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The Rituals and Rhetoric of Queenship; Medieval to Early Modern

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The Rituals and Rhetoric of Queenship; Medieval to Early Modern is a collection of papers which originated in a conference held at Canterbury Christ Church University in August 2006. Perhaps by coincidence, 2005?6 appears to have been a high point for conferences on queenship as two similar collections from conferences held during that period, *The Rule of Women in Early Modern Europe* and *Queens and Power in Medieval and Early Modern England* were also published in 2009.⁽¹⁾ All three books have a varied selection of papers and an interdisciplinary approach, with contributions from historians, literary specialists and art historians. Another shared attribute is multiple papers on the Tudor queens, particularly on the magnificent but over-represented Elizabeth I.

Both *Rituals and Rhetoric* and *The Rule of Women* share a focus on the representation of female rule and the assessment of ruling women by their contemporaries. The major difference between the two works is geographical focus. *The Rule of Women* takes a pan-European approach which takes in several oft-neglected examples such as Catherine of Brandenburg, Prince of Transylvania and the Spanish regent Juana of Austria. Although it is not specifically indicated in the title, *Rituals and Rhetoric* has an entirely British thread running through to link the papers, even though some, such as the piece on Philippa of Lancaster's reign as Queen of Portugal, have a connection beyond the British Isles.

Queens and Power also has a British focus with European connections and shares with *Rituals and Rhetoric* papers which examine Shakespeare's queens and representations of Elizabeth I 'on stage and page'. The primary difference between the two is not necessarily an emphasis on power over rituals and rhetoric, instead it is the subjects chosen beyond the Tudor queens. *Rituals and Rhetoric* includes papers on Plantagenet women and Mary Queen of Scots while *Queens and Power* encompasses work on the Empress Matilda and Stuart queens.

The first section of *Rituals and Rhetoric* is titled 'Rituals' and begins with a contribution from one of the editors, Louise J. Wilkinson, on the marriage of Henry III's sister, Isabella to the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II of Hohenstaufen. Wilkinson notes that although this marriage was politically significant and well documented in contemporary chronicles and official records, both the marriage and particularly the bride have not received a great deal of attention from historians. While the paper is interesting, thorough and goes a long way toward redressing the lack of attention that Isabella and her imperial marriage have received, Wilkinson admits more than once that many facets of Isabella's life remain 'frustratingly uncertain' or 'unclear' (pp. 33-4).

The second paper by Manuela Santos Silva focuses on the reign of Philippa of Lancaster as Queen of Portugal. Santos Silva discusses both the women who influenced Philippa during her childhood; her mother and her two step-mothers, Constanza of Castile and Katherine Swynford. Constanza's Castilian influence on John of Gaunt's cultured household is cited as a 'multicultural model' for Philippa's own court in Portugal (p. 44). The author then discusses the Philippa's own daughter Isabella which may have been disseminated in the Burgundian court of her husband, Philip the Good.

Jacqueline Johnson provides an intriguing paper next on the changing depiction of Elizabeth of York as the 'mother of the Tudor dynasty'. The author notes significant change in how Elizabeth's dynastic claims were represented both during and after her lifetime. As Henry VII's queen, Elizabeth's right to the throne was acknowledged but deliberately downplayed which may have been due to the fact that her claim was arguably stronger than her husband's. Johnson analyses the imagery in a window from York Minster which she argues 'suggests that Elizabeth is being positioned in a subordinate role and, if the window as a whole is representing the marriage, then we should consider that what is being promoted here is an unequal union, where Lancaster is being promoted over York' (p. 50). By contrast, the author notes that Elizabeth's role as the heir of York is emphasized by later Tudor monarchs, such as her namesake Elizabeth I, who use her lineage as a legitimizing gambit. In addition, Johnson cites works such as Shakespeare's *Richard III* and *The Ballad of Lady Bessie* which portray Elizabeth of York as a royal heiress and suggest more of a joint rule with her husband than was actually the case.

The next paper, by Anna Whitelock, moves from the woman who might have been England's first female sovereign to the first genuine English queen regnant, her granddaughter Mary Tudor. Whitelock's monograph on Mary I came out this year and she has also published several papers on Mary which have added to the recent reassessment of this often controversial figure.⁽²⁾ This paper focuses on the changing view of Mary and her reign, noting the 'Eltonian hangover' which contributed to a dismissive evaluation of her government (p. 68). Whitelock also calls for a re-evaluation of Philip of Spain as a king consort as she argues 'a lack of a full-length study [on Philip] to date is perhaps indicative of nationalist prejudice which remains embedded in historical writing' (p. 71).

Another link between *Rituals and Rhetoric* and *The Rule of Women* can be seen in the next paper; Kristin Bundesen's 'Lousy with Cousins: Elizabeth I's Family at Court' which has a counterpart in Carole Levin's 'Elizabeth I as Sister and 'Loving Kinswoman''. Both authors study Elizabeth's extended family; particularly the Careys which Bundesen notes were linked by contemporaries to the 'Tribe of Dan' (p. 78). Levin and Bundesen both argue that while Elizabeth's Tudor relatives could be threatening, her maternal relations provided a support network for the monarch and could be usefully deployed in governmental positions. Bundesen includes several excellent charts which not only give a genealogy of Elizabeth's maternal relatives but also illustrate the Careys' placements as 'points of contact' in the court and government.

The last paper in the 'Rituals' section is 'Troubled Eulogies: Queenship and Sexuality in Lylyan drama' by Shehzana Mamujee. This paper is also linked to Elizabeth I and examines the queen's role as Lyly's muse. Two of Lyly's plays, *Sappho and Phao* and *Endymion*, both from the 1580's are the particular focus of the study. While this paper is an interesting addition, it is more of a close reading of these two works and not as directly focused on queens and ruling women as the rest of the collection.

Kavita Mudan opens the second section of the volume, 'Rhetoric' with a paper on Elizabeth Woodville, 'So mutable is that sexe': Queen Elizabeth Woodville in Polydore Vergil's *Anglica historia* and Sir Thomas More's *History of King Richard III*'. Mudan constructs a stimulating comparison between the two authors' divergent treatment of Woodville. Ultimately Mudan concludes that the difference between their portrayals of the queen derives from their opposing attitudes to the 'consolidation of monarchical power in the person of the king' (p. 116).

The next two papers concern diplomatic letters during the reign of Elizabeth I. The first 'Highly excellent Queene': the Rhetoric of Majesty in Diplomatic Letters Relating to Mary Queen of Scots' is by Alison Findlay. Findlay bases her investigation of a selection of letters written in 1584/5 after the Throckmorton Plot. These letters are examined in close detail, noting the variable use of the royal signature, changes in address, the use of French and the queen's own hand. Both the construction and content of the letters centre on the 'manipulation of royal status' as both queens jockeyed for position. Findlay concludes by noting that 'A pawn could be elevated to a queen or a monarch cornered into checkmate by the elegant means of epistolary politeness' (p. 130).

Rayne Allinson continues this epistolary analysis with 'Conversations on Kingship: the Letters of Queen Elizabeth I and King James VI'. This paper is connected to Allinson's doctoral research on Elizabeth's wider correspondence with other monarchs. The letters between Elizabeth and James form an interesting discourse which illuminates the two monarchs' views on the nature and practice of kingship, the notion of divine right and attitudes to female rule. One of the most intriguing elements that Allinson highlights in this correspondence is the difference between how each of the sovereigns refer to Elizabeth. It appears that Elizabeth preferred to define herself by her office instead of by her gender, referring to herself more than 20 times in their correspondence as 'king'. James by contrast generally referred to Elizabeth as 'prince', 'madam' or 'dearest sister' which Allinson suggests 'rhetorically undercut her claim to wield absolute power as a woman' (pp.134/5).

Lisa Hopkins' paper 'The words of a queen: Elizabeth I on stage and page' continues the Elizabethan theme and also includes a discussion of the writing of the Virgin Queen. Instead of an analysis of her letters, Hopkins surveys a wide variety of sources including the queen's poems and translations. Hopkins examines Elizabeth's spoken words as transcribed by others and also looks at the way invented speeches of the queen were included in literary works and plays. Hopkins notes the queen's acute awareness of the public significance and import of her every word, both written and spoken. The author concludes by suggesting that this may explain 'the queen's preference for circumlocution, indirection and off-the-record communication' (p.156).

The next paper also looks at Elizabeth I, but indirectly as a role model for a virtual queen, the great heiress

Anne Clifford. Jessica L. Malay's paper 'Anne Clifford: appropriating the rhetoric of queens to become the lady of the North' examines Clifford's 40-year struggle to claim her impressive inheritance. Malay suggests that Clifford was inspired by Elizabeth's endurance during her journey to the throne, through disinheritance, imprisonment and as heiress presumptive. The author also notes Anne's use of Elizabeth's favoured stragems such as gift giving and ceremonial progressions through her territory as a way of asserting her authority and spreading her influence.

The third section, 'Subverting the Rituals and Rhetoric of Queenship' begins with two interesting papers on Anne Boleyn. The first, 'Which thing had not before been seen?: the rituals and rhetoric of the execution of Anne Boleyn, England's first criminal queen' by Nadia Bishai examines 12 accounts of Boleyn's execution. Bishai compares these accounts with the medieval expectations of appropriate behaviour for criminals at their execution which she argues revolve around the principles of 'repentance, restitution and reintegration' (p.174). The author examines divergent impressions of Anne at the scaffold and also notes the fact that none of the accounts include a confession of guilt from the convicted queen.

The controversial consort is also the focus of Paula de Pando's paper 'Unqueening the Queen: the Spanish Image of Anne Boleyn' which follows. The author specifically examines the depiction of Boleyn in the 1627 play *La Cisma de Inglaterra (The schism in England)* by Pedro Calderón de la Barca. She argues that the play is politically motivated and connected to the conflict between Spain and England during the reign of Charles I. In the play, Anne is portrayed as a dangerous temptress who leads Henry and his realm into heresy when she usurps the rightful place of Catherine of Aragon. The author also notes the inaccurate but interesting device of juxtaposing Anne's conviction for adultery with news of Catherine's death, citing an emotional passage from Henry VIII's character who is stricken with grief that he cannot undo his grievous mistake and make amends to his true wife (p.195/6). de Pando claims that the end of the play, where Mary I is finally crowned as a Catholic queen is 'a declaration of war against Protestantism' (p.196) and an invitation for the audience to join 'in a new crusade against the followers of Anne Boleyn' (p.198).

The two papers which follow return to the subject of Mary Queen of Scots, another figure who has remained controversial and has been the subject of both sympathetic and critical portrayals. Sandra Bell examines the latter in her paper 'The Queen's Desire: George Buchanan reading Mary Queen of Scots'. Bell discusses Buchanan's assessment of Mary's personality and reign through his evaluation of the Casket letters and sonnets. In his own writing, it is clear that Buchanan views Mary as a failure as a woman, wife and particularly as a queen and sees the Casket letters as proof of 'Mary's overt and covert corruption' (p. 204). Bell argues however that the disputed authorship of the letters makes it difficult to judge Mary on this basis but concludes that Buchanan had already condemned Mary and may have only been using the Casket letters to look for evidence of 'her emotional commitment to treachery as well' (p. 208).

Leticia Álvarez-Recio returns to the theme of queenly executions with her paper 'Contemporary Visions of Mary Stuart's Execution: Saintliness and Vilification'. This paper differs Nadia Bishai's study of the execution of Anne Boleyn in that it focuses on arguments for and against the Scottish queen's execution rather than on accounts of the execution itself. She draws on a fair number of contemporary sources, including pamphlets, poems and letters from both Britain and the Continent to demonstrate the queen's portrayal as 'either a Catholic martyr or a treacherous heretic' (p. 209). The author notes that the common thread binding all of these texts was the heady mix of politics and religion. Ultimately Álvarez-Recio argues that what these texts truly demonstrate is that Mary's execution 'radicalized both Protestant and Catholic positions, turning her into a symbol of what they had to destroy or recover' (p. 221).

The next paper is the second contribution from an editor, Liz Oakley-Brown, 'My lord, be ruled by me?: Shakespeare's Tamora and the Failure of Queenship'. Shakespeare's treatment of queens is a popular theme; both *The Rule of Women* and *Queens and Power* feature papers with a similar study. In *The Rule of Women* Sandra Logan contrasts Shakespeare's portrayal of Katherine de Valois with the queen's treatment in Michael Drayton's *Englands Heroicall Epistles*. The paper in *Queens in Power* is arguably more similar to Oakley-Brown's as it focuses on another Classical queen, Cleopatra ('Shakespeare's Queen Cleopatra: *An act of Translation*' by Richardine Woodall). Both Woodall and Oakley-Brown stress the influence of and

connection to Elizabeth I and wider arguments regarding the merits of female rule. The popularity of this Shakespearean strand of queenship studies does demonstrate the interdisciplinary emphasis of the field as Oakley-Brown's paper would be equally appealing to a historian or a literary specialist.

The final two papers form the final section of the volume, 'Towards Theorizing the Rituals and Rhetoric of Queenship'. This section title, while admirably encapsulating the theme of the conference and collection, doesn't really summarize the theme of these two papers which both focus on representations of the queen's body. The first paper 'Ageing out Catholicism: Representing Mary Tudor's Body' by Sabine Lucia Miller draws some fascinating comparisons between the representations of Mary and Elizabeth Tudor. Miller argues that although both sovereigns begin as virgin queens, the perception of Mary's body changes with her marriage to Philip of Spain. She particularly examines descriptions of Mary's controversial false pregnancies and how her barrenness became connected with her persecution of heretics and death itself. In addition to contemporary sources, Miller discusses the continuation of this negative imagery surrounding Mary in Victorian literature and the modern portrayal of Mary in films such as *Elizabeth* (1998).

The final paper in the volume is yet another work based on a study of Elizabeth I, a joint paper by Elisabeth Bronfen and Barbara Straumann entitled 'Political Visions: the Two Bodies of Elizabeth I?'. This paper also includes a link to modern portraits, contrasting the pictures of Elizabeth I with modern images of Claude Cahun, Marilyn Monroe and Gwyneth Paltrow. The authors argue that Elizabeth was an Early Modern 'diva' and a forerunner of the modern obsession with celebrity. They also examine portrayals of Elizabeth in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and by the actress Bette Davis in *The private lives of Elizabeth and Essex* (1939).

Overall, this volume is another worthy addition to the field of queenship. The papers are well linked and generally well balanced, although there is a surfeit of papers on Tudor queens. The Tudor queens, particularly Elizabeth I, have received far too much focus by biographers and queenship specialists, a trend that looks set to continue with the publication of *Tudor Queenship* this summer.⁽³⁾ Some contributions on Plantagenet and particularly Stuart queens would have been a valuable supplement to the excellent papers in *Rituals and Rhetoric*. While this collection has emerged at the same time as *The Rule of Women* and *Queens and Power*, all three works contain informative and intriguing papers which add to our knowledge of these fascinating women and demonstrate the continuing interdisciplinary development of the field.

Notes

1. *The Rule of Women in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Anne J. Cruz and Mihoko Sukuki (Chicago, 2009) and *Queens and Power in Medieval and Early Modern England*, ed. Carole Levin and Robert Bucholz (Lincoln, 2009).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Anna Whitelock, *Mary Tudor: England's First Queen* (London, 2009).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. *Tudor Queenship*, ed. Anna Whitelock and Alice Hunt (forthcoming, London, 2010).[Back to \(3\)](#)

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