a way that the text’s description of her coronation does not, a discrepancy that draws attention to the manuscript’s awareness of multiple narratives of queenship and the potential of a female ruler’s independent authority to weaken the king’s.

Figure 1: Reception and Coronation of Edith, fol. 11v, Cambridge MS. Ee.3.59, Cambridge. Cambridge University Library <http://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/MSS/Ee.3.59>.
In this initial meeting of the king and his new queen, hagiography offers a solution to the problem raised by the clash between the idealizing romance narrative of Edith and the more unsettling portrait suggested by history-writing conventions. After describing a lavish, courtly wedding and Edith’s coronation, the text describes the couple’s subsequent oath of chastity, in which they promise to remain chaste, a vow, which transforms Edith from a barren wife (many accounts of the couple’s childlessness blamed the queen) into an exaltation of her husband’s sanctity. The choice to explain Edith’s lack of progeny by emphasizing the oath, as Monika Otter asserts about the anonymous vita, “nudge[s] Edith retroactively into the last remaining ‘estate’ open to her—that of chaste virgin.” The queen’s virginity engages in an intertextual relationship with legends of virgin female martyrs like the early thirteenth-century Katherine Group, which includes the lives of Katherine of Alexandria, Margaret of Antioch, and Juliana of Nicomedia, women who eschewed motherhood and instead embarked on spiritual adventures. Perhaps even more applicable to Edith’s conjoined sacred and secular role is the Scottish queen Saint Margaret, who seems to have moved fluidly between her role as political leader and her religious calling. Inserting a hagiographical reference at this point in the text


23. See Katie Keene, “Margaret Queen of the Scots: Her Life and Memory” (PhD diss., Central European University, 2011). On Matilda, Margaret’s daughter, see Lois L. Huneycutt, Matilda of Scotland: A Study in Medieval Queenship (Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2003). For an edition of Margaret’s life, see Bishop Turgot, The Life of St. Margaret Queen of Scotland (Dunfermline: St. Margaret’s Catholic Church, 1980).
effectively smooths over the disruption raised by reminders of Edith’s lineage, integrating her childlessness into a spiritual narrative.

While Paris did not invent the reworking of Edith’s childlessness into an oath of chastity, he does deploy this vow to different ends. This hagiographic narrative began with the first version of Edward’s life, the anonymous eleventh-century *Vita Aedwardi Regis*, a work, probably commissioned by Edith herself, which aimed to praise the queen with a narrative of her husband’s sanctity.24 In the *Estoire*, however, the laudatory target is reversed; Paris emphasizes Edith’s sanctity not to bolster her own reputation but rather to render her a suitable, though always subordinate, partner for Edward. His choice to minimize spiritual female agency and instead to concentrate on Edward’s sanctity contrasts even with his most direct source, since in Aelred’s *Vita*, when first confronted with his barons’ demand that he marry, the king talks about chastity in feminized terms:

Admirabilis Suzannae constantia tua virtute de impudicis presbyteris triumphavit. Sanctae Judith castitas singularis, quae inter regias dapes et infecundos calices Holofernis nec laedi potuit nec tentari, femineam manum in perniciem nefandi capitis ferro muniens, urbem exemit obsidioni.

[Susanna’s wonderful constancy triumphed over shameless priests. The singular chastity of holy Judith saved her city from destruction: she could be neither harmed nor tempted among royal banquets and the sterile cup of Holofernes, when she fortified her feminine hand with a sword for the destruction of his impious head (146).]

By omitting this speech, Paris supresses allusions to female spiritual agency, allowing Edith spiritual status only as the less important half of her husband’s conjugal chastity. Unlike those saints whom Edith’s oath of chastity evokes, her celibacy is for the sake of her husband, functioning to rein in her disruptive potential and to fold her persona into that of Saint Edward’s.

Paris’s insistence on the queen’s passivity is further emphasized by the disparity between his description of the oath and its portrayal in the Nun of Barking’s text. The latter Anglo-Norman life granted Edith an opinion on her fate by including a dialogue in which the queen agrees with Edward’s desire for chastity, saying “Bel duz sire, tres chier ami . . . / cvo ai tuz jurz désiré / D’offrir a Deu ma chastée” (1371–76) [handsome, sweet lord, very dear friend . . . I have always desired to offer God my chastity]. In this version of the scene, the king retires to “un secré lieu” (1345) [a secret place] to speak with Edith, emphasizing the private collaboration of the couple in their decision to enter into a chaste marriage. Paris uses no such details and so limits the wife’s importance in the chaste marriage. His work thus manifests an ambivalence on the subject of Edith’s spiritual agency: while Paul Binski argues that Edith assumes importance as a guard of the king’s “chastity, the source of his spiritual power,” the Estoire focuses so little on her at the decisive moment of the oath that it negates the queen’s influence in a male-centered hagiography. The Estoire’s androcentric portrayal of the oath not only emphasizes Edward’s individual sanctity but also creates an image of piety and legitimacy for Henry III, who attempted to align himself with Edward through numerous artistic and architectural programs.

25. The subject of Edith’s complicity in the oath of chastity in the Nun’s life has recently been the subject of an essay by Thelma Fenster, “‘Ce qu’ens li trovat, eut en sei’: On the Equal Chastity of Queen Edith and King Edward in the Nun of Barking’s La vie d’Edouard le confesseur,” in Barking Abbey and Medieval Literary Culture, ed. Jennifer N. Brown and Donna Alfano Bussell (York: York Medieval Press, 2012), 135–44.

26. As Wogan-Browne notes, canon law required married people to obtain a spouse’s consent to a life of chastity. The Nun of Barking’s life was therefore more historically accurate than Paris’s. Wogan-Browne, “Clerc u lai,” 70. The translation is my own.

27. This intimacy is also noted by Wogan-Browne, “Clerc u lai,” 70–72. A wife’s voice also appears in St. Alexis’s life, where, in later versions, Alexis’s bride gives her consent to her husband’s chastity. Wogan-Browne, “Clerc u lai,” 71.


29. See Joanna Huntington, “Saintly Power as a Model of Royal Authority: The ‘Royal Touch’ and Other Miracles in Early Vitae of Edward the Confessor,” in Aspects
in fact, tenuous, the oath of conjugal chastity thus served the greater project of drawing attention away from biological heritage and instead emphasizing the spiritual connection that Henry sought to cultivate, a link in which Edith’s role could only ever be subordinate.

While the manuscript’s images do not depict the couple’s private oath, the images on folio 11v nonetheless reflect the hagiographical emphasis of the text. The rubric on this page suggests a spiritual bond between the couple as it proclaims, “Edith, la bele e acem mee / Fille Godwin, est curunee, / E l’espuse li rois Aedward / Par commun cunseil e esguard. / Li cuples fu mut glorïus, / L’espuse est bones e bon l’espus” (4783-88). [Edith, Godwin’s beautiful and accomplished daughter, has been crowned and she has become Edward’s wife by the advice and esteem of all. The couple is glorious! The wife is good, as is the husband (69)]. This caption’s syntactic equation between goodness of the king and the queen is, as I previously suggested, enacted in the kneeling of Edith before Edward on the left. This gesture is not, however, simply a transfer of secular regality since the coronation ritual also encodes a spiritual dimension. Edith’s kneeling before her husband reflects the portion of the English coronation ritual in which the queen bows to “symbolize an annihilation of the previous personality.”30 This merging of her identity into her husband’s royal sanctity is further emphasized by their physical contact, as Edward reaches out to Edith’s face and they clasp hands as she places her right hand in his lap. While this last gesture might hint at a lack of sexual intimacy, their physical closeness also conveys a spiritual bond, implying Edith’s “sharing her husband’s rule, one flesh with a saint.”31 Similar physiognomies reinforce their spiritual union as do their focused gazes on each other. Since the manuscript’s palette is generally restrained, it seems significant that, on the left, Edward’s royal blue cloak, in its diagonal form, draws the eye from the upper left hand

30. Stafford, Queen Emma and Queen Edith, 165. This kneeling posture might also recall supplementary historical accounts that describe how Edith refused a throne in favor of a seat at her husband’s feet. See Otter, “Closed Doors,” 76.
31. Stafford, Queen Emma and Queen Edith, 47.
corner of the miniature to the bottom right, connecting with the blue of Edith’s skirt. This movement of color conveys a transfer of Edward’s holiness to his queen, which is reinforced by the upward diagonal created by her kneeling body on the left and her erect posture in her coronation of the right, which implies her spiritual ascension through contact with Edward. In this right panel, a bishop, perhaps Aelfwine, further enhances the queen’s religious worth by anointing her with oil, an act that in coronation rubrics was accompanied by a prayer for the “abundant pouring out of the spirit of God’s blessing” upon the queen.32 Edith’s body, central to the miniature’s composition, literalizes this outpouring of God’s will, as her raised posture and blue robe visually suggest spiritual elevation. Read in context of the text’s hagiographic tone, this image emphasizes Edith’s integration into her husband’s sanctity.

This introduction to Edith, which relates her courtly characteristics in romance hyperbole and her chaste marriage in hagiographic terms, largely suppresses the threat her family connections posed to Edward’s rule. A desire to minimize the historical agency of the queen is evident not just in Paris’s portrayal of Edith but also in his characterization of his dedicatee, Queen Eleanor of Provence, whom he praises in romance terms. In his opening dedication, Paris writes to Eleanor:

En vostre garantie met  
Ke pur vus ai fait cest livret,  
Noble dame de haute orine,  
Alianor, riche reine  
D’Engleterre, ki sestes flurs  
De dames par bens e honurs.  
N’est hom ki ne vus eime e prise

32. While it is not certain from the image that the bishop anoints Edith, it seems probable given his gesture and the well-known rituals of the queen’s coronation. Stafford, *Queen Emma and Queen Edith*, 165. Queens in England had been anointed since the coronation of Aelfthryth of Wessex in 973. This act gave formal power to queens since it allowed them to possess treasure and lands. See Carol Neuman de Vegvar, “Images of Women in Anglo-Saxon Art III: A Paean for a Queen: The Frontispiece to the *Encomium Emmae Reginae*,” *Old English Newsletter* 26, no. 1 (1992): 57.
Vos buntez, sens e franchise.
Si dit n’en fuse losengers,
Vos bens diroie volenters,
Mais brefvement tut vus ent los
Cum il m’apent e dire l’os:
Cum charbucle est entre autres gemmes
Flur estes entre autres femmes.

(49-62)

[Noble, well-born lady, Eleanor, rich queen of England, flower among ladies by virtue of your qualities and honors, I who have prepared this book for you put it in your care. There is no man who does not love and esteem your goodness, wisdom, and nobility. Were I not to be called a flatterer, I would willingly talk about your good qualities; instead, I will praise you briefly, as is fitting and as I dare say: like a carbuncle among gems, you are a flower among women. (54)]

Like Edith, Eleanor is here described in a romance idiom as a flower and a gem. The correlation of Paris’s praise of the queen’s nobility, wisdom, and goodness here with his subsequent descriptions of Edith’s courtly graces suggests that part of Estoire’s purpose was to inspire the queen to imitate Edith. Eleanor did, in fact, fulfill many of these “generic” expectations, since, as evidenced by the Liberate and Close Rolls, she beautified her surroundings by commissioning elaborate chambers, gardens, and chapels into which she introduced images of Edward the Confessor, after whom she and her husband named their firstborn son.33 Just as in Paris’s account Edward transfers nobility to his queen, Henry III was seen to have fostered his wife’s good taste, teaching “her to love beautiful settings and beautiful objects as aids to devotion.”34 Paris’s likening of Edith and Eleanor to women of courtly romance thus participates in a larger cultural understanding of queens as decorative additions to their husband’s rules.

Just as the text’s emphasis on Edith’s romantic character might have directed contemporary queens towards certain kinds of courtly patronage, the hagiographical dimensions of the manuscript may have been intended to inspire them towards a devotion to Edward’s cult. Henry III expressed dedication to the saint through his completion of Westminster Abbey, where he commissioned a new shrine for Edward and installed paintings of Edward’s coronation inside his royal private chamber. He further rehearsed his dedication to Edward, as kings had done since the Conquest, by donning the saint’s regalia at his own coronation and repeating the oath, “Edward li esprit de sauer od governement” [Edward the spirit and savior of government]. Since Queen Eleanor was expected to mimic Henry by honoring Edward’s cult, the *Estoire* served to school her in this religious obligation. In his epithalamium to Eleanor, Paris explicitly encourages her to love Edward by writing, “whatever her lord King Henry loves, [she] cherish[es] and desire[s]” (54). Perhaps to encourage a love of Edward further, the *Estoire* offers the model of Queen Edith, a figure with whom Eleanor could identify in her duty to “sacriliz[e] the house and the dynasty.” Eleanor’s reverence for Edward’s cult, as well as her link to Edith, was enacted during her own coronation mass on January 20, 1236, in which “the king and queen drank Christ’s blood from Saint Edward’s chalice as a sign of their unity,” representing the sacred bond between Edward and Edith. During this ceremony, Margaret Howell hypothesizes, Eleanor held a scepter and a golden crown of lilies, both of which were later represented


36. Binski describes Henry’s regalia; Ibid. The coronation oath is given in J. Wickham Legg, *Three Coronation Orders* (London: Harrison and Sons, 1900), 42. Paris would have been especially aware of Henry’s special connection to Edward since, in his *Chronica majora*, he gave a firsthand account of Henry’s translation of the saint’s relics in 1247.


on her seal, likening her to the image of Edith during her coronation in the manuscript.40

During her reign, just as Edith’s participation in the oath supported her husband’s sanctity, Eleanor of Provence performed her religious duty by assisting in Henry’s celebration of Edward’s feast day, first in 1236, and later in 1253 when she acted as regent in her husband’s absence.41 She seemed to emphasize publicly a connection to Edith, and therefore to Edward, when she founded a nunnery at Tarrant, recalling Edith’s refoundation of Wilton to provide a home for England’s spiritual women.42 Possibly too, Eleanor privately expressed her personal devotion to Edward in the painted decorations of her rooms at Westminster, which though they do not survive, were thought to contain depictions of Edward, for whom Eleanor and Henry named their firstborn son.43 While Eleanor of Castile could not have directly informed the Cambridge manuscript’s representation of female power, the Estoire, as Binski suggests, may have been given to her “to introduce her to the cult of her husband’s name-saint.”44 Indeed, she was instructed in devotion to Edward the Confessor as early as her first arrival in England in 1255, as her father-in-law, Henry III, planned the event to coincide with the saint’s feast day.45 Fidelity to Edward’s cult became a way for Eleanor of

40. Howell, Eleanor of Provence, 18. Much later records of Queen Victoria’s coronation mention that she also held a scepter with a dove, Edward’s symbol. J. Wickham Legg, The Coronation of the Queen (New York, 1898), 35. It thus seems possible, given the continuity of this ritual, that Eleanor of Provence’s scepter may have been similar. Eleanor’s seal, which contains a virge and scepter, is found in BL Cotton Charter XVII6.


42. Ibid., 9.

43. Eleanor of Provence’s Westminster chambers were demolished in 1825. Evidence of their visual content only remains in drawings that suggest the rooms contained images similar to those of Edward in Henry’s chamber. Gee, Women, Art, and Patronage, 57-58.


Castile, like her mother-in-law, to advance her husband’s desired self-image, as Edith does in the *Estoire*.

The use of romance and hagiography in the *Estoire* to render Edith as a passive mirror of her husband as an example for contemporary queens is reinforced by her limited presence between her introduction into Edward’s life and her appearance at his deathbed. In this interim, during which Edward enacts many miracles and rebuilds Westminster, there is only a brief account of Edith’s involvement, after Edward first falls ill, in planning the cathedral dedication feast and of her pains to ensure that the event pleases her husband because she is queen “en glis e eu palois” (3665) [both in the church and in the palace (101)]. In this act of homage to Edward, the poem characterizes Edith as “vaillant,” a term that evokes chivalric knighthood, yet this bravery seems primarily to serve the interests of the king. Other lives accord more autonomy to the queen’s activities during Edward’s reign. The anonymous eleventh-century *Vita*, for instance, emphasizes her secular responsibility, a subject raised but not explored in the *Estoire’s* coronation image, by describing Edith as a surrogate mother who “reared, taught, adorned and showered with maternal love boys of royal birth.” 46 The couple’s historical dual acts of patronage—Edward’s rebuilding of Westminster and Edith’s reconstruction of the Wilton nunnery (consecrated in 1065)—imitated this coparentage. This *Vita* even includes Edith’s personal opinion on her religious patronage, as it states that she believed alms best bestowed on “the weaker sex, less skilled in building, more deeply felt the pinch of poverty” (47). The queen’s dedication to caring for boys and women in this anonymous *vita* affords her a subject status of maternity that the *Estoire* entirely excludes. 47

One possible motive for Paris’s omission of Edith’s agency between her coronation and Edward’s death is to divert attention from the couple’s lack of progeny, a detail that does not serve the model the text attempts to establish for contemporary queens. According to sources, including Aelred, Edith was banished from the court during Edward’s reign in 1051, probably because of her inability to conceive. By failing to record

47. Wogan-Browne, “Clerc u lai,” 75.

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Edith’s activities after her coronation, the Estoire avoids even a vague reminder of the less auspicious event of her banishment. Such selective fiction-making in the life of a queen resembles that of an earlier text, the Encomium Emmae Reginae, which, though not directly related to the Estoire, similarly attempts to mold public opinion about a queen through a fusion of truth and fictionality. Composed between 1040 and 1042, probably in Flanders, the Encomium attempts to recover the reputation of Emma, Edward’s mother, who married Cnut, the Danish invader by casting her as a peacemaker and bearer of legitimacy.48 Elizabeth Tyler’s account of the Encomium’s fictionality as borne out of social and political necessity may equally be applied to the Estoire’s suppression of comprising historical anecdotes about Edith to achieve its desired political message of praising Edward and providing an example for contemporary queens.49

When Edith finally does reappear in the Estoire at the significant moment of Edward’s death on folio 29r (fig. 2), romance and hagiography in the text seem at first to integrate her into a narrative of passive, feminized grief. As Edward lies dying, Edith doesn’t speak but rather reacts physically and with intense emotion, acts which refer to both romance and hagiographic intertexts:

La reïne grant dule demeine,
Suef le leve e suef le cuche,


Baise li e face e buche,
Mut se deut e pleint e plure
E pur li Deu prie e ure,
Mais ne truue pas quor cunfort.
(3682-87)

[The queen, who grieved mightily, awoke him softly, and softly
she put him to bed, kissing his face and mouth. She lamented
and wept and grieved and prayed to God on Edward’s behalf, but
could find no solace. (101)]

When the people later mistakenly announce that Edward is dead, Edith
again fails to speak but rather tears her hair and wrings her hands.
Romances of antiquity, like *Le roman de Thèbes*, often conclude with
women weeping and sacrificially tearing their hair over the destruction
of their cities and the deaths of their husbands, reactions that underscore
their lack of agency as they are unwillingly implicated in the aftermath
of wars. Similarly, Edith’s futile prayers to God, her inability to find comfort, and the distressed movements of her body demonstrate her lack of control at the moment of Edward’s death. At the same time, these intense, nonverbal reactions to Edward’s suffering seem also to adhere to hagiographic portrayals of women whose lives focused on the emotional and physical realizations of religious truths. However, while such holy women are able to “overcome their inherent feminine weakness through the twin processes of physical identification with Christ’s suffering and the endurance of extreme physical torture,” Edith here remains marginalized with only these few sentences to describe her grief.\textsuperscript{50} At this point in the text, Edith’s difference from the romance and hagiographic heroines she seems to resemble in fact draws attention to her disempowerment as she loses her identity as reigning queen with the death of her husband.

Into the scene of romantic grief and hagiographic suffering at the hour of the king’s demise, the text of the manuscript introduces the history genre, which was necessary to fortify the imaginary link between Edward and Henry III. Immediately before his death, Edward briefly recovers and recounts a vision he has had. Two men, he says, have told him that England, symbolized by a tree, has sunk into a state of moral decay for which it will be punished. They prophesy, however, that this tree, “regne la seingnurie” (3807) [“the lordship of the realm” (103)], will eventually undergo a process of rebirth. Once the branches born from the trunk, the wicked Kings Harold and William, are severed, the “li ceps recevera verdur, / Fruit portera aprés sa flur” (3773-74) [the trunk will produce new green growth and bear fruit after flowering (102)]. This renewal, the narrator tells us, comes with King Henry I, who will marry Matilda, the daughter of Edward’s niece, reestablishing a “legitimate” kingship, which will further blossom with the birth of Henry III. Edward’s vision thus connects him to Henry with a spiritual metaphor, skirting around the problem faced by the Norman and Angevin kings of having to legitimize their succession through the female line.\textsuperscript{51} Whereas in the Nun of Barking’s \textit{Vie}, the genealogical tree flowers with the birth of

\textsuperscript{50} Elizabeth Robertson, \textit{Early English Devotional Prose and the Female Audience} (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 43, 97.

\textsuperscript{51} Wogan-Browne, “Clerc u lai,” 73.
Matilda, the *Estoire’s* tree flowers with Henry I, thereby deemphasizing the woman’s role in succession.\(^{52}\)

As Harold’s sister and a reminder of Edward’s lack of progeny, Edith posed a threat to the historical narrative proposed by this prophesy, a problem Paris solves by deemphasizing her role at the moment when she should have been the king’s chief mourner. Instead of emphasizing Edith’s responses to her husband’s death, Paris highlights Edward’s roles as romance hero and royal saint. When Edward begs his people to bear faithful company to the queen, who is not just his wife, but also his sister, his lover, and his daughter (3877–79, 104), his language is courtly, evoking the romance hero who praises his lady. However, when he responds to Edith’s weeping by telling her not to grieve because he will soon be with God and, later, requests that he be buried at St. Peter’s, he transitions to a hagiographic mode. The accompanying rubric and image on this page further emphasize his sacred kingship. The rubric states, “Seint Johan, si druiz demeine / Devant la Maïsté le meine” (5077–78) [Saint John, his loving friend, leads him before the Divine Majesty(103)] while the accompanying image illustrates his soul leaving his body, suggesting Edward’s posthumous endurance as the focus of religious devotion.\(^{53}\)

Since Edith never replies to Edward’s speech, and the text’s attention then passes to Harold’s speech, this fusion of romance and hagiography diminishes the queen’s importance in favor of her husband’s sacred kingship.

Paris’s choice to minimize Edith at Edward’s death becomes even more apparent when compared to Aelred’s description of the same event. In the earlier text, Edward is more specific in his requests for Edith’s future; he entrusts her “to her brother and to the chief men” (210). Equally, he is more precise in his praise. Whereas the *Estoire’s* Edward cannot find words to describe his queen’s goodness, in Aelred’s version, he commends her obedience and her modesty, “for she bore herself as a wife in public, but as a sister or daughter in private” (210). Equally,

\(^{52}\) Wogan-Browne, *Saints Lives*, 252.

\(^{53}\) John is known as the chaste Apostle, so his appearance at the death of Edward, the virgin king, is particularly appropriate. On images of St. John in the Middle Ages, see Jeffrey Hamburger, *St. John the Divine*: The Deified Evangelist in Medieval Art and Theology (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).
more attention is given to her independent wealth when Aelred says of Edward, “he commanded also that everything she had brought as a dowry should remain hers” (210). In the Estoire, Edward asks only that Edith be given an ample dower, seeming to forget that she has conveyed her own possessions into the marriage. The Estoire’s lack of attention to the queen’s fate at Edward’s deathbed culminates in a rapid switch from his speech to his wife to Harold’s plan to marry Duke William’s daughter. Explaining the need for this alliance, Harold recalls Edward’s lack of heirs, addressing the king: “vus, sire, naturaument, / Ki eir n’avez de vus issu” (3900–1) [you who have ruled the kingdom and have no issue (104)]. Thus, the text moves easily from the suppression of one queen’s agency to the use of another woman as a political bargaining tool, further emphasizing its exclusion of female concerns.

While the text, rubric, and certain elements of the miniature minimize the queen’s importance to create an idealized image of Edward’s sacred kingship that reflects well on Henry III, the queen’s prominent visual presence at her husband’s deathbed unsettles this appearance of genealogical continuity. If the text, in its failure to draw problems of succession to their full conclusion, as Otter argues about the anonymous Vita, is “fretting” about what it cannot say, the miniature fills some of these silences with a pictorial imagining of events that brings several genres into contact. The illumination places the queen directly over the king’s body as a distressed presence, her arm reaching over him as a symbol of their physical and spiritual bond. Though her posture of lament recalls a pietà, or perhaps a grieving romance heroine, this scene is more than the death of a saint or of a chivalric knight. It is also the demise of a king, who will leave his people without a ruler. In this context, the queen’s visual prominence over the Edward’s body suggests the text’s anxieties about the absence of heirs, about broken hereditary lines, and about the unauthorized agency of royal women. In this image,

Edith’s body takes on an almost masculine appearance. Her facial features and short hairstyle, which resemble illustrations of the younger Edward in the *Estoire* manuscript, replace the heightened femininity of earlier depictions of Edith. It is now she alone who wears the royal blue, and she is active in contrast to the king’s static body. This image might thus imagine the queen’s newly asserted agency as a quasi-masculine heir to the throne. Depictions of powerful women as men were not uncommon in this period. Wogan-Browne, for instance, observes that early church fathers emphasized virginity as “a way for women to shed their cultural gender and become more like men.” The *Estoire’s* juxtaposition of this miniature’s hagiographic model of the virile woman with the text’s limited descriptions of Edith and its strong emphasis on a sacred, male-oriented genealogy reflect an ambivalence about the queen’s role after her husband’s death.

The queen-figure, at the intersection of different generic conventions, thus acts as an opening through which many of the manuscript’s anxieties slip. As Otter argues, Edith is threatening because her barrenness symbolizes the fate of a nation headed towards catastrophe since Edward’s lack of a male heir would clear the way for the Norman Conquest. Edward, for all the *Estoire’s* efforts to remake him, was not a strong king, and Edith’s body remains behind in this miniature as an emblem of her husband secular failure, symbolizing the “closed doors” of his progeny. In hagiography, a saint’s death completes the narrative; in a romance, the story ends once the male protagonist is dead. Only in a


history might Edith have had some role after Edward’s demise. Yet, this is a history that the manuscript, in order to present a continuous link between Edward and Henry, silences since the queen’s body can only remind readers and viewers of the rupture between the two royal houses and thus of the flimsiness of Henry’s claim to descent from the saint-king. Thus, the Estoire vacillates between yearning for union with the past and desiring distance from this very history. The genre of history’s unavoidable allusions to Edith’s lack offspring, her traitorous family connections, and her personal political agency disrupt efforts of romance and hagiography to present Edward as an ideal king and Henry as his equally ideal successor. Once this link between the two kings unravels, the connection between Edward’s acts and Henry’s loses currency.

While the manuscript’s initial portrayal of Edith as a romance love-object and a submissive partner in her husband’s hagiography foregrounds her function as an example to contemporary queens, in her second appearance, the increased use of history writing conventions gestures to anxieties about the independent power of queens. Such concerns were not unwarranted, as both Eleanor of Provence and Eleanor of Castile wielded power in the form of literary patronage, personal ownership of property, and intercession, unsettling the certainty of their husband’s dominance. As a literary patron, Eleanor of Provence commissioned several manuscripts including the romance of Guillaume le Conquerant, an Anglo-Norman version of Vegetius’s De Re Militari, and the pseudo-Dionysius’ De celesti hierarchia.59 Eleanor of Castile sustained this power of patronage by commissioning a romance about her ancestor, Isembart. Moreover, her wardrobe records prove that she maintained a personal scriptorium, and a 1288 note records the purchase of parchment to cover the lives of Saint Thomas and Saint Edward, signifying her personal interest in preserving documents recording her kingdom’s ancestral past.60 These records suggest that Eleanor of Castile sought


60. See John Carmi Parsons, The Court and Household of Eleanor of Castile in 1290 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1977). This evidence of Eleanor of Castile’s wardrobe records has often been overlooked and might, with further research, serve to link her more positively to the Cambridge manuscript.
influence through literature, and even perhaps established new trends, such as the revival of Arthurian legend.\(^{61}\) Since, according to Paris’s own *Chronica majora*, the younger Eleanor was “looked upon with suspicion by all England” because of her Spanish heritage, her continental literary tastes might have exacerbated this distrust.\(^{62}\) Though Eleanor of Castile’s particular power of patronage postdates the *Estoire* and so can not have figured in the intentions of its composer, Paris’s portrayal of Edith suggests a general awareness of the ability of queens “through literary or artistic patronage, [to] inscribe themselves in political discourse” and perhaps even destabilize it.\(^{63}\)

Just as Edith’s possession of a dowry from her treacherous father unsettled the court, these thirteenth-century queens’ ownership of property might further have challenged romance and hagiographic images of queenship in which a woman’s power was generally subordinate to her husband’s. Eleanor of Provence, for instance, possessed independent income from wardships, which she managed herself.\(^{64}\) The Oxford parliament’s negative reaction in 1258 when she tried to increase her income, Parsons hypothesizes, expressed, the greater controversy over her expanded sphere of activity.\(^{65}\) Later records equally describe Eleanor of Castile’s purchase of Leeds Castle in which Paris critically describes her commission of tapestries in a “Spanish fashion.”\(^{66}\) Since both Eleanors seem not only to have owned their property but also to have been criticized for it, the *Estoire* manuscript’s omission of references to Edith’s personal possessions and patronage in a work that may have been intended as a model for these same queens is unsurprising.

\(^{61}\) Eleanor’s influence on the Arthurian revival is only supported by some scholars. See Parsons, “Of Queens, Courts and Books,” 184.


\(^{63}\) Ibid., 188.


\(^{65}\) Ibid.

Further challenging a view of the submissive spouse was the queens’ intercession, which meant that they had a publically recognized right to intervene with their husbands on behalf of their subjects. Eleanor of Provence exercised her power to intercede, which was visually symbolized by her seat next to the king’s *virge* of justice at her coronation ceremony, in order to gain support from powerful families. In 1266, for instance, she intervened with Henry III on behalf of William de Haustede, thus securing the allegiance of two generations of the Haustede family. Her role as patron, protector, founder, and mediator further allowed her to forge critical alliances with abbots and bishops such as Edmund Rich of Canterbury, Nicholas Farnham of Durham, and Robert Grosseteste of Lincoln. Just as the Oxford parliament objected to Eleanor’s increase of income, contemporary chronicles expressed displeasure with her “masculine” authority by describing her as “a noble and pious virago,” suggesting that she took on qualities of a man.

Eleanor of Castile equally intervened in her husband’s affairs. For instance, in 1282, she successfully objected to her husband’s plans for her daughter’s marriage, an interjection that Parsons suggests signifies her move “from the margins to the center of power.” Parsons further argues that, rather than indicating her inconsequence as a queen, Eleanor of Castile’s absence from chronicles may indicate uneasiness about her influence over her husband, Edward. An indication of her powerful sway is contained in a letter from Archbishop Peckham which requests: “my lady we require you for God’s sake that you will do so in this matter that those who say that you cause the king to use severity may see and know the contrary.” Here, the archbishop implies not only that the queen had a strong influence over Edward but also that her authority was perceived as threatening. In an era when a husband was expected to have

67. Parsons, “The Queen’s Intercession,” 151, 156.
68. Parsons, “Piety,” 111.
69. Parsons, “The Queen’s Intercession,” 158.
control over his wife’s activities, Eleanor of Castile’s influence would have been unsettling. Through acts of self-assertion within different zones of medieval society, these foreign-born queens posed a threat to their husbands’ absolute rules and to society’s standard equation of femininity with passivity. The different texts of their lives—chronicles, letters, records, and works of art—portray contrasting versions of queenship through a kind of generic discord that resembles Edith’s multiplicity in the *Estoire* manuscript.

In this essay, I began by suggesting that the genres of romance, hagiography, and history represent different views of Edith’s identity. Hagiographic and romance conventions portray a passive and subordinate queen who complements Edward’s identity as a saint-king, facilitates his link to Henry III, and acts as a model for the queens who would have read the manuscript. To complete its project of connecting Edward to Henry III, however, the manuscript also relies on the genre of history writing, which adumbrates a more subversive mode of queenship. Gaps within and between this multimedia manuscript’s text, rubrics, and images further contribute to an ambiguous portrayal of queenship. Not only does the unstable figure of Edith expose the *Estoire*’s contradictory project of showing Edward as a virgin king who is genealogically linked to Henry III, but it also reveals broader cultural anxieties about queenship. On the one hand, Paris’s original version for Eleanor of Provence and its copy for Eleanor of Castile sought to mold the queens into submissive supporters of their husband’s rules, but the use of history writing to describe Edith, through its omissions as much as through what it includes, equally draws attention to her subversive potential. The contrast between Paris’s omissions from the historical record and Edith’s striking presence in the manuscript’s images suggest a deliberate suppression of her lack of progeny, her threatening family connections, and her independent wealth and power. In a work destined for two generations of queens who possessed similar independent authority, this near erasure of Edith’s agency suggests both discomfort with and acknowledgment of the power queens could wield. As Jo Ann McNamara observed, studies of medieval women’s roles always encounter difficulties in their attempts to construct “a history for which there
were no historians, from records that resist the project.” In the *Estoire* manuscript, only by reading within the gaps between genres as well as between texts and images can we gain a sense of the queen’s complex role as a figure perpetually negotiating between dependence and individuality, submission and assertion.

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