The reputations of medieval queens have suffered particularly badly at the hands of successive generations of mainly male historians who have uncritically accepted past judgements heavily influenced by political propaganda and gender stereotyping. It could be argued that the four queens of later fifteenth-century England, Margaret of Anjou, Elizabeth Woodville, Anne Neville and Elizabeth of York, have suffered more than others in the hands of their detractors as a result of the frequent changes of political regime in the period. Historians need to peel away the layers of slander and prejudice which have built up over the past five hundred years in order to attempt to penetrate the true characters of the individual queens whose personal and political circumstances were all quite different.

This book is the product of a relatively new approach to the study of medieval history which has grown out of the interdisciplinary Centre for Medieval Studies at the University of York. The part played by queens in medieval government and society is difficult to ascertain from traditional historical sources such as chronicles, narrative accounts, and the records of central government and parliament because the king's wife had no recognised place in the formal structures of government and administration. By widening the selection of source material to include literary texts such as romances, verses composed for state occasions, conduct books and letters, as well as visual images in manuscript illuminations, stained glass and altarpieces, the ideology and practice of queenship becomes clearer. The richness of these sources is explored fully in this book to demonstrate the function of medieval queens, most clearly visible at important symbolic moments such as coronations, crown-wearings, state-entries and funerals. Such occasions presented opportunities for the promotion of certain queenly attributes that were used to affirm the king's majesty with the important supporting female element in kingship associated with chaste motherhood, healing and peacemaking powers, and piety.

Laynesmith argues that English queens in the second half of the fifteenth century had a particularly important role to play in the legitimisation of kingship. This was a period of exceptional political instability when the authority of kings was repeatedly challenged and weakened by changes of dynasty. Expectations were high when Margaret of Anjou arrived in England in 1445 as queen consort to Henry VI, bringing to an end a long period without a female presence at the head of the English court. Laynesmith emphasises the importance of this moment which marked Henry VI's entry into mature kingship and the re-establishment of the court as a focus of both kingly and queenly activity. Because of the king's physical and mental collapse in 1453, Margaret was placed in an exceptional position at the centre of the court and royal household. The political implications of this unique position cannot be fully explored, because of the inadequacies of the sources, except for rare occasions such as the reception given to Margaret and her young son in 1456 by the mayor and citizens of Coventry in a manner usually reserved for kings. Laynesmith argues that this was 'probably intended to represent a conceptual shift in which sovereignty was understood to focus not simply upon the person of the king but on the royal family as a whole, with Margaret as the only adult capable of exercising it'. However this concept was too radical for the English nobility and Margaret's inability to persuade them to accept her bid for the regency had dire political consequences, resulting in civil war, and the ultimate destruction of the Lancastrian monarchy. These events reinforce the point that queens were generally powerless to intervene directly in politics and if they did their reputations were inevitably tarnished unless they happened to end up on the winning side. This is most clearly illustrated by the example of Lady Margaret Beaufort, mother of Henry Tudor, one of the most politically active noblewomen of the period, who, in contrast to the vilified Margaret of Anjou, is remembered as a pious, educated, courageous, steadfast and shrewd woman, and above all as a survivor in a dangerous age.

Edward IV's choice of Elizabeth Woodville as his queen has been regarded by many historians as his biggest mistake because she failed to conform to contemporary expectations of queenship. Laynesmith goes even further, suggesting that Edward's choice of queen and the manner in which he made it was revolutionary, setting a precedent for later kings to follow. She suggests that Edward's actions had some influence on Henry VIII's behaviour towards his queens, but to blame Edward IV for 'opening the way for a stunning series of divorces and judicial murders of queens' by his grandson is taking the claim too far. The key point is that both monarchs married for love rather than selecting their marriage partners for diplomatic or territorial reasons. Did this represent a conscious rejection of traditional queenship as exercised in medieval Europe? Or was it rather a particular response to the unique political circumstances in which later fifteenth-century kings were operating?
Inevitably questions are raised here about the reputation of Elizabeth Woodville and the role of her family in Yorkist politics, a subject which has exercised fifteenth-century historians for the past forty years. Elizabeth has been regarded as both an evil, grasping schemer who promoted the interests of her family at every opportunity and as a tragic victim, whose sons were forcibly removed from her care and ultimately murdered. Laynesmith agrees with recent critics of Mancini’s account of the events immediately following Edward IV’s death in 1483 which led to Richard, Duke of Gloucester’s usurpation in response to fear of the ambitions of the Woodville family including the queen who allegedly sought to deprive him of power. As both Horrox and Pollard have asserted, there is no evidence of enmity between Gloucester and the Woodvilles prior to 1483, nor can Elizabeth be blamed for Gloucester’s actions. Laynesmith provides a much more sympathetic view of Elizabeth describing her behaviour in 1483 as ‘moderate and sensitive’. Like her predecessor, Margaret of Anjou, when faced with a threat to her position as mother of the heir to the throne, her actions were determined by the desire to protect her children.

This analysis of the ideology and practice of queenship in later fifteenth-century England should inform all future studies of individual queens of the period. Laynesmith provides evidence of the importance of the role of the queen to the exercise of sovereignty in her capacity of wife, mother and joint presider over the royal court. By the sensitive use of sources often neglected by more traditional historians, Laynesmith succeeds in deepening our understanding of the role and powers of queens in the context of late medieval English monarchy.

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