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Queenship in England, 1308-1485: Gender and Power in the Late Middle Ages

Conor Byrne

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Queenship in England, 1308–1485: Gender and Power in the Late Middle Ages. By Conor Byrne. Almería: MadeGlobal Publishing, 2016. ISBN 978-84-945937-7-2. 134 pp. £8.99.

While there has been a recent flowering of studies of later medieval queenship—most notably in the broader works of Lisa Benz St. John and J. L. Laynesmith, alongside the research into individual queens by the likes of Diana Dunn, Helen Maurer, and David Baldwin—there is still much important work to be done. As such, Conor Byrne's observation that historians "have not always considered how the queen was affected [by the political tensions of the later Middle Ages] and whether ... a new model of queenship emerged" remains true (115). The aim of Byrne's new book— to provide a general "study of queenship in England during the period 1308–1485"—is therefore admirable (5). Unfortunately, however, this is an aim that Byrne fails to achieve.

The first issue with the work is in its very structure. Byrne proclaims that his book "is not a conventional biography of the queens who reigned at this time," but rather "a thematic study of the institution of queenship as it operated during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries" (6). Indeed, Byrne does identify interesting themes—for instance, the queenly role as child-bearer, mother, intercessor, patron, and manager of a household—which he discusses sensibly and fruitfully in the epilogue to the work (115-119). However, the main body of his book, framed by the prologue and epilogue, is arranged into nine chapters—one for each of the queens of the period, starting with Isabella of France and ending with Anne Neville—which go through the individual queens in turn, charting their early lives, family backgrounds, marriages, activities as queen, roles as dowager queens (where applicable), and deaths. This fundamentally narrative and biographical approach is at odds with Byrne's stated goal, and means that he only examines his themes across the period as a whole in the final stages of his book, which prevents him from developing his analysis in any depth or detail.

Byrne's accounts of the queens themselves are also somewhat problematic. There are some stimulating moments, such as his discussion of Philippa of Hainault's role as an intercessor, which draws effectively on Juliet Vale's biography of the queen in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (40-41). Yet, there are also serious issues. Although the brevity of the book (totalling just 134 pages) necessitates concision, there are places where the paucity of Bryne's treatment is simply unhelpful: Isabella's crucial role in the deposition of Edward II is dealt with in just one page, and Margaret of Anjou's important contribution to the restoration of Henry VI is confined to just one paragraph (31-32, 90). Moreover, his assessments are often poorly supported and one-sided. For instance, he declares that "it is not true that the queen

[Margaret of Anjou] was an avaricious, grasping woman determined to enjoy power irrespective of the consequences" (88). While such a conclusion is potentially justifiable on the evidence, Byrne fails to provide any reasons or references in support of his judgment, and does not engage with any of the contemporary aspersions to the contrary, such as John Bocking's famous letter to Sir John Fastolf, in which he observed that "the Quene is a grete and strong labourid woman, for she spareth noo peyne to sue hire thinges to an intent and conclusion to hir power" (*The Paston Letters, 1422-1509,* ed. J. Gairdner [London, 1904], 3:75).

These issues appear to reflect the questionable research upon which the work is based. Byrne has undoubtedly read widely, with his bibliography running for eleven pages, and listing some 181 items—including not only more predictable chronicle sources (such as the *Anonimalle Chronicle* and the *Vita Edwardi Secundi*), but also less exploited texts, such as the Acts of Court of the Mercers' Company (123-134). Nonetheless, the secondary literature consulted focuses more on popular works, rather than on recent academic studies. For instance, Byrne cites Kathyrn Warner's (2014) and Harold Hutchinson's (1971) popular biographies of Edward II, but not Seymour Philipps's definitive life of the king (2010); Ian Mortimer's mass-market account of Edward III's reign (2008), but not Mark Ormrod's seminal work on the monarch (2011); and B. P. Wolffe's (1981) and Ralph Griffiths's (1981) classic studies of Henry VI, but not the more recent research of John Watts (1996) and David Grummitt (2015) (126-134). Similarly, Byrne seems to neglect many important primary sources—including the chronicles of Jean le Bel, Henry Knighton, and Adam Murimuth—despite them offering numerous insights as to the political activities of late medieval Queens (123-125). Byrne's work would have rested on a much firmer scholarly foundation had some of these works been consulted.

The formatting and proofreading of the book further exacerbates its shortcomings. Much of the book is well-written and clearly expressed, and Byrne's prose is occasionally attractive, as in his observation that the experiences of Anne of Bohemia and Isabelle of France (wives of Richard II) serve "as a reminder that the queenly office was ever-changing, susceptible to shifts that arose according to political, military and domestic circumstances" (60). However, this is rather spoiled by the typographical errors that beset his text, from the first page of the prologue, where "the Peasants' Revolt of 1381" is mistakenly rendered as "the Peasant's Revolt of 1381" (a particular *bête noire* among medievalists, with its gramatical connotation that only one peasant rebelled) (5) to the bibliography, where—in his rendering of the title of James Raine's 1839 edition of the work of three Durham historians—"Robertus de Graystanes" is misspelled "Robertus de Graystaynes", and "Gaufridus de Coldingham" contracted to "Gaufridus Coldingham" (125).

Indeed, bibliographic infelicities abound, with the citation of the 2012 edition of Geoffrey le Baker's Chronicle mentioning only David Preest's role as translator, and not Richard Barber's editorial involvement as the provider of the introduction and notes; with the dates of the first volume of the *Calendar of Chancery Warrants* series being given as "1230-1326", rather than 1244-1326; and with Amy License's *Anne Neville* listed as a continuation of Henrietta Leyser's *Medieval Women,* rather than as a separate item (124, 125, 131). Yet, the most overt oversight is the absence of either an index or a list of abbreviations, the latter meaning that the Calendar of Close Rolls is referenced for the first time as "*CCR*" without any expansion or clarification (30). While occasional lapses in the quality of prose and scholarly apparatus are perhaps excusable, if frustrating, this does seem to be an example of the publisher's carelessness.

In sum, there is little to commend this book. Although there is historiographical space for a high-quality general work on later medieval English queenship, this—plagued by issues in structure, content, research, style, and referencing—is regrettably not it.

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