

The Lessons of a Serious History

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IN MY FIRST YEAR at university I took a medieval history course in order to fulfill a requirement and fell in love with the subject. When I asked the male professor what I should do to become a medievalist, he stated that I had better start taking Latin and then took a preemptive stance against what he termed the “soft” history that attracted female students: “no women, no social history—do real history; be serious.” I did start Latin, but I did not take the rest of his advice much to heart. The next year in a broad honors seminar aimed at promoting undergraduate research, I somehow convinced the incredulous political science professor teaching it that I should complete a project on the medieval family. Among the books I consulted was Pauline Stafford’s *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers: The King’s Wife in the Early Middle Ages*. In addition to being a page-turner (it is remarkably well written), it delighted me that a woman had written such a clever history of powerful women that was also clearly the result of “hard” research. My glee in discovering how very wrong that medieval history professor was about the subjects that interested me was far less significant, however, than the way *QCD* made me realize how crucial it is that historians turn their eyes to matters that play out in the background of our sources.

The best proof of the importance of a historical study is the continuing and new investigations it spurs, not whether everyone readily agrees with its conclusions. Our efforts as historians are best spent in building on Stafford’s work, not only in *QCD* but also in her subsequent publications, while also recognizing the contributions of earlier and contemporary scholars. One of the many reasons *QCD* has had such influence among medieval historians is that it still feels fresh. In fact, when I first considered whether I could write a book about early medieval women, I feared that *QCD* had already covered everything worth discussing. Stafford pointed out, among other matters, the way male-authored sources often obscured the power and actions of women through misogynistic statements, conjecture that was little better than gossip, and emphasis on male concerns and agendas. This last insight aids historians of all subjects. It is always worth looking beyond what any author wanted to convey in order to discover what their asides, negative statements, and supporting details reveal.

QCD remains a wonderful book for teaching. It serves as a model of good historical writing: clear, well argued, and elegant. It has never failed to astonish me that my North American, usually first generation, university students, who typically know almost nothing about early medieval history, are nevertheless consistently able to follow the evidence presented including all the “strange” names and places. Even more remarkable is that *QCD* is one of the few books I can assign that makes my students not only care about what happened in the early Middle Ages but also excited about it. Its methodological lessons are legion: it is among the very best books for teaching students about prosopography and why ancient and medieval historians alike find it useful. The wide range of European women that Stafford examined make *QCD* a convincing, cohesive book. Her later *Queen Emma and Queen Edith: Queenship and Women's Power in Eleventh-Century England*, focused on two queens, provides a methodological counterpoint. My course on medieval women is cross-listed for credit in the Women and Gender Studies program, and even the most modern-focused of my gender studies students see much to admire in *QCD*, often noticing the book's second-wave feminism worn lightly. History and WGS students both take pleasure in the same things that made the book exciting for me as a student: Stafford's ability to make early medieval women fascinating and yet relevant to persisting questions regarding women. Why do women suffer blame for matters men do not? Why does having children (or not having them) so strongly influence the perception of women? Why is it so hard for some to accept a woman's leadership, power, or strength? For a book to continue to provoke such conversations decades after it was written is a testament to the research that underpinned its arguments and to the compelling way that Stafford organized and presented her findings.

In sum, *QCD* remains an influential and provocative book thirty-five years on. I fully expect the conversations which Pauline Stafford began for so many of us to continue in decades to come. I am delighted to draw attention to how very contemporary this book remains, with lessons not only for the historical record but also for the present day, as we confront our own world's public discourse—one that remains full of male-centered concerns, gossip, lies, and misinformation.