

## Queenship in Medieval Europe

**Review Number:**

1509

**Publish date:**

Thursday, 14 November, 2013

**Author:**

Theresa Earenfight

**ISBN:**

9780230276468

**Date of Publication:**

2013

**Price:**

£20.00

**Pages:**

368pp.

**Publisher:**

Palgrave MacMillan

**Publisher url:**

<http://www.palgrave.com/products/title.aspx?pid=411175>

**Place of Publication:**

Basingstoke

**Reviewer:**

Alice Ferron

Theresa Earenfight's new book, *Queenship in Medieval Europe*, stresses that the medieval royal court could be a woman's world as much as a man's. Responding to historiography that has largely identified the concepts of 'monarchy' and 'sovereignty' as male dominated, Earenfight argues that the indirect and often passive power of a queen 'could be just as powerful as official authority' (p. 11). Queens were often able to exercise influence through their roles within the royal family as wives, mothers, daughters, sisters, and aunts, as well as wield significant power as regents, intercessors, patrons, and models of piety and chastity. She argues that a 'distinct and coherent medieval queenship began to take shape around 300 CE', leading to a fixed and unchanging concept by 1500 (p. 15). Through the course of the book she discusses what queenship entailed in the first part of the period and then moves on to highlight how the role of queen evolved from just the wife of a king to a symbolic figurehead.

Written with her students in mind, Earenfight's writing style is both clear and engaging. The four body chapters comprising the textbook are organized chronologically, spanning from approximately 300 CE to 1500. Similarly, the geographical scope provided by Earenfight is impressive as she ranges from Scandinavia to the Mediterranean and from the British Isles to Russia. The breadth of time and geographical space covered provide a framework that is useful for studying queenship as it allows the reader to make useful comparisons between medieval monarchs and the various kingdoms. The broad scope of the study also provides Earenfight with an extensive amount of evidence at her disposal. Earenfight uses material culture, mainly artistic imagery, to expand the readers' understanding of individual queens and how they were depicted via their clothes, jewelry, and sculptures. However, the evidence employed by Earenfight is

not solely material, as she also draws from illuminated manuscripts and correspondence as well as medieval literature, such as hagiography, charters, official records and works patronized by queens. Rightfully so, she warns her readers that these sources must be read with due consideration as rumor and innuendo are often intertwined with fact. Earenfight mentions several fascinating sources in the course of her book but her broad approach limits her from providing many close readings. She seeks to remedy these gaps by providing suggestions for further research so that the reader can pick-up where she left off.

Earenfight's study allows historians and students alike to contemplate the various ways queen's exercised official and unofficial power in both the public and private spheres. She begins by first establishing the term 'rulership' as being a more inclusive concept than 'monarchy,' as it shakes loose power associations with male rule and allows space for queenship (p. 12). Earenfight skillfully encourages her readers to ask how queens wielded influence beyond their roles as wives and mothers of kings. How these royal women functioned is at times ambiguous, as the complicated balance between power and subjugation allowed some queens to become political partners or even rulers, whilst forcing others to exert more subtle forms of control. Earenfight uses Æthelthryth, consort of King Ecgfrith, and the chaste Queen Edith, wife of Edward the Confessor, as examples of the latter, as although both queens were childless they were still able to exert significant power as models of virtue and piety for their subjects. As noted by Earenfight, in terms of the various roles and influence queens had, 'one theory does not fit all' (p. 11).

Chapter one, 'Theme and variations', centers on how Roman, Barbarian, and Christian societies, among them the eastern Roman Empire, the early Byzantine Empire, the Frankish and Merovingian realms, early medieval Britain and Ireland, the Iberian Peninsula and Italy, began to fashion a definition of medieval queenship from the years 300–700 CE. Writing this chapter was undoubtedly challenging for Earenfight as she admits both kingship and queenship were poorly defined during this period. Yet despite this obstacle she is still able to identify an emerging concept of queenship across these loose kingdoms, which was linked to 'Roman notions of gender and political power' as well as 'Christian ideas on virginity and marriage' (p. 73). Earenfight argues that both in the East and West power was dependent on family structure and that women were central in maintaining these familial ties. She continues this argument by highlighting four commonalities of early queenship in the above noted regions. The first of these commonalities is that the queen was typically the wife of the king, as polygamy and concubinage often complicated the question of succession. Secondly, Earenfight maintains that women were not always viewed as unfit to rule as many customs of the early medieval era respected female counsel and the roles they played as wives and mothers because they were usually seen to have family interests in mind. Thirdly, Earenfight demonstrates that the Christianization of Europe dramatically transformed political culture and ideas about women. Queens played a prominent role in the Christianization process through converting their husbands and subjects, maintaining an interest in relics and holy sites, founding convents and monasteries, and encouraging their children to enter the Church. Earenfight goes on to argue that this queenly piety distinguished women from the 'warrior' kings of the period. Lastly, Earenfight contends that queens in early medieval Europe created and maintained good relations between the royal family and their noble subjects through gift giving and hospitality.

The second chapter, 'Legitimizing the King's wife and bed companion', focuses on the period between 700 and 1100, when kings became the pre-eminent lords of a given region. Earenfight argues that queens were recognized not just as wives or concubines but also served to further legitimize male rule through bearing sons. A number of regions were discussed in this chapter, more specifically the Byzantine Empire, the Carolingian Empire, the Saxon and Ottonian regions, early Capetian France, England, Scotland, and Wales, Christian Iberia, Eastern Europe, Scandinavia, and Kievan Rus. Although all different kingdoms, Earenfight demonstrates that the concept of queenship eventually shifted, mainly due to changing legal and social circumstances, and reforms undertaken by the royal courts as well as the papacy. She views these modifications as advantageous to men, yet she successfully illustrates that 'not all change was disadvantageous to women' (p. 81). While queens lost control of the bedchamber, treasury, and wardrobe, they were still the king's closest companion and influenced him via intercession and on marriage negotiations, piety, patronage, and their children's educations. Several queens were known to have influence

in this way, such as Queen Emma, who was instrumental in arranging the succession of four potential heirs in 11th-century England. However, while this passive facet of queenship was similar in both the East and West, there was variance in terms of the amount of access women had to direct power. Women in the East were known to inherit the crown and rule in their own right during this time period, while it was virtually unknown for princesses in the West to succeed their fathers or brothers, due to such customs as the Salic Law.

Earenfight's third chapter, 'The link of conjugal troth', argues that queenship was a family practice between 1100 and 1350 as queens gained power through not only their own blood relatives but their husband's as well. As in previous chapters, Earenfight looks to a breadth of kingdoms, among them France, the Iberian Kingdoms (Leon, Castile, Aragon, and Portugal), England and Scotland, to support her argument. By approaching queenship from such an extraordinary geographic perspective, Earenfight reveals that the increasing influence of the church in secular politics, especially concerning marriage, continued to limit a queen's role in political culture during this period. Princesses were denied opportunities to rule in their own right due to primogeniture and were frequently sent to marry kings and princes in other kingdoms. For Earenfight, these foreign matches 'were vital to establishing and maintaining cross-border family links' (p. 126). Earenfight suggests that scholars stop looking at only one queen and instead consider their mothers, daughters, sisters, and aunts who may have influenced their power and point of view. Count Ramon Berenguer of Provence and Béatrice of Savoy married their four daughters to kings and the sisters ruled France, England, Sicily, and the Romans. This network of royal women allows Earenfight to expand on the 'entire royal family' and not just simply 'the person sitting center stage' (p. 125).

The fourth and final chapter, 'Queenship in a crisis of monarchy, c. 1350-1500', concentrates on the late Middle Ages, when a queen's right to rule or convey the right to rule was challenged by a series of crises, like the Black Death and the Hundred Years War. By focusing on the effects of social and political upheaval, Earenfight demonstrates that queens were often at the center of events when a crisis unfolded. The histories of queens, such as Margaret of Anjou who infamously stepped in to govern during her husband's fits of madness, are employed by Earenfight as evidence that queens exercised influence and power during troublesome times. Other queens found more subtle ways to influence political affairs, serving as intercessors on behalf of their subjects. Earenfight includes a fascinating close reading of Christine de Pizan's allegorical *Treasury of the City of Ladies* (1404 or 1405), which portrays queens as 'more than just an object in a marriage exchange' (p. 194). For Earenfight, de Pizan demonstrates that a queen could 'play an active role in the pursuit of peace, as an intercessor between her husband and his enemies' (p. 194). She refers back to this text throughout the chapter as she goes on to highlight queens from France, England and Scotland, Iberia (Castile, the Crown of Aragon and Portugal), Hungary, Poland, and Scandinavia. A section of this chapter also describes the visibility of the late medieval queen through portraiture, public processions and coronations as well as her patronage of the arts. With the separation of the queen's fiscal account from that of the king's, queens were allowed the opportunity to patronize projects they were passionate about.

Earenfight's conclusion is not so much an ending to the study of queenship rather it is a beginning of a discourse on a concept that continued to change and adapt well into the 16th century and beyond. According to Earenfight, the most visible change in queenship during the late Middle Ages was that of the role of the queen regent, which 'took on new prominence' and 'continued against all the efforts to prevent it' (p. 251). With the exceptions of Elizabeth and Mary Tudor, who ruled England in their own right, Earenfight argues that a new class of royal official largely diminished queenly influence during the early modern period. Mazarin and Richelieu in France and Oliares in Spain replaced the queen as a trusted royal confidante but could be easily manipulated by a 'shrewd queen' (p. 252). The early modern period continued to adapt queenship and the type of power queens could exercise.

Earenfight's book provides significant case studies and an original perspective for historians interested in both queenship studies and gender history. This work has the potential to reach out to wider audiences, particularly undergraduate students who are beginning to develop an interest in the subject. Although her ambitious geographic approach limits her discussion of certain regions, like Wales, and readings of primary sources, such as the letters from Pope Gregory and Boniface V mentioned in the first chapter, the number of

queens and kingdoms covered is nothing short of remarkable. Furthermore, her assertion that after 1650 'Queens had ... lost their right to inherit and govern, and did not regain them until well into the nineteenth century' may generate discussion amongst historians interested in the likes of Britain's Queen Anne, Austria-Hungary's Maria Theresa, and Russia's Catherine the Great (p. 254). Overall, Earenfight's broad study of medieval queenship should do nothing less than inspire its readers to undertake more research into medieval and pre-modern queens. I hope that Earenfight's contribution further ensures that scholars no longer focus solely on the male members of a royal family or court. As Earenfight has shown, these realms were just as much a woman's world as a man's.

**Other reviews:**

Historical Novel Society

<http://historicalnovelsociety.org/reviews/queenship-in-medieval-europe/> [2]

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1509>

**Links**

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/58992>

[2] <http://historicalnovelsociety.org/reviews/queenship-in-medieval-europe/>