ROYAL STUDIES JOURNAL

2018 V

Cecily Duchess of York

J. L. Laynesmith

London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017

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WINCHESTER UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Cecily Duchess of York. By J. L. Laynesmith. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. ISBN 978-14742-7225-4. viii + 262pp. £85.00.

Cecily, Duchess of York, the mother of Edward IV and Richard III, was one of the few persons to live through the entirety of the Wars of the Roses. Yet, as Joanna Laynesmith points out in the introduction to *Cecily Duchess of York*, she mostly features as an exemplar of religiosity and book ownership in studies focusing on lay-piety. No attention has been given to her role as a landowner, head of household, or her administrative support of Edward IV.

As the first full-length study of Cecily to focus on these previously neglected areas, Laynesmith takes a chronological approach—instead of employing a thematic structure—in order to provide a strong foundation for future research. In an effort to avoid falling into narrative storytelling, Laynesmith concentrates on only the events of the Wars of the Roses in which Cecily's involvement can be found. As such, the biography is divided into eleven chapters, concentrating on the different stages of her life between her birth in 1415 and her death in 1495. Laynesmith mines an impressive amount of rich primary source material, in marked contrast to the few, previous treatments of Cecily. She examines Cecily's account rolls, court records, letters, and other administrative documents associated with Cecily's household, as well as references to Cecily in Richard, Duke of York's accounts and the royal administrative documents of record, all scattered across a multitude of national and local archives. Through a thorough examination of these sources, Laynesmith argues that Cecily's life provides insight into politics, women's power, motherhood, household dynamics, and the role of religion during the period. She includes Cecily as one of the powerful lordly-women, that Kimberly LoPrete has argued are not the exception, but the norm in the Middle Ages ("Gendering Viragos: Medieval Perceptions of Powerful Women," in *Victims or Viragos?*, ed. Christine Meek and Catherine Lawless [Four Courts Press, 2005], 18).

Through its narrative structure, the book is rich in content and context of the period, allowing Cecily's significance within the political milieu to emerge. The study employs a very strong analysis of the wealth of previously under utilized source material. This is strongest in the second half of the book, once Edward IV becomes king. There is a greater focus on scrutiny of the

administrative record from chapter seven onwards. The greater critical and documentary focus of the later chapters may be attributed to the possibility that once Cecily became the mother of the king, she was more visible in the documentary material—material that also had a greater chance of survival. While the study strives to balance narrative biography and thematic analysis, and largely succeeds, there are times when chances for deeper investigation and positioning Cecily within current scholarly discourses about medieval women were missed. In chapter ten, Laynesmith asserts that Cecily continued to be close to the king towards the end of his reign because he granted her an annuity, and that she "was similarly still managing her own affairs in ways that would benefit the king," but then moves on in the narrative, foregoing the chance to delve into a deeper analysis and position Cecily's experience within the scholarly discourse of gender and/or queenship (152). Likewise, the book neglects some interesting opportunities to make strong conclusions about some of the themes and ideas posed in the introduction. The assertion that Cecily represents the norm, rather than the exception, is a striking argument that once articulated in the introduction is not returned to again. This would have been a nice unifying theme, and its absence means the study missed opportunities to trace it throughout the narrative.

Laynesmith has produced a foundational study into discussions on how women exercised their agency within different contexts. Because Cecily's life and career stretched across the entirety of the Wars of the Roses, she provides a unique example of a woman who navigated an extremely volatile political climate through a woman's different life stages, providing scholars with insight into the varying circumstances faced by women of the period. Laynesmith demonstrates that Cecily was able to navigate this unstable climate through her relationships. Her relationships with men were largely key to her successful lady-ship, and her decision to consistently identify herself as the "king's mother" and the "queen's grandmother" demonstrated her knowledge that these relationships had an authoritative inference (182). It was through these personal relationships that Cecily was able to exercise agency because distinct personal relationships could ignore or trump more general negative stereotypes that were typically applied to women in significant political roles. This work has certainly laid the foundation for further examinations of Cecily as more than just an example of lay-piety. By telling Cecily's story through these relationships, Laynesmith convincingly shows

that "she was an astute politician, a 'good-lady', a respected wife and mother and that her power to influence put her in the center of the political community" (184).

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