



Ladies-in-Waiting in Medieval England.

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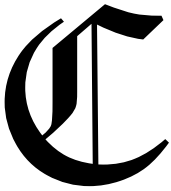
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Abstract: Review of *Ladies-in-Waiting in Medieval England*, by Caroline Dunn (Cambridge University Press, 2025).



***Ladies-in-Waiting in Medieval England.* By Caroline Dunn. Cambridge University Press, 2024. ISBN 978-1-009-45701-9. xvi + 344 pp. £85.00.**

aroline Dunn provides fascinating insight on the women behind the scenes at court who attended on and served English queens and noblewomen in the later Middle Ages. Adopting a data-driven approach, as much as the primary sources allow, Dunn sheds light on the everyday lives and responsibilities of ladies-in-waiting, persuasively showing that their duties were far more numerous and varied in comparison to the traditional Victorian image of a woman attending to her needlework. Dunn persuasively shows that female attendants were active and necessary participants in both daily life and high politics, as the situation called for. These women were both essential and liminal, acting in both the domestic and political spheres of court life, helping the monarchy to function effectively from the background.

Dunn takes a thematic approach to the topic examining the individuals and their functions in a book comprising an introduction, six chapters and a conclusion. The introduction addresses issues of terminology and definitions, particularly the troublesome “court” and “household” with their overlapping but also separate roles, as well as the range of names for the women studied (6–9, 20–21). Here, Dunn justifies her reasons for using the somewhat anachronistic term “lady-in-waiting.” The six main chapters of the book are divided into three equal parts comprising two chapters. Part 1 consists of chapters 1 and 2 and focuses on who the women were, with chapter 1 addressing the composition of households and the origins of the women serving within them. Chapter 2 concentrates on family ties and family service within households. Dunn shows how these positions at court were difficult to obtain but lucrative, offering opportunities for rewards through inter-courtier marriage, but also possibilities for bringing other family members into the orbit of service. Parts 2 and 3 then turn to what these women did. Chapter 3 examines the day-to-day duties in comparison to chapter 4, which addresses the attendants’ participation in the more extraordinary events, namely rituals and ceremonies. Employers expected and rewarded good service from attendants in their everyday activities. This extended to more formal settings, with female servants particularly heavily involved in female- or queen-centred rituals and ceremonies including coronations, churchings, and funerals. The participation of ladies-in-waiting became an expected part of the pageantry and helped to enhance the prestige of the monarchy. Chapters 5 and 6 finally shift focus to power, politics, and rewards, examining how female attendants experienced the opportunities and perils

of life at court. Dunn demonstrates that, as these women became more visible over the centuries, they were more susceptible to hostility. Nevertheless, the perils of court politics also provided access to benefits such as patronage or intercessory opportunities. Quite rightly, Dunn stresses the intricate connection between domestic and crown governance. Thus, the study of these somewhat overlooked women is key to furthering our understanding of the operation and politics of the English royal court.

Spanning 300 years, from the marriage of Eleanor of Provence to Henry III in 1236 to the death of Catherine of Aragon, Henry VIII's first wife, in 1536, Dunn's broad study is ambitious but well executed. The survival of the source material always favours the later years of the Middle Ages into the early modern period, nevertheless Dunn's examination of the different facets of courtly life for ladies-in-waiting is generally well balanced. As subjects are approached thematically, Dunn brings in examples from across the centuries to round out her analysis. These examples are given in chronological order from the thirteenth through to the sixteenth century, as the evidence permits. This allows Dunn to chart diachronically how the roles and functions of these female attendants changed, demonstrating how female attendants became more numerous and visible as the centuries progressed. Moreover, although more sporadic, this analysis is nicely complemented by her examination of the nobility. Chapter 5, however, takes a different approach. It adopts a much narrower focus utilising case studies comprising of four queens (Isabella of France, Anne of Bohemia, Margaret of Anjou, and Catherine of Aragon) and Alice Perrers—the most powerful woman at the court of Edward III towards the end of his reign—as Dunn demonstrates how elite servants navigated their proximity to power during politically tumultuous times.

The wealth of material contained within the fiscal and administrative records of royal government (and more specifically the royal wardrobe and household), as well as comparable aristocratic household accounts predominantly form the basis of the study. Through these sources, Dunn charts the range of payments, liveries, grants, and privileges obtained by these women, in addition to their duties and functions. These government records are supplemented with household ordinances, letter collections (most frequently the Paston letters), and literary texts to reveal the expectations of ladies-in-waiting, if not their actual experiences. The real strength of this book is Dunn's use of the source material to construct her extensive relational database of over 1,000 women, that allows her to adopt a quantitative approach to the subject. This can be seen clearly in chapters 2 and 6, where Dunn evaluates the numbers of attendants married to other attendants within the

household, as well as the different types of rewards female attendants received. It is in the minutiae of detail that the depth and scope of Dunn's study are exhibited, yet she never appears to lose sight of the bigger picture.

Overall, this is a rich study of the women behind the scenes of power, through which Dunn greatly enhances our understanding of the closely intertwined world of politics and domestics in medieval rulership and of the important role of the women who supported queens and noblewomen.

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