

# Beyond Women and Power: Looking Backward and Moving Forward

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THIS SPECIAL ISSUE of *Medieval Feminist Forum* on “Beyond Women and Power: Looking Backward and Moving Forward” is the direct result of several happy coincidences and a lot of hard work; it is also the fruit of the contributors’ many years of thinking about the issues addressed herein. The initial impetus for the issue was a pair of roundtables at the 2014 Kalamazoo and Leeds congresses. The first, entitled “Beyond Medieval Women and Power,” was organized by Amy Livingstone;<sup>1</sup> she and Elena Woodacre organized the parallel session the following summer at Leeds, “Debating Women and Power in the Middle Ages: A Round Table Discussion.”<sup>2</sup> Then, about nine months later, Christine Adams and Tracy Adams organized a roundtable entitled “Prejudices, Misconceptions, and Blind Spots: A Roundtable Discussion of the Historiography of Women from the Thirteenth through Eighteenth Centuries” at the 2015 annual meeting of the Society for French Historical Studies, providing not only evidence of the timeliness of the topic, but also its import past the Middle Ages.<sup>3</sup> All three sessions were

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1. The session was sponsored by the Charles Homer Haskins Society, *Medieval Prosopography*, and *Seigneurie: Group for the Study of the Nobility, Lordship, and Chivalry*. Participants included: Constance Berman (University of Iowa), Lois L. Huneycutt (University of Missouri–Columbia), Marie Kelleher (California State University–Long Beach), Kathy M. Krause (University of Missouri–Kansas City), and Elena Woodacre (University of Winchester).

2. The panel was sponsored by *Medieval Prosopography* and the Royal Studies Network, and the other roundtable participants included Theresa Earenfight (Seattle University), Joanna Huntington (University of Lincoln), Therese Martin (Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, Madrid), and Penelope Joan Nash (University of Sydney).

3. In addition to the organizers, the other roundtable participants were Kathy M.

extremely well attended and generated excellent discussions, leading the participants to think in terms of publication.<sup>4</sup> As I had the pleasure of participating in both the Kalamazoo and SFHS roundtables, I suggested including participants from the SFHS session with those of Kalamazoo and Leeds; the result is this special issue of MFF, with essays developed from our remarks at the three roundtables.

In publishing these essays, our primary aim is to present our collective intellectual and scholarly “*cris du cœur*” to a wider audience in order to inspire both reflection and action. In them, we look back upon centuries of misrepresentations of elite women and their access to power and ability to wield it, not only to expose (once again) the biases and prejudices of earlier scholars, but also to learn from them and from the historiographic record. Thus, the issue opens with a series of essays focused on how we have gotten where we are now, each approaching the question via a specific (sub)disciplinary perspective, and each also offering suggestions for the future. Lois Huneycutt uses queenship studies as her lens, chronicling both the development of the field and the ways it has opened up new avenues for the study of medieval women more broadly. Amy Livingstone looks at the study of medieval women through questions of aristocratic family structure and notes, among other points, the significant shift in historiographic methodology initiated by feminist historians when they turned to charters to try to escape the “misogynistic bias” of medieval prescriptive literature that had informed so much of the scholarship up until that point. In addition, she looks forward to the next steps in our scholarly conversation about women and power, thereby anticipating the essays that close this special issue. The third essay is my own, and although my contribution discusses in large part how and why medieval literary scholars have tended to perpetuate myths of female disempowerment already discredited by historians, it also provides examples of Old French literary representations of female lords, including a lament for the death of a real ruling countess of Boulogne, thus broadening our perspective on the subject.

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Krause (UMKC), Kathleen Wellman (Southern Methodist University), and James B. Collins (Georgetown University).

4. Indeed, the sessions even generated social media attention, including tweets and blog posts.

Focusing more on present practice, Penelope Nash's contribution builds on her work looking at ruling women of the Holy Roman Empire both pre- and post-investiture controversy, whereas Elena Woodacre's essay opens with remarks on the regnant queens of Jerusalem and of Navarre, but also considers how questions of female power transcend the divide between medieval and early modern.<sup>5</sup> Both essays challenge us to work across established boundaries, both temporal and geographical. The next three essays do just that, extending our examination of powerful women to the late medieval and early modern periods in France. First, Tracy Adams uses Isabeau de Bavière as a test case to document how even recent research repeats old chestnuts about women, in part because they are so omnipresent in the secondary literature, and she urges scholars to return to the primary sources themselves rather than depending on later works. In similar fashion, Kathleen Wellman looks at the historiography of two famous royal mothers, Catherine de Medici and Louise of Savoy, reminding all of us that there are many routes to power for women (as for men), and, unfortunately, just as many ways for the historiographical record to mistreat them. Christine Adams takes us from mothers to mistresses, examining the historiography of two of the best-known early modern French mistresses, Madame de Montespan and Madame Tallien; in doing so, she unpacks, among other things, another layer of the earlier commentary on powerful women that focused on physical appearance and sexuality.

The antepenultimate and penultimate essays encourage us to broaden, in particular, our critical perspectives. Marie Kelleher asks the essential

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5. Theresa Earenfight begins her seminal article "Without the Persona of the Prince: Kings, Queens and the Idea of Monarchy in Late Medieval Europe" with a discussion of the qualifications needed on the topic of women and power. She notes that "A queen rarely stands alone. She needs an adjective," referring to the need to qualify a queen's role as a queen regnant, queen consort, queen regent, dowager queen, etc. However Earenfight argues that "These modifiers telegraph the range and variety of practices of queenship and clarify a queen's exercise of power and authority, but calling attention to the presumed anomaly of female political power subordinates it." The only time a king is given a qualifying adjective is in the case of a king consort. See Theresa Earenfight, "Without the Persona of the Prince: Kings, Queens and the Idea of Monarchy in Late Medieval Europe," *Gender & History* 19, no. 1 (2007): 1-21, 1, doi: 10.1111/j.1468-0424.2007.00461.x.

question of what we mean by women and power, challenging us to think critically about how historiographical precedent has defined power itself and whether we should remain within the boundaries of the definition handed to us by earlier, masculine-biased scholars. Theresa Earenfight's essay then continues the conversation about how we define power and suggests using feminist standpoint epistemologies as a way to understand critically "the differences between male and female power." This essay brings us full circle, for it takes its examples from studies of royalty and queens, with a particular regard for a category not discussed elsewhere, that of childless queens, as it offers a set of directions for future study that complement those discussed by Amy Livingstone in her contribution.

The volume closes with Constance Berman's article, which provides a working illustration of the previous discussions. Using the charters of Cistercian nunneries founded in the thirteenth century, she explores women's power as evidenced by the charitable foundations of five women named Matilda. The charters and the women's power they document provide telling examples of the topics addressed by the other essays in the volume, from the different paths to power for women to the ways in which the historical record can be and has been manipulated, subverting the evidence for women's power, up to and including, for example, the denial of even the existence of female Cistercian monasteries in the Middle Ages.

We hope that these essays provoke critical reflection on how we research, and how we talk and write about, women and power in the medieval and early modern periods (and in later periods as well). We also hope that our stories serve to empower further historical and literary scholarship that will continue to disturb, decenter, and re-center the inherited narratives about women, about power, and about women's power.<sup>6</sup>

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6. Putting together this special issue of *Medieval Feminist Forum* has been a model of collaborative scholarship. It has been my privilege to work with all the scholars involved in the issue, as well as with those who participated in the roundtables but could not contribute to the issue. I have had my own scholarly horizons expanded geographically, chronologically, and critically.