

## The Last Medieval Queens: English Queenship, 1445–1503

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Rachel Gibbons

This is a fascinating and much-welcomed addition to the steadily increasing body of work on medieval queenship that has emerged with the development of this (still) fresh historical discipline over the last twenty years. Rooted in the research behind the author's doctoral thesis – 'English queenship, 1445–1503' (York, 1999), produced under her maiden name (Chamberlayne) – *The Last Medieval Queens* is an excellent model of the work being undertaken within this scholastic movement, with its focus and line of enquiry centred firmly on the institution of queenship, rather than just the lives (however illuminating or fascinating) of the individual incumbents of the office. Laynesmith explores a wide range of themes within the 'ideology and practice of queenship' during this last half-century of the medieval epoch, in which four quite different women were crowned as queen of England. Margaret of Anjou, Elizabeth Woodville, Anne Neville and Elizabeth of York each had distinct backgrounds, personalities and expectations that they brought to the office, and were led by outside circumstances into quite different queenship experiences, but all adapted themselves, their goals and their operations to the parameters of a long-established yet ever-vibrant institution.

The fifteenth century was a period of turbulence and strife, certainly, known to generations as the Wars of the Roses and imprinted vividly on popular consciousness by Shakespeare, but which, thankfully, is now increasingly recognised as an era of dynamism and vitality rather than just the dark prequel to Tudor 'Merrie England'. Arguably, it has been also the most extensively studied and publication-heavy century amongst British medievalists over the last few decades. Amongst queenship historians, though, the later Middle Ages often has not seemed as appealing a prospect as earlier centuries in which, as argued by the pioneer Marion Facer, the queen genuinely was 'the king's "partner" in governing'.<sup>(1)</sup> It is clear that, by the end of the twelfth century, the queen's public role had irrevocably altered in both the practical and the symbolic sense.

No longer was royal government conducted in the domestic sphere, with 'every act and decision approved or assisted or contended by the queen *because she was there*'(2), as mistress of the household and keeper of its keys like any other elite wife. As the queen became more removed from the day-to-day business of rule, with the development of institutionalised bureaucracies, the virtues of queenship promoted by contemporaries began to reflect this changing status, but also the desired function of feminine sovereignty within an increasingly refined model of kingship that emerged in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in the works of theorists like John of Salisbury and Saint Thomas Aquinas. The ideal qualities of queenship in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were increasingly those of benefactress, patroness, intercessor, mother and iconic representation of monarchy – a form of queenship heavy in symbolic potency, even if not in practical authority; the queen had, therefore, a different status, not a lessened one.

In her introduction, Laynesmith concisely addresses the historical development of queenship over the medieval centuries and recent scholarship on the subject. She introduces the reader also to the sources and historiography of each of her queens, along with the parameters and questions behind this thematic study of their office-holding, which deliberately focuses on issues important to the careers of all four women and, therefore, avoids in-depth discussion of Margaret of Anjou's unique political exploits. At this preliminary stage are established two particular issues to which Laynesmith draws constant and correct attention throughout the remainder of the book, namely, the essentially family-orientated nature of the office of queenship, and, second, the ability of the queenly office to 'complement the role and person of the king' (p. 27), whether through the kings' utilisation of the feminine elements of sovereignty provided by their wives, or the means by which queens themselves created and enacted these roles.

Chapter 1 examines the selection of queens and what it was hoped a new queen would bring to the nation and to the king, both personally and ideologically. Laynesmith highlights the normally fundamental reason of diplomatic expediency for choosing one potential royal bride over another, reminding the reader of the role of the queen (as with all elite women) in creating bonds of kinship, and of two of the more basic contemporary assumptions of the 'normal' queen that were challenged during this period – that she would be of foreign birth and of royal status, or at least with royal affiliation and elevated noble birth. Laynesmith links this idea of a breaking of traditional conventions with additional components in the selection of a queen that one might sum up collectively as the representation of idealised femininity in all its guises. Themes of virginity, virtuous character, youth and a particular blonde beauty are interwoven to produce a recognisable type of queenly imagery whose potency is demonstrated all the more by the artistic portrayal along these lines even (and particularly) of a queen like Elizabeth Woodville who so ill-fitted the mould, being a widowed mother of little more than noble birth whose queenship was grounded in forceful sexuality, whichever of the two parties was thought to have pursued the other. Queenly power for all four women was rooted firmly in Marian symbolism – in this visual sphere, in the identification of queenly roles of benefactress, intercessor, and in the queen's primary role as mother – and Laynesmith explores extensively the ever-closer ceremonial association between earthly queens and the Queen of Heaven in this period as a means by which the queen herself was enhanced in status and the kingship of her husband further exalted.

The deliberate construction of the queen into a potent icon of royalty is further investigated in chapter 2, in which Laynesmith considers the ceremonial rites of passage of English queenship. Rituals attached to marriage, childbirth and burial shared common themes with those undergone by many late-medieval women, but Laynesmith argues that these, along with the explicitly royal ceremonies of state entries and coronation, were imbued with political significance on many levels, aimed at different sections of the community, and concerned with 'the queen's power to complement, legitimise and enrich her husband's kingship as an integral part of the king's public body' (p. 74). She presents a powerful picture of the symbolic metaphors behind many of these rituals, with, for instance, the coronation pageant of Margaret of Anjou being used to champion the peace with France that she personified, and representing the queen as the Virgin Mary, as the universal church and as the human soul, each in union with Christ as the queen now was with the king. Exploration of the liturgy, anointing and regalia of the coronation ceremony is detailed and, along with material on funeral ceremonies – arguably the ultimate commemoration of idealised queenship – demonstrates the contemporary value given to rites of passage, particularly those also with the power to

invoke the quasi-sanctified nature of monarchy. However, all rituals of queenship emphasised her unique role as the feminine contrast and complement to mature kingship and celebrated the familial bond tying her to the king and to the heirs of their bodies.

Chapter 3 is devoted to the key role of the majority of queens – that of being a mother, producing the king's children and protecting his lineage. Laynesmith wisely identifies motherhood as part of, not distinct from, a queen's public activity. Maternity added to the queen's own political identity, doubly engaging her with the fate of a realm that was now the birthright of her child, as well as her husband's heritage and her own domain through the sacramental ties of marriage and coronation. Motherhood could dramatically alter perceptions of an individual queen, particularly if it was worryingly delayed, and also brought to the fore again the comparisons between earthly queens and the Virgin Mary, whether in literature, art, or pageantry. Like many other aspects of her office, the range of opportunities offered by queenly motherhood could vary widely and were often dependent on the personality and particular circumstances of the individual queen. Therefore, Laynesmith considers the level of influence that each queen exerted over her children's lives and, in particular, that of the prince of Wales, in the appointment of his household and officials, and the administration of his estates. She also addresses motherhood in a time of political crisis, centring Margaret's claim for regency in 1453 and her exceptional activity in the subsequent two decades firmly within her new status of mother of the heir. Like Elizabeth Woodville in 1485, who was also bereaved of both husband and sons and had no obvious position, Margaret lost much of her potency as a political threat, if not her status, when there was no longer a living masculine tie between her and the crown.

Chapter 4 extends this concept of the essentially familial context in which queens most often operated to include her wider kin. The role of women in providing the link between the vertical line of hereditary lineage and horizontal ties of kinship is visible and important, particularly in royal circles, where interests of families were also those of kingdoms. John Carmi Parsons has argued that 'a queen's power was intimately linked to her position within the families to whom she owed allegiance. That this power was both diplomatic and personal . . . further confounds distinctions between public and private'.<sup>(3)</sup> The very different backgrounds of Margaret of Anjou and Elizabeth Woodville illustrate that a queen's family ties always could be regarded as problematic. In Margaret's case, it was that a foreign queen might be suspected of using her position to benefit her native country; in Elizabeth's case, that a subject exalted to the throne altered the kingdom's power balance by raising her family with her and, in them, had a ready-made faction that she might use to political advantage. There had been no real involvement in politics from a queen's family since Eleanor of Provence, wife of Henry III (1216–1272), so three English women in succession on the throne – the first native born queens for four centuries – raised particular challenges. The Woodvilles traditionally have been regarded as conspicuously grasping in their acquisition of plum marriages, titles and offices, but Laynesmith presents also the more plausible alternative view that the queen's family were a means by which Edward IV might bind himself (even if through in-laws) to a broader range of the nobility than the Yorkist faction had incorporated in the past. Richard III also leant heavily on the heritage of Anne Neville to construct himself an affinity. Therefore, it is important to consider the queen's family in terms of its potential to support her husband's position – and, in Henry VII's case particularly, his legitimacy – as well as bolstering her own, uniquely isolated position at the heart of the polity. For both Queens Elizabeth, the ties of birth ran very much parallel to the newly acquired loyalties of marriage, particularly in their support of their sisters, a number of whom served as ladies-in-waiting, but Laynesmith also considers the particularly fascinating relationship of queens to their mothers-in-law, as well as to their mothers, that loomed so large in both these women's lives.

The final chapter considers a more traditional subject amongst queenship historians, that of the queen's household, which has been considered in some depth on a number of occasions since the first publication of treasurers' accounts in the 1950s. Laynesmith reminds us that the queen's household was never an isolated body, but firmly interdependent with the household of the king and the court in general, with mobility of personnel between the institutions. She considers the financial resources and the male and female attendants of the four queens, but very much broadens her sources and consideration from the norm to reflect upon the architecture and geography of the queenly household and unified court. Laynesmith also discusses the court

as a forum in which to network and forge alliances, for the queen as well as the courtiers, and the stage on which the ritual celebration of monarchy was played out in crown-wearings, embassies, state occasions, and the religious, cultural and social life of the nation's elite. The queen was the heart of court life – and not merely in a decorative fashion. Like any high-status household, the court functioned very much as a public space, and Laynesmith makes it plain that notions of 'public' and 'private' spheres are divisions too simplistic and largely irrelevant to the complex lives of late medieval queens. The overall conclusion of the book reiterates this perfectly, in emphasising that queenship was 'an integral part of the king's public body' (p. 265), while drawing attention to the range of skills necessary to fulfil the office effectively and prompting the reader, at the last, to consider the impact of each queen individually. Queenship itself remained a nebulous concept in the late fifteenth century, whilst the holding of the office naturally was an experience of variables, with not every individual queen having the talents, the inclinations or the opportunities to be able or to want to fulfil all potential roles. However, there was a core of ideology, conventions and practices within which every holder of the office operated, and both a political and symbolic significance to so much of the queen's public persona and experiences that it is impossible not to regard queenship as central to the exercise of English kingship in this period.

Although written within the scholastic parameters of the most contemporary of queenship studies, this is a valuable book for medievalists of all persuasions. To the constitutional historian, it serves as a reminder of the importance of queenship to perceptions and development of sovereignty at its most explicit – of particular pertinence, as Laynesmith reminds us in her introduction, during a half-century when English kingship experienced such turmoil. Queenship was regarded in the fifteenth century as a vital component of the Body Politic and, thus, it is completely necessary to restore it from now on to its rightful place at the heart of political culture. Additionally, for the political historian, Laynesmith provides a fresh look at the activities of one extremely prominent queen in Margaret and, in considering the two Queens Elizabeth alongside her, reminds us that seeming passivity could be a potentially 'active' choice in itself and brings the familial, collective approach common to several late medieval European queens into the foreground of English consideration. For historians of gender, amongst whom queens have sometimes been forgotten women, Laynesmith's contextualisation of the rituals of motherhood and Marian symbolism so potently exploited in the construction of feminine sovereignty in this period should prove particularly fascinating. Finally, the fact that I lent this book to two MA supervisees straight after my first reading of it, before even commencing work on this review, should indicate that I consider it a valuable addition to the growing body of work on medieval queenship studies. However, perhaps just as importantly, finally, it is an enjoyable as well as an instructive read. Its recent accolade as joint winner of the Longman-*History Today* Book of the Year Award for 2005 should bring it to the attention of the wider readership that it richly deserves. I have no hesitation in recommending it most warmly for both beginners and the well-established scholar in this field.

## Notes

1. Marion Facinger, 'A Study of Medieval Queenship: Capetian France, 987–1237', *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History*, 5 (1968), pp. 3–48, at p. 4.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Facinger, p. 27.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. John Carmi Parsons, 'Mothers, Daughters, Marriage Power: some Plantagenet Evidence, 1150–1500', in ed. J. C. Parsons, *Medieval Queenship*, (Stroud, 1994), pp. 63–78, at p. 78.[Back to \(3\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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