

Carole Levin, Jo Eldridge Carney, and Debra Barrett-Graves, eds. *“High and Mighty Queens” of Early Modern England: Realities and Representations*. Palgrave/Macmillan, 2003. pp. 284.

More a broad, sweeping cultural history of the influences, interpretations, and literary representations of sixteenth-century queens than an historical work, this set of fourteen essays will appeal to readers ranging from those who work in history and literature to those interested in transformations in the acceptance of women’s ability to manage political power since the sixteenth century. The authors have taken their title from Anne Bradstreet’s poem about Elizabeth I, itself an attempt to more positively figure that queen’s reign, but the work also focuses on three kinds of queens: wives of kings, queen regents and queens regnant. In addition to focusing on one or two such early modern queens, each essay also provides some perspective on the common difficulties faced by all of these women whose abilities to rule were constantly under siege due to patriarchal assumptions about women’s weak nature. The

work is thematically divided into three parts, historical, literary-historical, and more broadly cultural in their evaluation of the influence of early modern queens. The overall argument of the work, can it be said to have one, is that the existence of this group of women whose lives and power were very public caused an irrevocable transformation in how women of power were viewed. Inevitably, some essays are better than others, but each is accompanied by extensive notes, and the work holds together marvelously despite the authors’ wide-ranging perspectives. I enjoyed each essay and speculate that some will be reread, depending on each reader’s orientation towards early modern history, literature, women’s studies, culture studies, or the intersections of two or more such categories.

The first section is the most historically grounded of the three. Entitled “The Nature of

Renaissance Queens,” its four essays, by Timothy Elston, Judith Richards, Louis Roper, and Karen Nelson, revise traditional views of Catherine of Aragon and Mary I (1), Mary Tudor (2), Anna of Denmark (3) and Henrietta Maria and Elizabeth of Bohemia (4), respectively. I found the comparative essays of Elston and Nelson to be the most informative, especially on vastly different methods these women used to wield political power.

The second section, entitled “Imagining Renaissance Queens and Power,” considers literary representations of real and imagined queens, including Amazon-Queens in the early modern period. These five essays, by Matthew Hansen, Susan Dunn-Hensley, Jo Eldridge Carney, Sid Ray and Kirilka Stavreva, range from discussions of the female body and the sexualizing of queenly power to the demonization of fictionalized queens in Shakespeare and Fletcher to discussions of Jacobean use of “witch speak” in literature as well as the language of the day. While each of the essays speaks to cultural anxieties

about women in power, each has its unique revelations about particular women and particular representations of power. Space does not permit details for all, but, for example, Stavreva’s essay, “‘There’s Magic in Thy Majesty’: Queenship and Witch-Speak in Jacobean Shakespeare,” is forceful in its linkage between cultural anxieties about early-modern queens and changes in women’s positions throughout early modern society, and Carney’s detailing of Amazon queens as yet another representation of similar anxiety sent me back to Abby Kleinbaum’s *War Against the Amazons* (1983) for her interpretation of Amazon lore in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

The student of historical popular culture, as well as the general reader, will perhaps enjoy the third section, “Cultural Anxieties and Historical Echoes of Renaissance Queens,” the most. These five essays by Carole Levin, Joy Currie, Georgianna Ziegler, Elaine Kruse, and Retha Warnicke span as many as four centuries worth of representations that reflect the

longstanding cultural influence of powerful women, especially the subjects of the first section, in works from Shakespeare to Wordsworth to modern filmmakers. For example, Ziegler's essay on "Catherine of Aragon Among the Victorians," details Charles Kean's reinterpretation of Catherine's death in Shakespeare's *Henry VIII* as it deeply affected both Queen Victoria and Lewis Carroll despite the fact that they, and much of the audience, did not share Catherine's Catholic views on the afterlife (217). Warnike's "Anne Boleyn in History, Drama and Film," covers the longest period, ending with her observations on "the twentieth century Anne," who has been transformed in modern films from an innocent to a manipulative coquette, a startling reminder of how vulnerable we are to mistaking entertainment for fact. Yet the five essays together remind the reader that "cultural" reinterpretation is by no means a modern phenomenon and by no means limited to literary representations.

Thus, while this book is not strictly either an historical,

literary or cultural study, it is a very accomplished example of how essays by different authors can illuminate a single theme, the enormous influence that early modern queens have had on our understanding of women in powerful political positions, and how their stories have been manipulated to appeal to audiences through four centuries. This work reflects on the power of history and literature to combine in our search for truth.

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