



*Queenship at the Renaissance
Courts of Britain: Catherine of
Aragon and Margaret Tudor, 1503-
1533*

Michelle L. Beer

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Much ink has been spilled in service of Henry VIII and his veritable parade of wives, but not nearly as much has been spent to examine the choices and experiences of those queens and the influence they held over his court. Queens consort in early modern Britain were the most public of housewives, their domestic skills and marriages on constant display for their subjects and contemporaries to see and judge. To navigate the fraught political realities associated with being married to a sovereign, queens needed to quickly learn how to network and did so through various means, not the least of which was knowing how to throw a good party. As ‘chief hostesses’ of the realm, Catherine of Aragon and Margaret Tudor did not participate in these spectacles as performers like their later successors did, but the importance of their roles as facilitators cannot be overstated. Through their efforts, they effected diplomatic policies and enabled their sovereign husbands in political endeavours.

Catherine of Aragon and Margaret Tudor, as queens consort of England and Scotland respectively, wielded considerable influence over king and court through their participation in the distribution of patronage, court life, and public spectacle. In *Queenship at the Renaissance Courts of Britain*, Michelle L. Beer harnesses considerable archival research and engagement with secondary literature to argue that both of these queens “adapted the court culture of England and Scotland to create and enhance their queenly identities,” with the result that Catherine and Margaret worked as royal partners to Henry VIII and James IV respectively (2). Beer is absolutely correct when she asserts that finding queens in the archives is a difficult task, because while their lives and experiences were documented more than most women, their records were more likely to be mixed in with those of their husbands. However, Beer does an admirable job in parsing Catherine and Margaret’s experiences from the scant historical record.

Beer begins her text with brief biographical information for both women, before moving on to her first chapter regarding the queenship of Elizabeth of York, consort of Henry VII. Elizabeth, as mother to Margaret and mother-in-law to Catherine, was the only queen consort that both younger women had the opportunity to observe in her role as royal help-meet to the king. The first Tudor queen, as Beer reminds her readers, was significantly involved in diplomatic matters, especially concerning the marriages of her eldest son Arthur and her eldest daughter Margaret. She also was involved in organizing and directing entertainments and pageantry at the

English court, a role that Catherine and Margaret would take on themselves at their own respective courts.

From there, Beer moves on to a delightful chapter on material culture and its correlation with projecting the image of a queen, particularly a queen's sartorial prowess. Beer explores the creation of a queenly identity "not only through her actions, but through her appearance, dress and company as well" (45). While analyzing the importance of a queen's wardrobe and other belongings, Beer contextualizes these women within their lived realities, which included pregnancy and childbirth, events of diplomatic pageantry such as The Field of the Cloth of Gold, and the giving and receiving of gifts.

One of the most important roles a queen consort could play was to facilitate connections between a king and his nobility at home or a king and other powers abroad, and she could only do so effectively if she had a good working relationship with the king himself. In her next series of chapters, Beer explores Catherine and Margaret's relationships with Henry and James, examining how each queen created opportunities for her king to practice largesse and to distribute patronage. Beer continues with a chapter exploring Catherine and Margaret's involvement in a public practice of "pre-Reformation piety" and how, through their performance of rituals and rites such as the Maundy or churching after childbirth, they associated themselves with a divinely sacred monarchy.

Queenship at the Renaissance Courts of Britain is an excellent addition to court, royal, and queenship studies, building on the work of Joanna Laynesmith (*The Last Medieval Queens*, 2004) to present late medieval and renaissance queens as more than royal baby-makers. They were, as Beer reminds her readers, royal partners to their sovereign husbands. Beer uses this language of partnership effectively throughout her book, demonstrating how Catherine and Margaret were able to take on responsibilities or tasks that were denied to their royal husbands because of their gender. An example of this would be intercession, such as the one it is said Catherine performed, begging Henry for the lives of xenophobic apprentices in the Evil May Day riots of 1517. This idea of a consort as a royal partner is simple and elegant, and it ties together the whole of Beer's work. Queens consort were able to exert authority and power in courts and kingdoms because they worked with the sovereign, sometimes in tandem, sometimes apart.

Beer concludes her work with an exploration of each woman's experiences as regent. 1513 was a monumental year for both queens, as Catherine directed her English army to victory over the invading Scottish forces at Flodden, where Margaret's husband met his end. Here, again, Beer brings together all of the threads she has introduced, speaking of queens consort as "heads of households, patrons, hostesses, audiences, pilgrims and

gift givers” (154), arguing again that these queens’ lived realities, experiences, and actions should be analysed in their proper context. This includes Catherine and Henry’s marriage, which comprised a long and successful partnership many years before Anne Boleyn entered the picture. “Catherine’s and Margaret’s reigns show that for pre-modern dynasties to survive and the power of the monarchy to continue,” Beer concludes, “monarchs needed their queens to be more than royal baby-makers. Queens were necessary public partners without whom few kings could succeed” (157).

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