

MARGARET OF ANJOU: Queenship and Power in Late Medieval England. Helen E. Maurer. 2003. The Boydell Press, Woodbridge. £25.

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A new study of the queenship of Margaret of Anjou is to be welcomed. The last serious life of this misunderstood and much maligned queen was published in 1948 by J.J. Bagley based on earlier studies and using a wide range of English and French chronicle accounts and histories as well as a collection of her letters edited by Cecil Monro, published by the Camden Society in 1863. What was surprising about Bagley's biography was his judgement of Margaret's character: she was courageous but impetuous, intelligent but inexperienced, susceptible to flattery and incapable of being passive. He used her letters as evidence of 'her officious and interfering personality' without due consideration of contemporary expectations of queenship and without comparison with the actions of other medieval queens. Bagley's portrait of Margaret of Anjou as a strong, arrogant, power-seeking queen who abused her position of authority to promote her own interests and ultimately to bring about civil war, can be traced back to Shakespeare's powerful image presented in his *History Plays*. It is the product of hostile politically-prejudiced sources written by Margaret's enemies, the Yorkists. Margaret's reputation has suffered because she failed to hold onto power and became the victim of one of the most effective propaganda campaigns in English history, which placed her at the centre of events and presented her as a totally malign force in politics.

A re-assessment of the role of Margaret of Anjou as queen is long overdue. Maurer examines Margaret's queenship in the context of contemporary attitudes towards women in positions of authority. She recognises that queens were placed in exceptional positions compared with other women, but were expected to assert their power only in very clearly defined and limited ways, as intercessors, mediators and peacemakers. This aspect of medieval queenship has been fully explored by a number of historians in recent years, notably by J.C. Parsons and Paul Strohm. Maurer rightly judges Margaret's queenship to be unique because of the particular circumstances of her birth, childhood and marriage to a king who lost his senses in 1453, rendering him incapable of government. Far from regarding Margaret as a power-seeker and an instigator of conflict, Maurer argues that she was restrained and sought to keep the peace for as long as possible in the hope that the king would recover. Margaret recognised the vulnerability of her position and was loath to act in any way that would jeopardise it. She was not hell-bent on destroying her political rival Richard, Duke of York and tried to mediate with her enemies until as late as 1460. The queen's attitude towards the 'Loveday' of 1458 is reconsidered by Maurer who argues that Margaret had more to gain from a peaceful settlement with the Yorkists than from antagonism. She casts Margaret in the traditional role of intercessor on this occasion, although she does admit that the queen remains invisible and unrecorded because she had no accepted political role to play. Contrary to the traditional view of Margaret of Anjou, Maurer believes that she adhered to contemporary notions of queenship for as long as possible, ultimately being forced by circumstance to involve herself in politics.

The main problem confronting any historian seeking to find the real person hidden behind layers of Yorkist and Tudor propaganda, is the paucity of personal material for the woman herself. Maurer has used what little material there is to good effect. The most promising source of information for Margaret's personality are her eighty-two surviving letters written between 1445 and 1455, seventy-four of which were published in 1863. Maurer regards the collection as representative of her interests and actions as queen especially in her role as an intermediary and in the exercise of her 'good ladyship'. The letters are a useful source of information on female networking as Margaret attempted to obtain favours for members of her household and other petitioners but they also reveal that the queen was limited in what she might achieve in her own name and could only act through her husband.

Part IV of the book entitled 'Queen's Rule?' explores the ways in which Margaret attempted to extend her influence in the period 1456 to 1461 both formally, through the institutions of governance, and informally, by mediation and intercession. This is a crucial period of Henry VI's reign when the king fell increasingly under the influence of his wife who attempted to retain control of government until their son Prince Edward reached adulthood, resisting attempts to establish an alternative form of government by a council of noblemen led by York. In his study of Henry VI, *Henry VI and the Politics of Kingship* (Cambridge, 1996), John Watts pointed out how difficult it is to know where the source of authority lay at this time because of the collapse of central government record-keeping after the removal of the centre of political power from Westminster to Coventry in 1456. Watts places the queen at the centre of events as she sought to establish a regional power-base in the name of her son, promoting those noblemen closest

to her to positions of authority, including William Booth, Archbishop of York, his half-brother Laurence Booth, Bishop of Durham, John Talbot, Earl of Shrewsbury and James Butler, Earl of Wiltshire. Maurer does not examine Margaret's relations with this important group of Lancastrian noblemen in any depth although she does consider the ways in which the queen used her authority to arrange marriages as a means of consolidating her power. She also investigates Margaret's manipulation of her image on public and ceremonial occasions such as at the reception given to her by the city of Coventry in September 1456. She sees this occasion as 'highly gendered', the queen being presented conventionally as a virtuous wife and mother in need of protection. This is in contrast to the next occasion when she was escorted from the city in March 1457 'in the same manner as the king at his departures.' This can be used as evidence to show that the queen had assumed royal power in place of her ineffective husband.

Maurer's book provides us with a much more sympathetic assessment of Margaret of Anjou's queenship compared with previous studies, setting her actions into context in order to explain why her efforts to hold onto royal power met with such hostility. She does not fall into the trap of assigning to Margaret feelings and emotions based on assumption and imagination. It is a pity that the book ends so abruptly in 1461 and does not continue Margaret's story to 1471 which marked the end of Lancastrian kingship with the deaths of both her husband and her son. Many questions about this intriguing woman remain unanswered leaving scope for further investigation and re-evaluation.

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