

# Wives, regents, independent rulers

## FASCINATING STORIES OF (NOT ONLY) MEDIEVAL QUEENS

What role did queens play in the times when the throne was reserved mainly for men? Was the queen only a symbolic figure at her husband's side? Doctor Ellie Woodacre from the University of Winchester, a world-renowned expert in the history of monarchy and women of power, who will be teaching classes at the University of Gdańsk under "UG Visiting Professors" programme, finds the answers to these questions. Her first lecture "Queens as Co-rulers: Examining Power Sharing and Ruling Partnership in the Premodern World", which was held at the Faculty of History on the 8<sup>th</sup> of April this year, presented queens as active co-rulers and explained the mechanisms of shared power in pre-modern Europe. Doctor Aleksandra Girsztowt-Biskup, who is passionate about social history and takes care of Dr Woodacre's stay at UG, supports the British scholar in her mission of presenting the new perspective on the British history

► **What prompted you to start doing research on the lives and activities of past queens?**

As a child I got interested in queens through the life of Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt. I was fascinated by her and I read a lot about her. When I grew up, I became familiar with the biographies of Eleanor of Aquitaine and

Blanche of Castile, and I became interested in the lives of medieval female rulers. However, it was not until I was studying for my Master's Degree and researching the succession of women in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and how they ascended to the throne at the time that I really began to take an interest in this aspect of their lives. I found it curious how a women



Doctor Ellie Woodacre

Photo by Dariusz Sobczuk

could assume power within the patriarchal political framework. This has finally led me to study the mechanisms that I specialise in until today.

**► You have become a leading voice in the study of royal dynasties and have helped to develop this field in new directions through your contribution and initiatives. What have been the greatest challenges in this area?**

It has been fantastic to observe the development of Royal Studies, a field that focuses on all things and issues that concern kings, queens, monarchies, in a word, everything that is royal. This great growth has been continu-

ing since I established the Royal Studies Network, a global scholarly network aiming to provide educational resources, scientific contacts and most recent knowledge on this very subject<sup>1</sup>, and organised – with the help of this institution – the first conference “Kings and Queens” in 2012. I think that one of the greatest challenges we faced was, first and foremost, establishing the field and recognising it as legitimate area of academic research. We managed to achieve that so the next challenge we face is the development of the field. I believe, and it is of utmost importance to me, that we have to adopt a global perspective in royal studies, as so far they have tended to focus on Europe. Moreover, I want this field

to be more inclusive towards related scientific domains like art history, literary studies and archaeology. I think that the more perspectives we bring to it, the richer it becomes.

**► I can imagine how fascinating it is to study this field and do research in it. I would feel like I was travelling through time. If you were really able to make such a journey, whose court – which queen or princess – would you like to live at and why?**

This is an almost impossible choice. I would like to visit far too many courts and meet some of the women, whose stories I have been studying for years...

Maybe, if I really had to choose, I would visit Olite, the beautiful palace in Navarre. For quite some time, I have been researching the rulers of Navarre, including the women from their dynasty, so they have a special place in my heart. So, yes... a visit to the Navarre court in 15<sup>th</sup> century Olite would be my first choice. But certainly not the last *[laughs]*.

► **Meanwhile, you have come to Poland, where, on the 8<sup>th</sup> of April, you gave a lecture as a visiting professor at the University of Gdańsk. It focused on Joan of Navarre, Queen of England and wife of Henry IV, one of the lesser-known royal figures. The audience learned about her fascinating life and the financial and territorial resources she managed. You also wrote her biography titled *Joan of Navarre: Infanta, Duchess, Queen, Witch?* What inspires you the most about the story of that woman?**

I started looking into Joan of Navarre thanks to the fact that I was researching the whole dynasty of the former kingdom of Navarre while doing research for my doctoral dissertation. The more I learned about her, the more convinced I was that her story was really worth telling. Joan of Navarre was Duchess of Brittany and Queen of England, and her life was full of political intrigues and dramatic twists. She was accused of treason (some say witchcraft) and spent several years in prison to later regain her position and privileges at the English court. Her biography is a testimony to her determination, political shrewdness and struggle for her rights in 15<sup>th</sup>-century Europe. She has been overlooked by many

historians, yet her life was not only interesting, but also crucial to understanding the complex politics of the time. I felt I was, in a way, an ambassador for her history. She was one of many female rulers who had fascinating life stories, and yet history has been silent about her. We tend to focus mainly on famous women, such as Anne Boleyn, Elizabeth I, or Bona Sforza in Poland. However, this often means that we overlook the stories of many women whose lives are equally exciting.

► **I, for one, would like to learn more about the history of the Polish queen, Elizabeth of Bosnia, wife of Louis the Hungarian and mother of Queen Jadwiga of Poland. I am under the impression that we still know too little about our Polish queens, or we only focus on the most basic facts. We have a beautiful woman here, a successful marriage, but also the queen's secondary role, the conflict with her mother-in-law or the lack of an heir. Is not this some great material for a book? How can we continue to uncover forgotten or hidden stories of women?**

That is a really good question! I am part of a collective known as the New Historia, based at the New School in New York, which is led by Professor Gina Luria Walker. The mission is to uncover hidden biographies of women so as to retrieve their stories out of the darkness of the past and thus encourage more people to learn about their lives. This also leads to an increased research on these women. These short stories are called "schemas". Gina, in turn, often calls it the work of "feminist recovery". Together, we uncover women's hidden stories and

bring them forth to the forefront of academic research so as to "convey" them to the public consciousness.

► **Let me ask you more about the part of this uncovering of women's stories that you enjoy the most. Is it sifting through archives and doing research, writing and shaping stories, or maybe sharing your findings at lectures and events?**

It is a difficult question for me, as I enjoy all these activities as a historian. Working in the archives is fascinating, because the idea that I am touching some 15<sup>th</sup>-century parchment is really something wonderful. I also like the writing process, as it is truly amazing to feel my project taking shape through this journey as a writer. Finally, I really take pleasure in sharing my knowledge and speaking publicly. I am passionate about making scientific research accessible, so I regularly give public speeches for historical societies and groups in England and beyond. I simply like to share my knowledge with anyone who is interested in history and lives of female rulers.

► **When you decide on the scope of your research, do you usually look for unexplored areas, or do your projects naturally stem from previous work?**

My projects have always evolved and one project naturally inspired another. For instance, during my master's research I looked at the medieval queens of Jerusalem, who played an important role in the history of the crusader states. Their lives prompted me to write my doctoral dissertation on a similar group of female rulers, but

in the Kingdom of Navarre. This led me to work more intensely on other women from that dynasty, such as Joan of Navarre, who played an important role in English politics. While working on her, I got more interested in the economic aspect of power in those times. In fact, one project always leads me to another – working on one set of research questions has always opened up new perspectives and suggested new areas for work.

► **You mentioned the economic aspect of power. I would like to ask how the medieval court of a queen was different from the court of a king ruling the same country in a different period. According to your research, did gender have any influence over things like the number of advisors, the structure of the court, security or access to resources?**

As far as the differences between female-ruled and male-ruled monarchies are concerned, for the most part the court looked rather the same. However, there are a few key differences. One of them, which I often discuss with my students, is that the queen's house was a kind of centre of power. It was the female courtiers who had more access to the monarch than the men. Women were given privileged access to the queen in private spaces. This gave them more influence over queen and thus more power. This shifted some of the power at court from men to women. Another difference was war – not all queens joined the battlefield, but not every king did either. The point is that a woman could be just as effective as a commander. She could lead by directing her subjects, generals, many of whom could be her "male favour-

ite". This could be exemplified by Catherine the Great of Russia and Grigory Potemkin.

The Reign of Queen Anne Stuart of England may also be an interesting example of both differences I mentioned: the power of women during the reign of a female monarch and the relationships between queens and generals. Anne's great favourites were Sarah Churchill, Duchess of Marlborough, and Sarah's husband, Duke of Marlborough, who was also Anne's general, and he commanded British armies in the War of the Spanish Succession. Anne rewarded them both by building Blenheim Palace, one of Britain's finest mansions, which remains in the Churchill family's hands to this day.

► **How can your studies change our awareness regarding queens in the Middle Ages?**

The study of the history of monarchy seeks to understand not only the lives of female rulers, but also the ways in which they exercised their power. In terms of most recent research trends, I think it is important to mention two key things. Firstly, there has emerged the theory of corporate monarchy, or the idea that government is collective rather than individual. This really opened up a new perspective on understanding the role that queens played as co-rulers with their husbands, sons, children, advisors. It has shown us the many ways in which they were involved in governing the country. Secondly, there has emerged an initiative to look at the economic side of female monarch's governance. It has helped us to better understand the way in which past queens ruled. The old saying "money is power" is thoroughly

true, so understanding the financial resources available to these women and the ways in which it supported their political agenda and authority has been a key finding of recent years.

► **How did these queens – whether spouses, regents or independent rulers – combine their political roles with their personal roles as wives and mothers?**

In the case of medieval queens, just as in the case of kings, it is impossible to separate their private lives from their political roles, as these two spheres were closely linked. When we expect a queen to be an ideal wife, we should also remember that she is also the wife of a ruler. Being a mother, on the other hand, was also inextricably linked to the hereditary, dynastic nature of monarchy. Motherhood was thus about providing the dynasty with an heir. Therefore, it is impossible to situate queens only in the political sphere, because, as I said, these spheres overlap.

► **What is the most common myth about women in the Middle Ages?**

I think that the most common misconception about women in the Middle Ages is the belief that they were powerless and that there are no sources that we could use to study their lives. I once met a historian that was trying to convince me that there was no data that I could use to study the history of women in the Middle Ages. I was truly amused by this! There are so many fantastic sources we can use to do just that, after all. One example is the recent exhibition "Medieval Women: In Their Own Words",



which focused on the challenges, achievements and everyday lives of women in Europe between 1100 and 1500. It was organized at the British Library in October 2024, and it tells the story of medieval women in their own words through manuscripts, documents and artefacts. This wonderful collection of source texts, accompanied by visual and material culture gathered and selected by scientists, has not only shown the fascinating lives of the women of the time, but it has also displayed the material evidence – the marks that the women left, which, in turn can be studied by scholars like myself. It has also proven that women in the Middle Ages wielded enormous power and had considerable influence. We are not only talking about queens, but also nuns, prioresses, mystics, women merchants, and writers such as Christine de Pizan.

Women made up half of the population in the Middle Ages. Therefore, I think that the more research we devote to them, the better we will understand the period as a whole.

► **We can also read about this in the book *Early English Queens, 850–1000* from the series you co-edit. It is a book about the role of women in the first hundred and fifty years of the West Saxon dynasty.**

It is one of many books that are part of the *Lives of Royal Women* series published by Routledge. I am co-editing the series with Professor Louise Wilkinson of the University of Lincoln. *Lives of Royal Women* contains academic but accessibly written biographies of royal women – wives, widows, royal mothers and rulers – and covers all ages, cultures and

geographical regions. They are studies of the exercise of power by the queen or her equivalent. They show complex monarchical structures, where the term “royal women” includes not only queens. It also covers important concubines, spouses and queen mothers, who were often the most powerful women at court. This was the case with the Ottoman Valide sultans and in certain African monarchies.

As far as the book *Early English Queens, 850–1000* is concerned, it was written by Matthew Firth, who is a fantastic scholar of royal studies. It is a great match for another book: *Early English Queens, 650–850* by Stephanie Wragg. They both give us an insight into the lives of these English queens and the development of the monarchy in the early Middle Ages. I highly recommend them, as well as the other books we have in the *Lives of Royal Women* series.

► **I remember the history of the Mughal Empire in India, which gives a global perspective of the modern period on kings and queens. You wrote about this in your 2018 *Companion to Global Queenship*. Many assume that women in such societies were confined to harems and had little power, but figures such as Nur Jahan, Jahanara Begum and Mariam-uz-Zamani show otherwise.**

Yes, the women of Mughal India are absolutely fascinating and are a really good example of the importance of looking at queenship in a global perspective. Over the last few years, I have devoted a lot of research to the global aspect of queenship, the results

of which I have included both in the collection *Companion to Global Queenship*, which I edited, and in my monograph *Queens and Queenship*, which looks at queens in different times, places and cultures, and brings together the experiences of women from different ages<sup>2</sup>.

When I started my exploration of the concept of queens in a global context, I started to perceive the issue of polygamy in a completely different way. I realised that it does not weaken women’s agency or deprives them of their power. This is what people usually think. Actually, the most powerful women did not have to be the spouse of a monarch at all, they could be mothers. There could be many wives and concubines but only one mother. Living in a polygamous monarchy, where the king had many wives, did not mean that royal women were powerless because they were one of many. This could be exemplified by the favourite wife of Emperor Jahangir, Nur Jahan that you have just mentioned. He had twenty spouses in total, yet she, the last wife, was his favourite and co-ruled the Mughal Empire with him.

The Mughal dynasty also shows powerful royal daughters. Rulers such as Jahanara Begum, or sisters such as Gulbadan, were described by Ruby Lal in her wonderful book *Vagabond Princess*. It is a biography of Gulbadan, one of the most extraordinary adventurers – a Mughal princess – based on her memoirs. So the Mughals are a wonderful example of dynasties that featured powerful and influential women.

► **You recently interviewed Natalie Garrett, a historian from**

**the Open University, who specialises in 18<sup>th</sup>-century European history, British monarchy and visual culture, about her new book *Queen Charlotte: Family, Duty, Scandal*. Queen Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, wife of King George III, has become better known through popular culture, particularly the TV series *Bridgerton*. Do you think that this kind of presentation helps to bring women's stories – and history in general – to a wider audience?**

I think there is a real feedback loop between academic research and popular culture. It works both ways. Sometimes you have historical figures who are really prominent in popular culture, like Anne Boleyn, Elizabeth I, or even Isabella I of Castile. Some long-term interest in these figures increases their presence in popular culture, which then encourages more people to study their lives. It is also the case that the sheer volume of academic work on a particular individual, a historical heroine, does not necessarily lead to her greater prominence in popular culture. On the other hand, sometimes there appears a figure who, by becoming more visible in popular culture, encourages academics to study her life.

Thanks to *Bridgerton* series, where one of the main characters is Queen Charlotte, my students have become more interested in her life, because they are more aware of who she was. This reminds me of the situation five or ten years ago regarding the women of the War of the Two Roses, which were made famous thanks to Philippa Gregory's novels and the miniseries based on them. They encouraged many

of my students to come to me to work on the history of monarchy and to write essays and papers on the women of that era. Furthermore, the lives of these women began to attract a lot of public interest, which encouraged many writers and scholars to write about them. To sum up, I think there is some true feedback loop between academia and popular culture, which can be very productive.

**► We have already mentioned that you have established the Royal Studies Network, a global initiative that has become a source of knowledge for scholars in this field. What is the long-term vision for it and its possible future influence on the development of Royal Studies?**

It has been great to witness the growth of Royal Studies Network from its beginnings in 2012 to today, when we have more than one thousand members worldwide. I want this network to continue to grow. I want to involve even more outstanding specialists, especially those working in global studies, Asian history, African history, Polynesian studies, pre-Columbian America, as well as archaeologists, art historians and scientists from various fields. As I mentioned, I want Royal Studies to be as inclusive and welcoming as possible, because the more perspectives we can bring from different people specialising in different disciplines, ages and areas, the richer the field becomes. It is also very important to encourage even more students and young researchers to participate in its development. They are its driving force and its future. Wherever it is possible, we

try to offer scholarships or discounts to our "Kings and Queens" conferences, and invite them to publish on our blog<sup>3</sup>.

We have also established a Royal Studies Journal award for the best article in Royal Studies for postgraduate or early career researchers. We are looking for different ways to provide young scholars with the most effective platform for work.

**► That's right! You have played a key role in promoting Royal Studies whether through organising the "Kings and Queens" conference, establishing the Royal Studies Network, editing the "Royal Studies Journal", or curating a series of books such as *Gender and Power in the Premodern World* and *Lives of Royal Women*. You are also the author of several books, including the biography of Joan of Navarre, Queen of England. Could you tell us more about your upcoming projects?**

I am currently involved in the publication of many things, small and large. I am writing texts on various aspects of the life of Joan of Navarre, as well as articles on the economic aspects of the queen's reign and her patronage.

As for books, I am currently working on two. They concern queens in the global aspect, which I have discussed before. The first book focuses more on ideals and expectations regarding the queen, and how individual women have, with or without success, managed these expectations. The second book will deal with the global history of women's rule. Both books will be published in a few years' time, but they are the ones I am currently working on.

► **Do you think that despite the passage of centuries modern female rulers face similar challenges to queens in the Middle Ages or early modern era?**

I believe that queens are still subject to the same scrutiny of their actions, even in the way they dress. We can see it in the pictures that depict their fashion choices. These can be easily found on the Internet or in popular magazines. What comes to mind is the comparison – these women still have to live up to the ideals of queenship that their subjects have. One of the main differences between a woman living in those times and modern rulers is feminism and the modern emphasis on gender equality. This has opened up a different perspective on female political leaders, which is certainly interesting in the case of women rulers such as Elizabeth II or the group of heiresses, who are lined up to inherit thrones across Europe in the next couple of years. However, these modern movements have not necessarily enabled women to sit on the Japanese throne, which has been the subject of intense debate for several decades. Although there are empresses in Japan, a woman

cannot currently ascend to the throne there. This shows that some of the same discussions about female successors, regarding whether a woman can or should sit on the throne, are not just a historical issue, but something that remains relevant today.

► **Finally, what do you enjoy the most about your work?**

I feel very lucky to be able to work on subjects that I am passionate about. I love investigating the lives of women from royal dynasties in every imaginable aspect. The more I learn about them, the more excited I become about the subject. I want to explore the aspects of these female rulers' lives that I had not thought about before. There are so many female rulers, whose lives we should know more about, which, in turn, would teach us more about the monarchy itself. This work never ends, a prospect I find exciting. It is great that there is still so much research to do for me and my colleagues, which will then be relayed to those who come after us!

► **Thank you for the conversation.**

**Sylwia Dudkowska-Kafar**

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.royalstudiesnetwork.org/>

<sup>2</sup> The monograph is available here: [https://www.academia.edu/45379125/QUEENS\\_AND\\_QUEENSHIP](https://www.academia.edu/45379125/QUEENS_AND_QUEENSHIP)

<sup>3</sup> <https://royalstudiesjournal.wordpress.com/>