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Eleanor of Provence: Queenship in Thirteenth-Century England

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Recent years have seen a blossoming of secondary literature on medieval queens and queenship, a development which owes much to the impetus provided by Pauline Stafford's path-breaking study, *Queens, Concubines and Dowagers: The King's Wife in the Early Middle Ages* (1983). Several essay collections, including J. C. Parsons ed., *Medieval Queenship* (1993) and A. J. Duggan ed., *Queens and Queenship in Medieval Europe* (1997), have shed light on the changing religious and secular imagery, rituals and experiences that touched and shaped the lives of queens in Western Europe and beyond in the early, central and later Middle Ages. These have been accompanied by a number of biographical works, with the careers of several medieval English queens undergoing valuable reassessments (see J. C. Parsons, *Eleanor of Castile: Queen and Society in Thirteenth-Century England* (1995) and P. Stafford, *Queen Emma and Queen Edith: Queenship and Women's Power in Eleventh-Century England* (1997)). In the light of all this scholarly activity, Margaret Howell's thought-provoking study of King Henry III's queen, *Eleanor of Provence: Queenship in Thirteenth-Century England*, has come as a welcome, timely and much-needed addition. Until now this most remarkable queen consort has not only lacked a biography but she has also received far less than her fair share of attention from thirteenth-century specialists. This is a curious oversight when one considers the political upheavals of Henry III's reign and the important contribution made by Eleanor and her Savoyard relations to the factional rivalries that divided his court.

Howell's highly accessible work, divided into twelve chapters, guides the reader through Eleanor's life, from her first experiences as a young bride in a foreign land (Eleanor was twelve at the time of her marriage to a man sixteen years her senior), to her development into a physically and politically mature king's wife

and queen mother. What becomes immediately apparent to the reader is that this study is the result of a tremendous amount of research. As well as taking on board the latest developments in thirteenth-century political and social history, the author utilises a vast quantity of unpublished source material, most notably Eleanor's letters (of which 160 survive) and her wardrobe accounts, thereby allowing the reader to come closer to Eleanor of Provence than to any earlier queen of England. Chapter 1 begins by placing Eleanor firmly within the context of her natal family (her father was Count Raymond-Berengar V of Provence and her mother Beatrice of Savoy), considering the social setting and cultural influences of her childhood. Howell then moves on swiftly to examine the European political background to Henry III and Eleanor's marriage, which followed two failed proposals by Henry to daughters of Leopold of Austria and Peter of Dreux, count of Brittany, and another set of abortive negotiations for the hand of Joan, heiress-apparent of Ponthieu. Howell deals subtly with the swings and roundabouts of thirteenth-century European alliances and carefully measures the disadvantages and advantages of the match. Henry III and Eleanor were married at Canterbury on 14 January 1236.

Undoubtedly the strongest theme throughout this book is family. Both Eleanor and her husband possessed a strong sense of personal loyalty to their respective blood-relatives. More often than not this bound them together but it could also be divisive. Eleanor of Provence's arrival in England was accompanied by an influx of her Savoyard relations, most notably her maternal uncles, for whom Eleanor was to emerge as a figurehead and who were to provide her with valuable political and emotional support. Howell is careful to acknowledge that Eleanor and her kinfolk's participation in court affairs was dependent on Eleanor's standing in Henry's favour. Her status as queen was, after all, dependent on her husband's office and as queen consort she did not possess any independent, constitutionally-defined duties of her own.

Personal relationships and personalities mattered in determining Eleanor's access to and exercise of power. There is something far more sophisticated about Howell's politically-active Eleanor of Provence, securing for her Savoyard kinfolk advantageous English marriages, than the sometimes meddlesome mother-in-law portrayed in Parsons' *Eleanor of Castile*. This is clearly something that Henry III's Poitevin half-brothers appreciated: when they came into competition with the Savoyards over royal patronage, they directed their enmity against the queen (p. 55). Yet when this competition for resources erupted into violence in November 1252, Henry III vented his anger at his wife, who temporarily lost control of the queen's gold and was packed off to Winchester (pp. 66-67). Howell's treatment of this incident is sympathetic and conveys the dependence of Eleanor's position on the king's goodwill. Nevertheless, one feels that slightly more should have been made of the potential restriction placed on the scope of thirteenth-century queenship by the king's ultimate control of both his wife's wealth and her level of contact with his officials. Even a queen, who as his legitimate bedfellow shared unique moments of intimacy with her husband, was vulnerable to the vagaries of the king's temper. Indeed the relationship between husband and wife emerges as the most influential force in determining the course of Eleanor's life.

Eleanor's chief responsibility as queen was essentially private and domestic. As a wife she was expected to bear children, especially male children, thereby continuing the royal lineage. This was certainly an expectation that Eleanor fulfilled: the future Edward I, the first of her two sons and three daughters, was born in 1239. Motherhood offered a queen, as a consort, an enhanced sense of security, a means of buttressing her position in her husband's affections. Howell demonstrates a canny understanding of its importance for Eleanor's position and does not go too far in describing it as Eleanor's 'ultimate strength' (p. 109). Eleanor's appointment as regent (aided by Richard of Cornwall's counsel) in 1253-1254, the arrangements for Edward's Castilian marriage, the transfer to him of his appanage, and the generous provisions in Henry's will (which stipulated that Eleanor would receive custody of all their children, including the heir to the throne, together with Wales, Ireland, Gascony and England on his death) all underlined the significance and potential of her maternity. Howell is right to see Henry's choice of Eleanor as regent as evidence that he appreciated her talents and, above all, regarded her with trust. Henry's judgement was clearly not misplaced; Eleanor was regent for ten months and appears as an effective and energetic figure, who 'kept her finger on government' (p. 117) in spite of a pregnancy and lying-in (although a daughter, Katherine, was born on 25 November 1253, writs were again being issued *per reginam*

by 5 December, pp. 117-118). Even so, a discussion of contemporaries' reactions to Eleanor's appointment as regent, and the information this reveals about their perceptions regarding the boundaries of queenship, would also have been useful here.

Howell shows that Eleanor of Provence was active in the interests of her children. Most pronounced of all was her involvement in the highly expensive and deeply unpopular scheme to secure the crown of Sicily for her second son, Edmund. Her pursuit of a policy for peace with France is represented as a necessary precondition both for this and Edward's security in Gascony. There were other, personal reasons as well; although her sister Sanchia had married Henry III's brother, Richard earl of Cornwall, her sister Margaret was wife to the French king Louis IX and another sister, Beatrice, had married Charles count of Anjou. All four women and their mother, the dowager countess of Provence, were present at the meeting at Paris in 1254 between Henry III and Louis IX (pp. 136-138). Yet Howell finds it only 'incidentally interesting that the family structure which underlay the 1254 meeting depended on a group of five women' (p. 138). Surely it is something much more than this. The full significance of this event lies in the insight which it provides into the role of royal and aristocratic women as both symbols and agents for reconciliation, as peaceweavers who crossed cultural and political divides. Unlike queens Emma and Edith who told their stories through fathers, husbands and sons in *The Encomium of Queen Emma* and *The Life of King Edward who Rests at Westminster* (Stafford, *Queen Emma*, p. 51), Eleanor of Provence's story would clearly have incorporated mothers, sisters and daughters as well.

Howell carefully admits that Eleanor's relationship with her eldest son was not always plain sailing. As Edward matured and began to choose his own friends in the late 1250s, he moved into the rival Lusignan orbit and towards Henry III's brother-in-law, the reformer Simon de Montfort. Howell also traces the hardening of Eleanor's attitude against the reform movement itself in the autumn of 1259, highlighting how the Provisions of Westminster's clause on queen's gold touched directly on Eleanor's financial interests. It is interesting to observe this alien queen playing an instrumental role in helping Henry III to recruit a force of foreign knights in the spring of 1260. Howell has uncovered evidence that Eleanor had been nurturing useful Flemish contacts: the manner in which Isabella de Fiennes, the wife of an Anglo-Flemish knight, was given a number of rings to pass onto Flemish lords and ladies by the queen when she left England in 1259 (p. 168), is particularly striking. More might have been made of this as well. Throughout the book one continually catches other similar glimpses of this private, behind-the-scenes, female networking but this informal feminine avenue to power is never rendered fully explicit nor examined for its own sake. This is a strange and serious shortcoming. Notwithstanding, the author is perceptive in her observation that Eleanor's close association with foreign military men probably harmed the queen's reputation and helped to concentrate xenophobic reactions on her person (p. 168).

It is Eleanor's involvement in the political turmoil of the 1260s that really marks her out, in Howell's account, as a player at the centre of the political stage. The argument that the revolution of 1263 was very much 'a rebellion focused on the queen and her policies' (p. 194) is certainly persuasive. Yet this did not prevent Eleanor from playing a key diplomatic role in working towards a royal recovery, accompanying Henry III to France in September 1263 so that Louis IX might mediate between themselves and the baronial dissidents. Once more one gains an impression of female networking which is not developed, this time between two queens, Eleanor and her sister Margaret, who actively tried to enlist the support of third parties, including Louis' brother Alphonse of Poitiers, for the English king (p. 200).

By remaining in France when Henry III and Edward returned to England in October 1263, Eleanor remained free to promote her husband's and son's interests, and later played an influential role in determining Louis' judgement at Amiens. After the battle of Lewes (14 May 1264) left Henry and Edward little more than captives in Montfort's hands, Eleanor exercised authority in Gascony, employed diplomatic pressure on England's new government and, above all, planned, financed and gathered an invasion force. Howell offers a thought-provoking explanation as to why it was that this force, which sufficiently worried the baronial government for them to respond by mustering an army on Barham Down, never invaded: the papal legate, whose involvement had been sought by King Louis, Queen Margaret and Queen Eleanor, opposed this course of action (p. 219). This is an important consideration. Howell argues that Eleanor was anxious to

avoid a 'bloody slaughter' and cites a letter written by the queen's uncle, Peter of Savoy, which suggests that he believed that peace was a real possibility (p. 219). By October 1264, when the negotiations had broken down, Eleanor had also run out of money to pay for her soldiers. This is highly convincing stuff. Howell is also anxious to stress that Eleanor's political importance was in no way diminished on her return to England on 29 October 1265, three months after the royalist victory at Evesham. Eleanor entertained foreign dignitaries, secured financial assistance for the Crown from the papacy, guarded former rebels at Windsor Castle and helped her second son to purchase the marriage of Aveline, heiress to the Aumale and Devon earldoms, from Aveline's two female guardians (networking with women again and in a typically gendered context!).

Perhaps the biggest turning point in Eleanor's life, second only to her marriage to Henry III, was her transformation into a queen dowager on Henry's death on 16 November 1272. Eleanor survived her husband by almost twenty years, after fourteen of which she became "a humble nun of the order of Fontevrault of the convent of Amesbury" (p. 287). Sadly her subsequent life is allotted only twenty-five pages of Howell's study. This is rather disappointing, especially as most of Eleanor's correspondence survives from this time. Moreover, what Howell does reveal, about Eleanor's preoccupation with her resources and her entrance to Amesbury, leaves one thirsting for more.

Margaret Howell's study of Eleanor of Provence provides more than an insight into Eleanor's family relationships, and her political concerns and preoccupations, vital though these are to an understanding of Eleanor's role as a queen consort. Chapter 4 offers a detailed examination of the queen's lifestyle, recreating an impression of the physical and cultural settings in which she lived and moved. Eleanor's piety followed her husband's lead and joined husband and wife together: she readily identified with Henry III's feelings for the cult of Edward the Confessor and, like her husband, was a great patron of the friars, turning to three Franciscans, Adam Marsh, Thomas of Hales and William Batale, for personal spiritual advice. Eleanor's accounts for 1252-1253 support Howell's assertion that her children were 'her constant preoccupation' (p. 99); she spent two-thirds of that year in residence at Windsor, near her children, enjoying unrestricted access to them. Indeed a real (and heartening) affection seems to have developed between mother and offspring, which endured into their adulthood; in 1260, her daughter Margaret, queen of Scotland, gave birth to her first child in England at Windsor (pp. 102-103).

Perhaps the most puzzling feature of Howell's book is the absence of any discussion of gender and its influence on queenship, unlike both Stafford's and Parsons' recent works. The concept of gender is central to an understanding of what it was that distinguished women from men and queenship from kingship. It throws a useful and valid perspective onto male attitudes and reactions towards women, especially powerful, aristocratic and royal women, thereby imbuing male and female interaction at all social levels with an added significance. Stafford's study of queens Emma and Edith, for example, is careful to draw attention to the manner in which becoming a queen consort did not, in the same way as did becoming a king, transform a person's status forever. The roles of queen consort and queen dowager were intricately intertwined with and indeed governed by the female lifecycle; they were extensions of the gendered roles of wife, mother and widow. The adoption of such an approach by Howell would have allowed her to consider more fully what it is that Eleanor of Provence's life and career reveals about the experience of being female in thirteenth-century England.

One should not be too judgmental, for Howell does, after all, devote an entire chapter (Chapter 11) to the subject of queenship, its image, practice and resources, and places Henry III's wife firmly within this context. She examines the relevance of Marian, biblical and literary symbolism for Eleanor of Provence's style of queenship and considers the influence of another popular queenly image, one shaped 'by the personalities and achievements of real queens' (p. 260), that of the highly capable and competent woman whom chroniclers described as a *virago*. Howell is at her most impressive when she dismisses the view that by the thirteenth century, English queenship was undergoing irreversible decline. In Howell's words, 'it was the form and style which changed' (p. 261), a view shared by L. L. Huneycutt in her article on the 'Images of Queenship in the High Middle Ages' (*The Haskins Society Journal*, 1989, pp. 61-71). Howell's challenge to Facinger's thesis, based on the French evidence, that the queen's removal to a household separate from

the king's in the twelfth century distanced the queen from power in government, is particularly convincing. Eleanor of Provence's household certainly provided her with a unique form of power base in the factional rivalries between the Lusignans and Savoyards. Moreover, Eleanor was still close to the centre of government, close to the king, and enjoyed personal contacts with the chancery, exchequer and judiciary.

At the end of the day, one is firmly compelled to agree with the conclusion that 'English queenship in the thirteenth century had great potential, but not for the passive or the incompetent' (p. 286). Margaret Howell's carefully researched volume has finally allowed Eleanor of Provence to emerge as one of the most important and dominating figures in English political life during her husband's reign. Thirteenth-century specialists take note, for a good deal of revision is now urgently required.

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