

Pauline Stafford—A Heroic Journey

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I FIRST MET PAULINE IN 1978 at a party at the Reform Club to celebrate the publication of *Medieval Women* (to which we had both contributed: she on “Sons and Mothers,” I on “Brunhild and Balhild”).¹ Since then our friendship has grown ever stronger.

Several of Pauline’s most oft-read and most valued papers deal with women’s very active public roles and family politics. Over the years, Pauline has thought long and hard about the problems and delights of life-writing, and of early medieval historical writing: “Succession and Inheritance: A Gendered Perspective on Alfred’s Family History”; “Writing the Biography of Eleventh-Century Queens”; “Reading Women in Annals.”² The earliest of these (and there are many more) was “Sons and Mothers in the Early Middle Ages.” The reviewer of the collection that included this paper, and reviewed it every bit as generously as it deserved, was Georges Duby, who picked out the pearl in the shell: “Si j’admire beaucoup l’analyse menée par le Docteur Stafford des relations mère–fils dans la haute société des X^e–XI^e siècles, c’est qu’elle fait apparaître la vérité la nécessité d’en savoir plus long sur la situation des concubines et des bâtards et sur la diffusion de la bénédiction nuptiale.”³ I reckon the admiration of Georges Duby is praise indeed.

¹ Pauline Stafford, “Sons and Mothers: Family Politics in the Early Middle Ages,” in *Medieval Women*, ed. Derek Baker (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978), 79–100; Janet Nelson, “Queens as Jezebels: The Careers of Brunhild and Balhild in Merovingian History,” in Baker, *Medieval Women*, 31–77.

² Pauline Stafford, “Succession and Inheritance: A Gendered Perspective on Alfred’s Family History,” in *Alfred the Great: Papers from the Eleventh-Centenary Conferences*, ed. Timothy Reuter (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 251–64; Pauline Stafford, “Writing the Biography of Eleventh-Century Queens,” in *Writing Medieval Biography, 750–1250: Essays in Honor of Professor Frank Barlow*, ed. David Bates, Julia C. Crick, and Sarah Hamilton (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006), 99–109; Pauline Stafford, “Reading Women in Annals: Eadburg, Cuthburg, Cwenburg and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle,” in *Agire da donna: Modelli e pratiche di rappresentazione (secoli VI–X): atti del convegno (Padova, 18–19 febbraio 2005)*, ed. Cristina La Rocca (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 269–89, at 271–74.

³ Georges Duby, “Review of *Medieval Women: Dedicated and Presented to Professor Rosalind M. T. Hill on the Occasion of her Seventieth Birthday*,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 31, no. 4 (1980): 493–94.

In 1986, Joan Scott published in the *American Historical Review*, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis."⁴ Her power-packed article hammered the case home. Can a case also be made for the usefulness of the life-cycle? It certainly can. Usefulness and suitability go together. As a historian of modern France, and very interested in gender's relationship to power, Joan Scott, in 1986 (when the Women's History Seminar at the Institute of Historical Research in London had just begun) unsurprisingly did not focus on early medieval queens. Yet that is exactly where one of the main thrusts of the historiography has gone since Pauline Stafford published, in 1983, *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers: The King's Wife in the Early Middle Ages* (repr. 1998).⁵ Joan Scott's work turns out to have hugely influenced not just medieval historians but historians in general.

Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers, and its successor, *Queen Emma and Queen Edith: Queenship and Women's Power in Eleventh-Century England* (1997) shared two key starting points: queenship and the salience of the life-cycle.⁶ One particularly fine paper has kept all its freshness: "Writing the Biography of Eleventh-Century Queens." Here, after drawing attention to "the familial dimensions of early medieval politics in general," the importance of discussing sources, and the impact of the social sciences on history, Pauline focused on the "room for agency" created by motherhood.⁷

Pauline's work has deservedly remained powerful. The life-cycle stages of a medieval queen can be listed as follows:

Bride
Wife
Mother
Widow

... though there might be a case for adding Grandmother (especially if the scale of the action could be reconsidered to include Marc Bloch's evoca-

⁴ Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (1986): 1053–75.

⁵ Pauline Stafford, *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers: The King's Wife in the Early Middle Ages* (London: Batsford Academic and Educational; Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1983; reprinted with new preface, London and Washington: Leicester University Press, 1998).

⁶ Pauline Stafford, *Queen Emma and Queen Edith: Queenship and Women's Power in Eleventh-Century England* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

⁷ Stafford, "Writing the Biography," 105–7.

tion of “our villages”: “Because working conditions keep the mother and father away almost all day, the young children are brought up chiefly by their grandparents. ... With the molding of each new mind, there is a backward step, ... while skipping that generation which is the sponsor of change.”⁸

To trace back Pauline’s scholarly work to its beginnings means retracing historiographical footsteps. In her earliest postgraduate research, she not only exposed important political aspects of Æthelred’s reign, but delved deep into the economic and numismatic as well, and the interplay between them. In “Historical Implications of the Regional Production of Dies under Æthelred II,” a remarkable publishing debut, Pauline presented geography as the necessary backdrop against which to place mints and moneyers center-stage.⁹ There was absolutely nothing insular in Pauline’s approach or in that of the series editor, Nicholas Brooks. In the foreword of *The East Midlands in the Early Middle Ages* (1985), Nicholas wrote, “Early medieval Britain can only be understood in the context of contemporary developments in Ireland and on the Continent.”¹⁰ (These are words worth reflecting on in light of present troubles.) Pauline also threw a flood of light on the career of Æthelflæd Lady of the Mercians as a female leader in war and peace, and the significance more generally of intermarriage between Anglo-Saxons and Danes and contacts across the Irish Sea. Pauline highlighted, at the same time, the exceptional relevance of the *Mercian Register* as a historical source.¹¹ Meanwhile she had delivered in 1983 a new rallying-call to early medieval historians interested in gender, in the form of *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers*.

As the double-barrelled biographer of *Queen Emma and Queen Edith*, and as an analyst of queenly reigns in comparison, Pauline has offered a wealth of new insights into life-writing as applied to the early

⁸ Marc Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft*, trans. Peter Putnam (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1954; reprinted with an introduction by Peter Burke, 1992), 33–34.

⁹ Pauline Stafford, “Historical Implications of the Regional Production of Dies under Æthelred II,” *Bulletin of the Numismatic Journal* XLVIII (1978): 35–51.

¹⁰ Pauline Stafford, *The East Midlands in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Nicholas Brooks, *Studies in the Early History of Britain* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1985), foreword, vii.

¹¹ See also the later Pauline Stafford, “‘The Annals of Æthelflæd’: Annals, History and Politics in Early Tenth-Century England,” in *Myth, Rulership, Church and Charters: Essays in Honour of Nicholas Brooks*, ed. Julia Barrow and Andrew Wareham (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 101–16.

medieval period. Some queens were exceptionally well documented and have attracted much attention, since the history of women, and then of women and gender, was firmly put on the historiographical map in the 1970s and 1980s. Self-evidently, queens constituted a tiny minority of women. It is possible to extend the field of interest in gender and life-cycle beyond queens and the high-born, to include peasant women and female religious more generally. Theoretical approaches to the stages of the family life-cycle have been taken by economists, demographers, sociologists, and psychologists. Though some social scientists have collaborated with historians, even now interdisciplinary conversations seem relatively few, and in the case of early medieval historians, fewer still. In different parts of the academic wood, scholars talk past each other. Archaeologists, many of whom would categorize themselves as both social scientists *and* historians, come into their own when cemetery evidence is being discussed. Gender difference appears strongly, for instance, in the pre-Christian period, the fifth to seventh centuries, in grave-goods; by the eighth century, in Francia and Bavaria, gender and age difference can be worked out from skeletal remains, and, if only rarely, difference of status in dress and personal accoutrements.¹² Women's life expectancy everywhere in Latin Europe, for which archaeological evidence survives, was significantly lower than that of men. An excellent complement to *Europe after Rome*, and published only four years later, was *A Companion to the Early Middle Ages: Britain and Ireland, c. 500–c. 1100*, which Pauline masterminded, and to which she herself contributed a tripartite introductory section and a fine account of "Queens and Queenship."¹³ Of its twenty-eight chapters, three connected Britain, Ireland, and Europe between ca. 500 and ca. 1000, eight more tackled different regions and realms, five dealt with religious beliefs, institutions and practices, and the remainder with various kinds of social science, including archaeology. This was a *Companion* on a heroic scale.

I referred above to the *Mercian Register*, and Pauline mentioned it in *The East Midlands* as "incorporated into some manuscripts of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*."¹⁴ In some sense, the wheel has come full circle: Pauline's

¹² Julia M. H. Smith, *Europe after Rome: A New Cultural History 500–1000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 118–20.

¹³ Pauline Stafford, ed., *A Companion to the Early Middle Ages: Britain and Ireland, c. 500–c. 1100*, Blackwell Companions to History (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

¹⁴ Stafford, *The East Midlands*, 67.

first book (1985) broached a significant historiographical theme relating to one key version of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. The *Chronicles* and their chroniclers have preoccupied her for much of more recent decades, during which she has brought forth a brood of article-length studies, identifying locations, smoothing rough places, and unraveling mysteries, and, finally, producing a major work, now in press with Oxford University Press. It will surely need little, if any, revising for a very long time. The scale is—again—heroic: the outcome, a resolution of problems surrounding chronicles and chroniclers before and beyond the Conquest.

The Influence and Importance of Pauline Stafford's *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers*

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I READ *QUEENS, CONCUBINES, AND Dowagers* for the first time during my first year of graduate school, and the book was a revelation to me about how one could study the power of medieval women, particularly through examination of the positions that medieval women held and the resources that they could control at each stage of their lives. One of the great strengths of *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers* is how accessible the writing style is. I had never studied early medieval history before I read this book—I had no idea who Lothar II was, nor did I know the difference between Louis the German and Louis the Stammerer—yet I could follow Pauline's argument and appreciate her points about the women of the Merovingian and Carolingian courts. I devoured the book in one sitting, then immediately went back to reread and take notes.

Two of the most influential aspects of the work for me were the ways that Pauline uses medieval sources and the emphasis that she places on the study of kinship networks. Medieval chronicles quite often use female behavior as an opportunity to moralize. Pauline read beyond the tropes of these narratives to study the situation of women in the early Middle Ages. Pauline has a talent for taking moralizing tales of piety or licentiousness and looking at the political and social reality. One example that always stayed with me was the story of King Edgar's attempt to woo and marry the nun Wulfhilde. According to the legend, he had the support of Wulfhilde's aunt, who was abbess of her nunnery, but Wulfhilde's