



***Norman to Early Plantagenet
Consorts: Power, Influence, and
Dynasty***

**Edited by Aidan Norrie,
Carolyn Harris, J.L. Laynesmith,
Danna R. Messer, Elena Woodacre**

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This edited collection is, chronologically, the first in a series of four books on English queen consorts that are part of the Queenship and Power series from Palgrave Macmillan. This volume, like the others in the series, aims to strengthen our knowledge of the strategies that queens used to wield power in male-dominated politics and society. In her opening chapter, Danna R. Messer posits the queen as the “main contender” for the role of the “true partner of the English King...[in] visible, all-encompassing governance” (16) and the rest of the edited collection certainly follows through in proving this to be the case regardless of the form this took. This collection significantly contributes to the existing historiography on some of these powerful women while creating a presence in the field for others, underpinning this work’s importance to queenship studies.

Following two introductory chapters, one of which is dedicated to establishing the idea of queenship in the pre-Conquest period, the book systematically progresses through the queens encompassed in the title. Starting with Mathilda of Flanders (c.1030–1083), the first Norman queen consort, each chapter is dedicated to an individual queen through to the second Margaret of France (1279–1318), Edward I’s second queen. The queens featured in this collection include several lesser studied queen consorts, such as Margaret of France (1157–1197)—Henry the Young King’s often neglected wife and consort—and Isabella of Gloucester (1173–1217)—John’s uncrowned first queen. Despite each queen being the topic of their own chapter, the contributors make continuous references to each other’s work to reinforce the points of continuity and comparison between the twelve queens and their lived experiences as the “leading wom[e]n of the realm” (279).

With the exception of the chapters on Isabella of Gloucester and Isabella of Angouleme (c.1186–1246), both by Sally Spong, different authors cover each of the other queens. The contributors include some of the leading scholars in Anglo-Norman and Plantagenet studies as well as emerging scholars, making this edited collection a strong addition to the historiography of these queens.

Many authors included in this edited collection, such as Laura Gathagan and Lois L. Huneycutt, are the authority on their respective queen and their chapters in the book are reflective of their ongoing research into that individual. Some chapters, such as Gathagan’s

on Mathilda of Flanders and her role in “queenly justice” (60), put forward some exciting new arguments, broadening our understandings pertaining to the variety of ways in which medieval queen consorts could wield their power and influence. Conversely, Huneycutt’s chapter on Matilda of Scotland (1080–1118) is more akin to the amalgamating of a series of previous articles, collating previous statements and arguments made by Huneycutt into a single essay. While in and of itself not ground-breaking, this approach does provide its own value in offering the reader the culmination of Huneycutt’s ongoing research and conclusions regarding the ideal of queenship embodied in Matilda of Scotland, which are particularly valuable to those new to the topic.

One approach, taken for those queens who demonstrated less active political agency during their tenures, was for the author to extrapolate, based on existing power and influence, the power they could potentially have wielded if their circumstances were different, most notably following the deaths of their husbands. Many scholars in this collection utilise this tactic for their subject including Márta Pellérdi and Gabrielle Storey who adopt this approach for Margaret of France and Berengaria of Navarre (c.1165–1230), respectively, deftly demonstrating the way in which a queen consort’s agency could be curtailed by a number of factors such as age or the nature of their relationship with their husband. By taking this approach, the aforementioned historians challenge arguments that these queens were representative of broader trends of powerlessness among medieval queen consorts and suggestions that queens with limited power and influence were consistently consigned to those limits throughout their lives. As such, these chapters provide a new way of looking at the queens who have traditionally been held to be relatively powerless and uninfluential to show that this was often a matter of circumstance and that when those circumstances changed so too did the women’s access to power.

As with many works on medieval queens, the idea of the lifecycle and its impact on power and influence is prevalent in this book, where many of the queens studied are shown to have been far more active in the years as queen dowager or queen mother than as queen consort. This is an argument that pertains in particular to the Plantagenet consorts, as all but one of the Norman consorts predeceased their husbands. This approach is not new; rather, the emphasis on queenly lifecycles and its effect on the power and agency available to a queen at any given time is a cornerstone of queenship studies, such as in Pauline Stafford’s book on Anglo-Saxon queenship *Queen Emma and Queen Edith: Queenship and Women's Power in Eleventh-Century England* (2001). Within this edited collection, the chapters that utilise this perspective, including Liam Lewis, Péllardi, Huneycutt, Spong, Abigail S.

Armstrong, Louise J. Wilkinson, and Paul Dryburgh, make a compelling argument that this theory holds true for the queens they examine, thereby furthering our understanding that ideas of queenship were often defined and influenced by concepts of the woman's lifecycle: "queen consort," "queen regent," and "queen dowager" (3).

This book ends with Messer and Katherine Weikert's chapter, which successfully summarises the conclusions from each chapter on the actions, power, and influence of twelve different queens, though they acknowledge this "is not a task for the faint of heart" (279). Challenging ideas of decline which have in the past dominated discussions of queenly power and authority, Messer and Weikert ultimately identify four points of "long-term continuity" which they dub the "four 'Ps': piety, patronage, peace-making, and, ultimately, the practice of power" (280). Overall, this book demonstrates the ways in which these twelve queens placed their own mark on what was a flexible and ever evolving role while, at the same time, also participating in the broader patterns of the office's development.

This edited collection is a worthy addition to the historiography of high medieval English queenship as it clearly demonstrates the vast possibilities when it came to the role. By utilising the evidence provided by their dowager lives to highlight these women's capacity for power and influence and distinguishing this from their ability to act on it during their tenure of queen, this edited collection avoids allocating these women into a powerful/powerless binary and instead demonstrates the complexity of this role and the lives of the women who occupied it. For many of the queens covered, it is an essential work because their historiographical field is limited. Capitalising on developments in approaches to queenship studies, the authors demonstrate an expanded understanding of the ways in which power and influence could be embodied.

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