

## Pauline Stafford's *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers* Thirty-five Years Later

Megan Welton  
*University of Utrecht*

“ANY STUDENT WISHING TO understand the rapidly shifting nature of political events, which centered almost entirely on the royal court, would do well to start here.” So Ian Wood declared in his 1984 review of *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers*; such was my own initial foray into queenship studies twenty-five years later.<sup>44</sup> *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers* came to represent the Alpha and the Omega, a book with which I started my graduate career and one of the last I revisited prior to my Ph.D. defense.

Stafford's erudite yet remarkably engaging prose—featuring such laugh-out-loud gems as “Politics, not preference for older women, made widows desirable; the tenth century did not suffer from a collective Oedipus complex” (50)—continues to attract young, eager scholars. Yet far more than witty turns of phrase distinguish Stafford's writings. Indeed, Stafford paid keen attention to the intersection of the public and private spheres of the royal households of a broad panorama of early medieval queens, which involved not only navigating the extant source material but also passing fluidly through the different stages of the queens' lives. Throughout, Stafford constantly reminded her audience of the disjuncture between written narratives and historical realities. As with medieval texts, objects, and images, *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers* bears fruit upon return. I have read this work not once, but at least three times in full, each time finding a new angle, whether through her concentration on the repetition of virtue in several of her sources, or her illuminating statement that “medieval politics was a dialogue, not a constant confrontation between royal and noble power” (39).

Each return to *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers* encourages its reader to question, debate, and prod its arguments further. One of the core concerns of this work came to be repeated not only by Stafford but also by subsequent generations of queenship scholars: the definition and exercise of female power. What makes power female? Is it the biology of

<sup>44</sup> Ian Wood, *History* 69, no. 227 (1984): 450–51, at 451.

the person exhibiting, performing, or embodying it? Is it their gender? Biology and gender, of course, are two different entities, and only very recently have medievalists taken stock of twenty-first-century conceptions of how power is expressed, both through and outside of gender.

Although certainly significant as one aspect of ruling women's lived experiences and political relationships, I believe that gender did not solely, or even primarily, determine the status of any particular queen or the ideology of queenship. By making gender the key point of entry into early medieval politics, scholars have created a binary framework in which queens and other ruling women must either be deemed to have held real power or shown to have suffered a deficiency of it. Furthermore, scholars pursuing this line of inquiry have tended to characterize kingship as a transpersonal ideal, one to which queens aspired but which they rarely achieved.

Part of the problem lies in the tendency of medieval scholars to treat gender as static, presuming that all women were different from all men. However, philosophers and gender theorists have developed counterarguments to this conception of gender realism, reconceiving gender as a normative state in which differences emerge from the stylized repetition of habitual acts and stand as just one component of an intersectional identity. I think we collectively need to develop both of these lines of thought in the future, not in order to invalidate gender analyses for ruling women, but instead to broaden the way in which their multifaceted identity is understood.

Because I would like to propose that we question the "female" part of power, I would also like to query the very notions not only of how power was held by women, but also of how power was discursively defined and expressed. Stafford and others focus on the Latin term *potestas*, understood as the ability to enact change, which, as Stafford has rightly pointed out, comes closest to our modern definition of agency. Indeed, scholars in the decades after *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers* have continued to explore the parameters of what queens could do as well as to illuminate what they did in fact achieve. But perhaps it is time to take stock of *how* they performed these actions and *how* they expressed their *potestas*. Were these actions expressed in a language that differed from that concerning their male counterparts? If kings and queens could, in fact, be described with, and share in, the same discourse of power, could this discourse also be extended past the royal circle, and permeate the "lower" ranks of nobility as well as the clerical and abbatial elite?

Finally, *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers* incorporated a wide range of evidence touching on early medieval queens, but in the age of increasing digitalization of texts, objects, manuscripts, and archival catalogues, we now have greater access to the sources required to consider more deeply the material culture surrounding queens and their expressions of queenship. The extant remnants—from the tomb and body of Queen Edith of Saxony in Magdeburg to the image of Theophanu on the Codex Aureus of Echternach to the relics of Adelheid in the portable altar of Countess Gertrude—should be more fully integrated into queenship studies, alongside the current work of art historians and archaeologists. Indeed, Stafford herself incorporated non-textual sources into *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers*, such as the Otto–Adelheid–Pfenninge, yet current numismatic research and important details remain to be more broadly discussed, such as the fact that on a few surviving coins, Adelheid's name alone surrounds the bust. Furthermore, the rise of digitalized manuscripts allows us to see the visual dimensions of many texts, such as the place and position of Anglo-Saxon queens in royal charters' witness-lists.

As medievalists, we strive to provide new answers to old questions and to push scholarship in new directions. Yet, what Stafford did with her remarkable work went far beyond such routine academic labor. She illuminated a whole new area of inquiry, and pioneered a new way of analyzing historical figures left too long in the shadows. *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers* continues to be a guidepost to show us the way.

## (Continuing) Inspiration from Stafford's Innovative Approach to Queenship

Elena Woodacre  
*University of Winchester*

STAFFORD'S *QUEENS, CONCUBINES, AND Dowagers* is a key work in the field of queenship studies and one that I repeatedly recommend to students, no matter what period they are studying. Indeed, although my own work is based in the late medieval period and some of my queenship modules (courses) extend past the French Revolution, I have still found Stafford's work on early medieval queens incredibly powerful and relevant to my teaching and research. For me, there are several elements of *QCD* that demonstrate the ground-breaking contribution of