

It can be difficult to study medieval women, even royal ones. As Stafford laid out on the very first page of *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers*: “Women have usually stood half hidden in the wings of the historical pageant. This is true of all periods, but is an acute problem in the early Middle Ages.” Perhaps the single most valuable contribution of this seminal book is the way Stafford demonstrates how to get the most possible mileage out of our scant, confusing, biased, and sometimes downright misleading sources, lessons that can be applied whether studying gender or any other medieval topic. It was from this book that I first really learned how to take proper account of bias, how to argue from analogy when the direct sources failed me, how to read taking full account of the societal context of the source—and how not to speculate too far. Throughout my career, I have repeatedly used her approach as a model of how to “do” medieval history, both in my own writing and when teaching students. Thirty-five years after its first publication, *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers* remains as valuable as ever.

Pauline Stafford, *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers*

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IN HIS 1991 BOOK *Germany in the Early Middle Ages*, Tim Reuter remarks that everyone who works on that subject “has had the experience of working through the literature on a topic and arriving at a conclusion, only to find that it had already been formulated more than 100 years ago in a crisp aside by Georg Waitz.”¹⁶ Those who work on early medieval queenship will all have had much the same experience with the oeuvre of Pauline Stafford. Of course, with *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers* we are dealing with a book that was first published in the 1980s, rather than Waitz’s 1880s, and that in itself is telling—it is easy to forget how little, comparatively, was written on this subject before *QCD*. Flicking through the bibliography shows how shallow the roots of the subject were. Beyond some important articles from the 1970s by Janet L. Nelson, Jo Ann McNamara, Suzanne Wemple, Karl Leyser, and others, one would have

¹⁶ Timothy Reuter, *Germany in the Early Middle Ages, c. 800–1056* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2014), xi.

had to turn to the classic studies of Georges Duby, Siegmund Hellmann, and Marion Facingier, and after that some early twentieth century German Ph.D.s. A long way better than nothing—but it certainly shows that very few people had taken early medieval queenship as a topic for sustained study before around 1980. It is very telling, in fact, that the two authors with the most items in the bibliography are Jack Goody, an anthropologist, and Pauline Stafford herself. To have written this book at the time it was written, and to have given due attention to all parts of Europe (Italy as much as England), cannot have been straightforward.

The structure of the book, built around the life-cycle, was also very significant, and forces us to consider the best way to write about queens and queenship in this period. Stafford wrote in 1989 of a “need to establish a comparative framework of female political action, and of the presentation of that action, which cannot mean simply slotting them into the history of kings.”¹⁷

There are actually pretty well-established ways to write about kings, but lots of different ways to write about queens. The most obvious example here is biography, which is a realistic possibility for many early medieval kings but considerably more difficult for individual queens. Where “kingship” has obvious connotations of military leadership, legislative activity, and family management, “queenship” tends to flit around the edges of these categories and themes rather than taking center-stage. This is, of course, a matter of the different sources for each, which require different approaches. On its own methodology, *QCD* is notably unprepossessing—in the introduction (xii), Stafford just says “I have chosen to present these queens through the stages of their lives, not simply dynasty by dynasty.” But one could equally read the structure as an argument about how best to write the history of queens and queenship in this period—via group biography. Some readers appreciated the value of this (e.g., Ian Wood’s review called it “one of the best available dissections of the political structure of the Dark Ages”); but others took exception (Wemple—“could it not be explained country by country?”); while Richard Sullivan’s bibliographical survey of the Carolingians from the 1989 issue of *Speculum* was not alone in hiding the book in a footnote on “women, sexuality and marriage.”¹⁸

¹⁷ Pauline Stafford, “Review of *Marguerite de Provence: Une reine au temps des cathédrales*, by Gerard Sivery,” *American Historical Review* 94, no. 4 (1989): 1080–81, at 1081.

¹⁸ Ian Wood, *History* 69, no. 227 (1984): 450–51, at 451; Suzanne Wemple, *Ameri-*

These considerations are really expressions of the old problem of how historical analysis should integrate structure on the one hand and individual agency on the other. This is a particularly clear issue when writing about queens, whose position at the intersection of gender and action is an obvious point of analysis. *QCD*'s group biographical/structural approach implicitly offers one answer to that question—and also means it can be read fruitfully as a work of comparative history. Others have taken different approaches, with different results—for instance Martina Hartmann's chronological book on early medieval queens from 2009; or Amalie Foessel's thematic study from 2000.¹⁹ There is of course no simple solution to the structure/agency problem—though for my money, Stafford's 1997 book on Queens Emma and Edith comes close via its meticulous contextualization of the broader issues first raised in *QCD*. This line of thinking is not purely abstract because the way we organize our arguments affects the type of history we end up writing.

Finally, a rereading of the book in 2019 also prompts some thoughts about periodization. Originally, Stafford in *QCD* argued for seeing a restriction in queens' power and status starting in the eleventh century, as an extension of changes in family structure. In the 1998 edition she recanted, partly because of doubts about the *mutation familiale* and partly because of doubts about whether the status of queens was linked to the status of women more generally. These reservations are valid—and the matter of how much the queenly experience tells us about women's experience more generally is one that probably needs to be addressed more directly.

One could still hypothesize a restrictive shift beginning in the eleventh century, prompted by the gendered political ideologies surrounding church "reform," rather than autonomous social change. But the question of how we describe change over time is a difficult one for historians of early medieval queenship. Focusing directly on ideologies of gender is undeniably important but tends to reveal stability and similarity. Focusing on individual careers, on the other hand, reveals circumstance, change, and difference. Even if ideas about gender did shift in the eleventh century (or

can Historical Review 89, no. 1 (1984): 106–7, at 107; Richard E. Sullivan, "The Carolingian Age: Reflections on Its Place in the History of the Middle Ages," *Speculum* 64, no. 2 (1989): 267–306, at 301.

¹⁹ Martina Hartmann, *Die Königin im frühen Mittelalter* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2009); Amalie Foessel, *Die Königin im mittelalterlichen Reich: Herrschaftsausübung, Herrschaftsrechte, Handlungsspielräume* (Stuttgart: Thorbecke, 2000).

the ninth, or the seventh), we can always find powerful queens. The relationship between power and gender is obviously complex—gender ideas do not simply determine the roles of royal women. The basic ideologies of gender in the early Middle Ages were generally very stable in principle but varied in application, and were expressed very differently according to the pressure of circumstance.

And actually, to stay with the eleventh century, and thinking about Jo Ann McNamara's *Herrenfrage*, or Megan McLaughlin on the rhetoric of gender during the reforms, a lot of the eleventh-century gender debate starts from masculinity, rather than from the roles of women.²⁰ As a final speculation: if changes in queenly status were not correlated with changes in the status of women more generally, should we instead be looking more carefully for correlations with shifts in the discourses of masculinity? Stafford's own 1999 article on Ælfthryth and the reforming churchmen offers a strong pointer in this direction.²¹

Thinking about structure and periodization, as Pauline Stafford did in *QCD*, and in her work on Anglo-Saxon England and the Norman Conquest, therefore really throws a spotlight onto larger questions about gender, power, and the writing of history. There obviously remains much still to be done. The fact that this remains true thirty-five years after the writing of the field's main synthesis shows how a book can open new doors and in a sense be definitive at the same time.

²⁰ Jo Ann McNamara, "The *Herrenfrage*: The Restructuring of the Gender System, 1050–1150," in *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, ed. Clare A. Lees, Thelma Fenster, and Jo Ann McNamara (St. Paul: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 3–30; Megan McLaughlin, *Sex, Gender and Episcopal Authority in an Age of Reform, 1000–1122* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

²¹ Pauline A. Stafford, "Queens, Nunneries and Reforming Churchmen: Gender, Religious Status and Reform in Tenth and Eleventh-Century England," *Past and Present* 163 (1999): 3–35.