

An Expelled Princess, a Slandered Empress, and an Abandoned Wife

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WHEN I FINALLY CAME to study early medieval royal women, Pauline Stafford's ground-breaking *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers* was a standard in the field. The monograph was published twenty years before I entered graduate school and nearly thirty years before my research turned to Carolingian royal women. In 2010, by the time I devoured her book, I had the luxury of not needing to question whether royal women were worthy of historical study. But, of course, this starting assumption depended on Stafford's monograph. Whether or not I fully realized it then, my decision to embark upon a project on women and family at the Carolingian court had been made possible by Stafford's convincing argument that the inclusion of royal women was necessary to write comprehensive histories.

By painting a portrait of the early medieval queen, Stafford helped royal women forcefully emerge from Carolingian texts. Consequently I recognized the previously unnoticed importance of women and marriage in Nithard's *Histories*.³⁰ Appreciating the central role that Bertha, the daughter of Charlemagne and mother of Nithard, played in Nithard's text, I was forced to consider the woman on her own terms. Soon I embarked on the task of crafting a book-length biographical portrait of Bertha.³¹ Confronted by the same source issues that challenged Stafford, I was simultaneously encouraged by her monograph and inspired by *QCD*'s life-cycle organization and the accessible style she adopted.

Although my research benefited from every chapter in Stafford's *QCD*, the second, "Bride to Be," received the lion(ess)'s share of my attention. Particularly important was Stafford's discussion of the betrothals and marriages of Charlemagne's children. She explored the many broken engagements of Charlemagne's offspring to foreign spouses and argued that he (and his son) sought to control their children's marriages (35–36, 47–48). Stafford pointed to Bertha, if not by name, when mentioning that

³⁰ Dana M. Polanichka and Alex Cilley, "The Very Personal History of Nithard: Family and Honour in the Carolingian World," *Early Medieval Europe* 22, no. 2 (2014): 171–200.

³¹ Dana M. Polanichka, *Footprints in the Snow: The Forgotten Life of Bertha, Daughter of Charlemagne* (in progress).

Charlemagne ended negotiations with King Offa of Mercia after the latter “presumptuously demanded one of Charlemagne’s daughters for his own son” (47). Neither Bertha nor her sisters married, ultimately leading to their expulsion from the palace in 814 by their own brother—and piquing my curiosity about Bertha’s life and legacy.

Stafford’s references reveal the state of historiography at that time: although many examples in this chapter often came from Charlemagne’s family, she could only cite the work of two scholars on the topic.³² By the time my interest turned to Bertha, there were dozens more books and articles that explicitly or implicitly owed their existence to her monograph.³³ For example, Stafford’s discussion of the failed betrothals of Charlemagne’s daughters found elaboration in Janet Nelson’s 1993 article exploring those princesses’ power—which then sparked Anton Scharer’s 2009 consideration of just *why* Charlemagne might not have wanted his daughters to marry.³⁴ Meanwhile, Rudolf Schieffer and Sylvie Joye have explored questions about royal marriages in the time of Charlemagne and his son and grandsons.³⁵

Indeed, Stafford’s exploration of the “Bride to Be” offered fellow Carolingian scholars so many threads to pick up and from which to weave

³² On pages 201–2, she cites Siegmund Hellmann, “Die Heiraten der Karolinger,” in *Ausgewählte Abhandlungen zur Historiographie und Geistesgeschichte des Mittelalters*, ed. Helmut Beumann (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1961), 293–391; Konecny, *Die Frauen des karolingischen Königshauses*.

³³ Of particular note is the work of Janet L. Nelson. In 1983, Stafford could only cite two of Nelson’s articles: “Inauguration Rituals,” in *Early Medieval Kingship*, ed. P. H. Sawyer and I. N. Wood (Leeds: University of Leeds, 1977), 50–71; and “Queens as Jezebels.” Also notable is Régine Le Jan, including her *Famille et pouvoir dans le monde franc (VI^e–X^e siècle)* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1995) and her *Femmes, pouvoir et société dans le haut Moyen Âge* (Paris: Picard, 2001). See also below.

³⁴ Janet L. Nelson, “Women at the Court of Charlemagne: A Case of Monstrous Regiment?” in *Medieval Queenship*, ed. John Carmi Parson (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1993), 223–42; Anton Scharer, “Charlemagne’s Daughters,” in *Early Medieval Studies in Memory of Patrick Wormald*, ed. Stephen Baxter, Catherine Karkov, Janet L. Nelson, and David Pelteret (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), 269–82.

³⁵ Rudolf Schieffer, “Karolingische Töchter,” in *Herrschaft, Kirche, Kultur: Beiträge zur Geschichte des Mittelalters: Festschrift für Friedrich Prinz zu seinem 65. Geburtstag* (Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann, 1993), 125–39; Sylvie Joye, “Carolingian Rulers and Marriage in the Age of Louis the Pious and His Sons,” in *Gender and Historiography: Studies in the Earlier Middle Ages in Honour of Pauline Stafford*, ed. Janet L. Nelson, Susan Reynolds, and Susan M. Johns (London: Institute of Historical Research, 2012), 101–14.

new scholarly tapestries. Two decades after Stafford tantalized readers with the ninth-century claim that Louis the Pious had selected his wife Judith from a bride show, Mayke de Jong devoted an essay to the likelihood of such a Carolingian adoption of a Byzantine custom.³⁶ Stafford's full monograph, following the life-cycle of the queen, also influenced other studies of the empress's life, because it "made it possible to place Judith's career in a wider context of ... the political activities of early medieval Frankish queens."³⁷

Stafford had firmly established the study of early medieval royal women, convincing the scholarly world that queens and concubines and dowagers mattered. So too did her work have the effect of demonstrating that other early medieval wives and widows, daughters, and mothers deserved our attention. *QCD* encouraged us to think about all the women who populated the early medieval world and exerted influence on it.³⁸ More recently, I have found myself considering the place, power, and life-cycle of a mid-ninth-century aristocratic woman named Dhuoda.³⁹ This wife and mother was deeply influenced by, and herself sought to influence, the political turmoil of the 830s to 840s: after all, the rumors of sexual infidelity against Empress Judith involved none other than Dhuoda's husband whose own (military) infidelities would eventually lead him to abandon his wife in Uzès and separate her from their sons.

And then there are the ways in which Stafford's *QCD* has more broadly affected me professionally. Soon after I arrived at Wheaton

³⁶ Mayke de Jong, "Bride Shows Revisited: Praise, Slander and Exegesis in the Reign of the Empress Judith," *Gender in the Early Medieval World: East and West, 600–900*, ed. Leslie Brubaker and Julia M. H. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 570–618.

³⁷ Elizabeth Ward, "Caesar's Wife: The Career of the Empress Judith, 819–29," in *Charlemagne's Heir: New Perspectives on the Reign of Louis the Pious (814–40)*, ed. Peter Godman and Roger Collins (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 205–27, at 206.

³⁸ Valerie L. Garver, *Women and Aristocratic Culture in the Carolingian World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), cites Stafford's *QCD* on the fourth page of her introduction as an example of a scholar of the early medieval world finding "innovative ways to tap into the lives of women."

³⁹ Dana M. Polanichka, "Book as Body: Maternity and Spiritual Progression in Dhuoda's *Liber manualis* (840s)," *Mediaevalia* 41 (forthcoming); "Quasi per speculum: Mirror-Imagery, Vision, and Vigilance in Dhuoda's *Liber manualis*," *Journal of Medieval History* 46, no. 1 (2020): 1–22; and "'From under the Table of God': Dhuoda and the Mid-Ninth-Century Carolingian Church" (in progress).

College, Massachusetts, multiple forces—the institution’s legacy as a women’s college, my colleagues’ commitment to studying women, and the college’s support for collaborative research with undergraduates—converged to reignite my long-term, if latent, interest in gender. With Wheaton’s support, I invited students to join me on my new project on Carolingian women.

Stafford’s *QCD* was one of the first pieces of scholarship I read with my students. More than intellectually and methodically important, the book was a true pleasure to read—accessibly written and full of riveting narratives. Experiencing the monograph with my students left me much more aware of how I present my research and created in me the desire to write in accessible ways so as not only to uncover the lives of early medieval women, but also to share those lives with the widest audience possible.

Stafford’s monograph has helped me, too, to create a lively community of undergraduates, nearly all women, eager to shed light on the lives of early medieval women.⁴⁰ *QCD* captivated my research team members, who are now just as passionate as I am about all the ways in which Bertha, Judith, and Dhuoda were subject to the “malicious gossip, political propaganda, deliberate suppression of facts, inadequate knowledge, blatant antifeminism, even simple lies” that Stafford had noted (3). Although the field of scholarship is no longer the same thirty-five years later, the world seems all too similar for my students. Indeed, they draw parallels not only between 1983 and now, but even across the twelve hundred years since the new emperor Louis the Pious banished his sister Bertha from court as a whore and since enemies of that emperor later accused Judith of infidelity and witchcraft. In the midst of the #MeToo movement, abundant fake news, and growing concerns about social media and (cyber-)bullying, is it any wonder that Stafford’s illumination of these important, but often forgotten, women resonates so strongly with 18–22-year-old female students? Pauline Stafford, by uncovering and giving voice to early medieval women, has helped younger generations—whether a professor like me or students half the age of *QCD* itself—find their own (historiographical) voices. For that and so much else, I am grateful to be part of the tremendous audience that Stafford’s work has impacted.

⁴⁰ I am grateful to the members of my research team over the last decade: Alex Cilley, Amy Cummings, Jane Cummings, Eben Diskin, Briana Gausland, Kate Humphrey, Carly Lewis, Elena Malkov, Allison Meyette, Jackie Michalowicz, Natalie Reynoso, Casey Smith, and Christine Sobieck.