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Ruling Women
Queenship and Gender in Anglo-Saxon Literature

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She stands, hand outstretched toward the altar cross, a gift to the New Minster from her and her husband, Cnut, who is positioned directly opposite. The diadem encircling her brow marks her status as a married woman, while the rubric arcing over her upper body designates her as Ælfgyfu regina, queen of the English. Together, she and Cnut fill much of the composition’s center, reversing the customary iconographic hierarchy of early medieval donor portraits, in which saints and the celestial court are usually figured as larger than, and thus symbolically superior to, earthly donors. Yet here it is the queen who looms large—almost equal in stature to her husband and larger than the Virgin, Saint Peter, or even Christ.

This image forms the frontispiece to the Liber Vitae of the New Minster, Winchester (a.d. 1031), the book containing the names of the abbey’s brethren, monks, associates, and benefactors, living and dead, who were commemorated in the monks’ prayers. One of the two surviving pre-Conquest drawings of an Anglo-Saxon queen, the frontispiece testifies to the social importance and symbolic complexity of queenship in Anglo-Saxon culture. A flying angel hovers over the queen’s head, holding her veil and gesturing toward the mandorla-enclosed Christ above to suggest that Ælfgyfu’s queenship is both derived from and sanctioned by the celestial ruler. The queen stands directly below the Virgin, her dress and pose
likening her to the Queen of all Queens, and conveying the promise that Ælfgifu and Cnut will look after the minster on earth, much as its two patron saints, Mary and Peter, watch over the house in heaven. In exchange for such generous patronage, the cluster of tiny monks housed in their stalls below the feet of the royal couple offer up prayers, joining Saints Mary and Peter in their intercessory efforts to ensure a place in heaven for the king and queen. Indeed the judgment looks promising for the royal couple, as the frontispiece is followed in the manuscript by a glorious depiction of Saint Peter with key in hand, welcoming the righteous through the open gates of the celestial city and into heaven.

I begin my study of queenship in Anglo-Saxon literature with the Liber Vitae miniature because it poses a question that is central to this book, namely, how did queens function as imaginative figures within the writings of pre-Conquest England? The miniature points to the malleability of the queen, her clothing and accessories suggesting cogent differences between her imaginative potential and that of her husband’s in the minds of early medieval writers. While the king’s side-fastened cope, crown, and sword clearly distinguish him from Peter and Christ, with their bare feet and saintly clothes, the queen is a more homogeneous figure, whose royal status is far less conspicuous than that of her husband: her headgear is little different from that worn by any other married woman or cloistered nun, her very shoes almost identical to those of the Virgin.4 The generic clothing that enables the queen to shade so easily into an image of wife, nun, or Queen of Heaven emblematizes how very ill defined queens’ roles were in Anglo-Saxon England—so ill defined that J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, in his classic study of early Germanic kingship, was led to claim that the Church “lacked any definition of the role of queens beyond what was required of all Christian wives.”5 Although Wallace-Hadrill offers little further discussion of either queens or Christian wives, his suggestive linking of the two nevertheless offers a central insight into the analysis of queenship that this book takes up. Anglo-Saxon literature and culture offer us far more resources for studying queens than they do for Christian wives. Might representations of royal women in Anglo-Saxon literature be used to investigate broader cultural ideals of femininity in early medieval England? And what might representations of queens, the richest and most powerful women in Anglo-Saxon society, have meant to audiences—male and female, lay and monastic—who enjoyed far less access to wealth or privilege?
But the drawing also raises questions about what is not or cannot be represented. Textual representations of living royal figures were a delicate affair, requiring Anglo-Saxon writers to weigh carefully the pleasures of candid self-expression against the potential hazards of offending men and women capable of wielding extreme power and privilege. Even setting forth more generic models of exemplary royal conduct could have been perceived as risky, for such models could be easily interpreted as suggesting gaps between the model and the contemporary king or queen. The Liber Vitae miniature adumbrates these kinds of artistic anxieties, reflecting a distinct effort to conform to Cnut's own wishes regarding his public self-presentation. A Dane by birth, Cnut worked tirelessly throughout his reign to ease the English people's acceptance of a foreign ruler by presenting himself as the darling of both their own clergy and their queen. Not surprisingly, the drawing conveys a sense of harmony between court and cloister, depicting necessarily a symbiotic relationship in which the royal family's material wealth is effortlessly exchanged for the monks' spiritual capital and its attendant promise of eternal riches. So too the miniature offers an image of marital harmony, the serene expression on the queen's face veiling the fact that she stands opposite the man who had alienated her from her two eldest sons and married her in an attempt to shore up his claim to the throne: if the English queen loved him, perhaps her people might follow suit. But how would an Anglo-Saxon writer have represented queens if he were a bit less constrained? What might a medieval monk have to say about queens if he were not—as the Liber Vitae monks quite literally are—under the feet of the royal family?

There are few discussions of either contemporary queens or models of queenship in Anglo-Saxon writings. The most substantive accounts of living queens and their roles within both the court and society at large are found in the Encomium Emmae Reginae (1041–42) and the Life of King Edward Who Rests at Westminster (1065–67), the former detailing Ælfgifu-Emma's life during the early years of Cnut's reign, the latter recounting Edith's participation in Edward's court before the Norman Conquest. Both are Latin texts, generally presumed to have been written on the Continent and commissioned by the particular queen who figures centrally within the narrative. Not surprisingly, both texts offer highly flattering portrayals of their royal female protagonists, so scripted that historians have often remarked on the strong resemblance between the two women featured...
in these texts. Yet the scarcity of contemporary representations of queens in Old English writings is probably not indicative of a lack of clerical interest in royal women or even due simply to fears about offending the royal family. Rather, this textual gap is more accurately explained as a product of the common medieval practice of negotiating contemporary cultural concerns through retrospection, specifically, through textual accounts of the past.

While the extant Anglo-Saxon corpus contains few depictions of living queens, it is nevertheless replete with rich and imaginative accounts of queens from distant, bygone worlds, queens from the Old Testament, from Germanic paganism, and from Christian late antiquity, whom Anglo-Saxon writers resurrected from the past to inhabit the mead halls and mythic courts of their verse and prose. Ruling Women traces Anglo-Saxon writers’ preoccupation with legendary queens to consider the cultural work that they performed for their Anglo-Saxon authors and audiences. Focusing on five major pre-Conquest works—Bede’s Historia Ecclesiastica, Cynewulf’s Elene, Beowulf, and Ælfric’s alliterative prose versions of the Old Testament Kings and Esther—I argue that Anglo-Saxon writers used legendary royal wives to model cultural ideals of queenship during a historical period in which queenship was itself undergoing profound changes; and to participate in the creation of ideologies of gender, family, spirituality, and politics which were both instantiated in and extended far beyond the rarified realm of the royal palace.

Unlike their later medieval successors, pre-Conquest writers seldom used female figures to register overt misogyny; to ventriloquize feelings of disempowerment, marginality, or compassion; or to gain access to the spiritual privileges that were thought to be available by identifying with the “weaker sex.” Rather, Anglo-Saxon writers drew on legendary royal wives to explore and to express their views on the most difficult and debated issues of Anglo-Saxon society: conversion, social hierarchy, heroism, counsel, idolatry, and lay spirituality. While their topical focuses, thematic interests, and formal strategies vary a great deal, Anglo-Saxon writers nevertheless exhibit a shared sense of the queen as a mediatory figure, a hybrid character who usually hails from a foreign kingdom and who offers the potential to bridge differences between groups of people, social structures, and systems of belief. Anglo-Saxon queens’ ever-fluctuating social status and their strong associations with intercession, combined with legendary queens’ ability to traverse temporal, territorial, institutional, and symbolic boundaries, further established a powerful link between queens and the idea of
transition. Anglo-Saxon writers thus consistently mobilized queens to negotiate sustained tensions, and sometimes overt antagonisms, between neighboring tribes, between Church and state, between ecclesiastical and lay culture, between paganism and Christianity, and between competing conceptions of heroism. Yet the queen's intermediary capacity for different peoples, institutions, and ideologies is accompanied by a dangerous ability to destroy the very bonds she fosters. Thus, unlike evil, tyrannical kings, who are often permitted to exist within their communities, queens who refuse to work toward the bridging of differences are usually forcibly reformed, exiled, or killed. As focal points for encounters between past and present, between traditional and revisionist models of belief and social practice, legendary queens in Anglo-Saxon texts are poised at moments of cultural instability or change, and they exert a powerfully ambiguous potential: to accomplish exemplary negotiations that alleviate cultural strain, or, more fearfully, to break apart existing unities and to show how tenuous and constructed they really are. Early medieval writers' relationships to legendary queens were thus underwritten by a constant dialectic of hope and fear: the hope that exemplarity was the lens through which these female figures would be perceived, thus making them a potentially powerful means of influencing contemporary politics, patterns of thought, and social practice; and the fear that legendary queens might function as dangerous exemplars and lead readers to social and spiritual transgression.

In spite of the pervasive presence of queens in both Anglo-Saxon literature and historical documents, Anglo-Saxon queenship remains an elusive concept. Unlike fourteenth-century France or Elizabethan England, in which heated debates on gynecocracy thrust queenship into the arena of both oral and written discourse, Anglo-Saxon England has left us no general tracts or treatises on queenship, no historical documents designating queenship as a public office or position with attendant rights and responsibilities. While the roles of other key political players, such as kings and bishops, were laid out in coronation ceremonies, ecclesiastical treatises, and monastic rules, queens' roles were far less clearly defined—so much so, that historians have questioned whether queenship as an institution actually existed during the early Middle Ages, or whether early medieval queenship is a presentist assumption imposed on the early Middle Ages by modern historians. Throughout this study, my interest is in reconceptualizing queenship—in viewing it not as a construct manufactured by rigid institutional definitions that have evaded modern historical sensibilities, but as an
idea that took shape within the particular contexts in which it was enacted. The richly imagined courts within Anglo-Saxon literary and historical writings offer a unique set of such contexts—in part because these texts were driven less by their authors’ recapitulation of objective truths than by their authors’ desire to create exemplary fictions. As Barbara Raw points out, images of the past in medieval art were usually intended not to provide objective pictorial recollections for teaching individuals about Christ’s life or biblical history, but rather to focus the mind on the present and the heavenly future, and to elicit specific emotional and behavioral responses from medieval audiences. The idea that textual representations of the past had similar formative power and could provide models of living for contemporary audiences is famously captured in the opening lines of Bede’s Historia Ecclesiastica, in which Bede maintains:

Siue enim historia de bonis bona referat, ad imitandum bonum auditor sollicitus instigatur; sue mala commemoret de prauis, nihilominus religiosus ac pius auditor siue lector deuitando quod noxi- um est ac peruersum.

Although the drive toward queenly exemplarity in Anglo-Saxon texts necessarily shades away from any direct representation of the lives of contemporary royal women, that impulse nevertheless displays a textual and cultural negotiation of queenship that illuminates social attitudes that affected the lives of Anglo-Saxon queens.

Any consideration of the cultural work of queens in Anglo-Saxon literature speaks, of course, to a larger vexed problem with cultural studies generally in Anglo-Saxon criticism. Difficulties of securely locating Old English poetry, either temporally or geographically, have deterred all but a very few scholars from reading the poetic corpus through the lens of cultural criticism, or from exploring Old English verse in the context of the
more firmly dateable pre-Conquest Latin and vernacular prose. The slipperiness of Anglo-Saxon queenship as a historical institution, exacerbated by queens’ powerful typological and symbolic resonances, has encouraged scholars to focus on legendary queens more as residual products of Latin and Germanic textual traditions than as compelling cultural artifacts, whose very alterations from their precursors reveal their authors’ profound engagement with distinctly Anglo-Saxon social, spiritual, and political formations. This book works to redirect the critical treatment of queens in Anglo-Saxon literature away from examining them mainly as products of different textual traditions and toward understanding them as complex sites of intersection between literary and cultural formations. In so doing, Ruling Women provides a revisionist perspective on earlier typological studies of queens that have sought to identify royal women’s symbolic associations with particular virtues, biblical figures, or institutions, as forged through biblical exegesis and patristic commentaries. Rather than taking the identification of each queen’s symbolic significance as a goal in itself, I seek to understand how medieval writers exploited legendary queens’ symbolic associations for contemporary Anglo-Saxon audiences. It was precisely because legendary queens carried such strong quotidian significance that they were so appealing to Anglo-Saxon writers—because writers could count on their audiences’ knowing, for example, that Elen represented the successful union of Church and state, that Jezebel stood for the dangerous seductions of earthly glory, or that Esther symbolized the potential benefits of pious intercession. These meanings were backed by the weight of biblical and patristic authority, as well as the sense that the female figures to which these meanings adhered were timeless and transcultural. However, legendary female figures proved remarkably protean in the hands of early medieval writers, who seized hold of these powerful cultural symbols, cloaking them in Anglo-Saxon dress and habits of thought, divorcing them from particular (and foreign) contexts, and placing them within hazy, generic geographical environs so as to render them more accessible exemplars for contemporary audiences. As the mountains and rivers of Jerusalem and Rome recede, biblical and late antique women are transformed into strikingly Anglo-Saxon exemplars with the power to convey partisan, culturally specific ideas vested with the authority of tradition. By examining how Anglo-Saxon writers mobilized and refigured both legendary queens and their symbolic associations, Ruling Women seeks to revive typology as the historically and culturally engaged hermeneutic approach that it once was for
medieval writers, as opposed to the reductive, closed system of analysis that it has tended to become in the hands of some medievalists.

Queens are the most ubiquitous female figures in the surviving corpus of Anglo-Saxon writings and have thus generated significant interest but also great ambivalence among feminist scholars. Viewed generously, the numerous richly detailed accounts of legendary queens in pre-Conquest writings offer feminist medievalists an opportunity to undertake important recovery work and to balance a literary history that has for quite some time taken long-haired kings and mail-coated warriors as its main objects of investigation. Viewed less so, the prevalence of queens in Anglo-Saxon writings threatens to focus feminist energies on a very small subset of extremely privileged women, and thus to further the production of an elitist literary history already weighted with "great kings and conquerors." While feminist scholars have duly cautioned against using women of privilege to generalize about Woman as a unitary group, Anglo-Saxonists have, understandably, been attracted to a small but significant body of lexical, thematic, figural, and historical evidence suggesting that the line between queens and women of lesser social status can be productively conceptualized as a very fluid boundary. Numerous metaphors of queenship—the queen as the spiritual mother of all Christians or as the chaste body of the Church—emphasized roles and virtues that were equally available to a broad range of women in Anglo-Saxon society.

Lexical evidence reinforces the fluidity between Anglo-Saxon queens and women of lesser social status. The strong feminine noun *cwen* was used as a title for queens, as in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*’s 722 entry, which recounts, “Her towærp Æþelburh cwen Tantun” (In this year, Queen Æthelburg destroyed Taunton); yet the term was also used in a more general capacity to refer to any noblewoman or wife, as in Riddle 80’s claim that “céne mec hwilum / hwitloccedu hond on legeð, / eorles dohtor, þeah hio æþelu sy” (sometimes a fair-haired woman lays her hand on me, an earl’s daughter, although she is noble). The weak feminine *cwene*, which ultimately led to the archaic *quean*, had an even broader valence and was used to refer to a wide range of women, including ordinary laywomen, concubines of priests, prostitutes, and the Virgin Mary. Indeed, the word “queen” is derived from the proto-Indo-European *gwen*, a word originally meaning “woman” and from which is derived the Greek *gyn*, a prefix that denotes a generic non-class-specific womanhood. Exemplary queenship in Anglo-Saxon texts thus comprehends, as I argue, not simply legendary
royal wives but also ideals of normative femininity generally, pointing at once to recognizable queenly figures and to women who enjoy significantly less social stature, and about whom Anglo-Saxon sources are largely silent.

The mutability of the linguistic and cultural signifiers surrounding Anglo-Saxon queenship and, by extension, womanhood generally suggests that queens, perhaps even more so than the familiar and putative heroes of many Anglo-Saxon texts, are the actual register of the cultural climate. Legendary queens’ historical and metaphorical richness made them particularly open to multiple interpretations and thus able to speak to different readerships, made them, as Claude Lévi-Strauss puts it, “bonnes à penser”—an ideological convergence of “good” to consider, “goods” to trade, and “maids” to employ as sexualized servants.24 By examining representations of royal wives along with the cultural concerns they embody, Ruling Women offers a fresh perspective on the well-worn “Golden Age debates” among feminist medievalists of the 1980s and early 1990s over the relative power of women in pre-Conquest England.25 I shift critical concern away from investigating how much power Anglo-Saxon women had, either individually or collectively, and toward illuminating what kinds of roles and power women are shown textually as taking up. Anglo-Saxon writers had, I argue, a strong sense of royal women’s rightful place as not constrained to either the bedroom or the birthing chamber, but as expanding outward toward sociopolitical acts and endeavors that trouble traditionally conceived gender boundaries. This is not to say that gender is irrelevant or secondary within these texts, but simply that Anglo-Saxon writers mobilize contemporary understandings of gender to explore and to express their views on a far broader range of issues.

In arguing that Anglo-Saxon writers use queens to address issues that reach beyond the boundaries of either queenship or gender, I also strive to stake a somewhat bolder claim, namely, that it is to a large extent their gender that made queens so attractive to Anglo-Saxon writers as vehicles for social commentary and cultural critique. Placing a woman in the middle of a text, particularly in a traditionally male role or story, as in Elene, or asking readers to view an event through the eyes of a woman, as in Finnsburg episode in Beowulf, is an effective strategy for upsetting an audience’s expectations, forestalling their primary reactions and creating a space of cultural critique. It is a strategy that works particularly well in heroic poetry, where queens are typically relegated to a position outside, or rather, just alongside, the cycle of violent action that organizes heroic life. Forced
to act as involved observers rather than direct participants in heroic violence, queens are thus able to offer powerful commentary upon it. This special perspective is not limited to queens; rather it is ascribed to any “disenfranchised” or, one might say, “feminized” voice, including the voices of most women, old men, children, monks, poets, and all those deemed “unmanly” by virtue of their inability to occupy the heroic position prescribed by the narrative. Writing—and reading—from a “woman’s” point of view was a powerful tool, perhaps one of the few available in nondidactic texts, for social critique.

Throughout this study, I consider Anglo-Saxon queenship not as a rigidly defined historical institution but as an idea that took its relative meanings from the particular contexts in which it was enacted. Because these contexts include not only the fictional courts in Anglo-Saxon literature but also the material courts in early medieval England, I offer here a brief overview of the history of queenship in pre-Conquest England and the social roles that were available to queens during this period. My remarks are not intended to be comprehensive but simply to highlight common issues that emerge in the fictions and practices of Anglo-Saxon queenship, and also to provide a few key examples that underscore the ill-defined, ever-changing, and extremely volatile nature of queenship in Anglo-Saxon England.  

Anglo-Saxon queens were almost always queens consort; that is, they became queens through marriage rather than inheritance. Although few queens from the period actually held the throne, women were not technically excluded from royal succession; nor was their fitness for rule ever disputed. Unlike fourteenth-century France and Elizabethan England, where heated debates raged over women’s fitness for national rule, in Anglo-Saxon England female rulership was never openly debated, nor do the Anglo-Saxons seem to have been opposed to the idea. The 672 annal of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* matter-of-factly records that Seaxburh ruled Wessex for one year after the death of her husband, King Cenwealh; the *Mercian Register* offers ample evidence that Æthelflæd ruled Mercia for at least eight years after her husband’s death (911–18); and the *Mercian Register* also suggests that when Æthelflæd died in 918, leaving only a daughter, Ælfwynn, the Mercian nobility supported Ælfwynn as their next ruler. 27 It is also possible that Anglo-Saxon queens exercised direct rule by acting as regents during a king’s absence from court or when the heir-apparent was underage. However, most of the contemporary evidence points to the regency of
ealdormen or bishops during royal absence, and also to the fact that the Anglo-Saxons tended to prefer fraternal succession to minority rule. It is thus unlikely that many Anglo-Saxon queens functioned as regents.

Although Anglo-Saxon queens occasionally exercised power through direct rule, they far more often claimed authority through informal channels, most notably, intercession and counsel. The idea that Anglo-Saxon queens might offer their husbands valuable counsel on both domestic and political affairs was backed by a long tradition of reverence for female counsel within Germanic culture. As early as the first century A.D., Tacitus remarked on the extent to which Germanic men valued female counsel. The Anglo-Saxons’ esteem for female counsel is borne out in the frequent appearance of the wise and verbally adept aristocratic ‘ides, “woman,” in Old English poetry, as well as in such gnomic poems as Maxims I, which prescribes that a wife ought to “rune healdan . . . ond him ræd witan / boldalagendum bæm ætsomne” (keep counsel . . . and know advice for them both, for both home-owners together).

It was perhaps in part the assumption that Anglo-Saxon kings would look to their wives for counsel that led such Continental churchmen as Pope Gregory the Great and Pope Boniface V to write to English queens in the seventh and eighth centuries, urging them to soften the hearts of their husbands, and to draw them away from their former pagan practices and toward Christianity. During this early stage of England’s Christianization, queens played prominent roles in promoting the Church. They functioned as patrons of monasteries and founders of churches; their coronation ceremonies were initially modeled on the rituals used for the making of an abbess; and seventh- and eighth-century queens who were either widowed or abandoned frequently founded and entered monasteries, usually appointing either themselves or one of their daughters as abbess.

While seventh- and eighth-century queens do seem to have exercised significant influence in matters related to national spirituality, the authority of the queen during these centuries was very much dependent on her position as the king’s wife. The amount and kind of power early Anglo-Saxon queens exercised thus varied a great deal, and was dependent on both the personality strength of the individual woman as well as the extent to which her husband wished her to participate in political life. So too the relative laxity of seventh- and eighth-century English marital practices left the queen vulnerable to losing her position. During this period, Anglo-Saxon
kings regularly took concubines, any of whom might be called on to replace the queen. Moreover, before the tenth-century Benedictine reforms, it was fairly easy to leave one’s spouse and not uncommon for an Anglo-Saxon king to have several queens over the course of his life.

Perhaps no text better illustrates the extremely tenuous nature of the Anglo-Saxon queen’s position than Asser’s *Life of Alfred*. Writing in 893, Asser recounts a slanderous tale about a West Saxon queen living in the early ninth century, detailing how this queen’s antipathy toward both her husband and her people led to her own expulsion from the throne as well as to strong public opposition to granting either titles or thrones to all subsequent West Saxon queens:

Gens namque Occidentium Saxonum reginam iuxta regem sedere non patitur, nec etiam reginam apellari, sed regis coniugem, permittit. Quam controversiam, immo infamiam, de quadem pertinaci et malevola eiusdem regina ortam suisse, maiores illius terrae perhibent; quae omnia contraria seniori suo et omni populo ita peregit, ut non solum suum proprium odium mereretur, ut a reginali solio proiceretur, sed etiam omnibus suis subsequeturibus eandem pestiferam tabem post se submitteret. Pro nimia namque illius reginae malitia omnes accolae illius terrae conjuraverunt, ut nullum unquam regem super se in vita sua regnare permissionerent, qui reginam in regali solio iuxta se sedere imperare vellet.

For the West Saxons did not allow the queen to sit beside the king, nor indeed did they allow her to be called “queen,” but rather “king’s wife.” The elders of the land maintain that this disputed and indeed infamous custom originated on account of a certain grasping and wicked queen of the same people, who did everything she could against her lord and the whole people, so that not only did she earn hatred for herself, leading to her expulsion from the queen’s throne, but she also brought the same foul stigma on all the queens who came after her. For as a result of her very great wickedness, all the inhabitants of the land swore that they would never permit any king to reign over them who during his lifetime invited the queen to sit beside him on the royal throne.
As Asser calls attention to the vulnerability of queens in ninth-century Wessex, he also reveals a sense of increasing debate and contention over queens’ roles during this century. Although Asser characterizes the early ninth century as a period of popular consensus, with “omnes accolae illius terrae” (all of the inhabitants of the land) opposed to queens inhabiting the throne or possessing the title *regina*, he suggests that by the time that he was writing in the 890s, popular opinion on the social status of queens had become far more fragmented and diverse. Asser refers to public opposition to West Saxon queens inhabiting the throne as an “infamia” (disgrace, scandal, infamous practice) and also as a “controversia” (controversy), suggesting that late ninth-century attitudes in Wessex toward queens were divided and that some of the higher echelons of West Saxon society favored granting queens more status than had formerly been customary. So too Asser himself harshly condemns popular opposition to the queen’s possession of public authority, characterizing such opposition as a “perversa illius gentis consuetudo” (perverse custom of that people) and also as a “detestabilis consuetudo in Saxonia” (detestable custom in the Saxon land)—a stance that probably derives from Asser’s own cultural background, as he had come to Wessex from Wales, where queens were typically granted significant authority.38

The debates over queenship in ninth-century Wessex that Asser so vividly describes were enacted during a period when queens seem to have had relatively minimal political power. Unlike earlier and later annals of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ninth-century annals do not refer to queens by either name or title, and they mention queens only for the purposes of explaining dynastic connections created through marriage. Similarly, studies of queens’ signatures on pre-Conquest land-grant charters have shown that, while queens frequently served as charter witnesses in the eighth, tenth, and eleventh centuries, they did so far less often during the ninth century.39 However, the ill-defined and unstable nature of Anglo-Saxon queenship that permitted a sharp decline in the status of ninth-century West Saxon queens allowed for exactly the opposite situation to obtain in the following centuries.

The tenth and eleventh centuries witnessed dramatic changes in the social and symbolic status of Anglo-Saxon queens. As reformers argued for increasingly strict marital laws, repudiating one’s wife became increasingly difficult, affording queens additional security that they would be able to keep their positions. This period also saw the establishing of new titles for
queens and queen mothers, the increased use of public anointing ceremonies for queens, the formal appointment of a queen as the official patron of female monasteries, the regular attendance of queens at meetings of the royal council, the enthronement of the first female ruler of central England, an increased esteem for royal maternal lineage, and the designation of queens as officially responsible for the conversion of heathens. It remains unclear whether the increased social and symbolic status of tenth- and eleventh-century West Saxon queens was accompanied by increased power, or even any changes at all, in the practice of queenship. Because Anglo-Saxon queens’ power and influence had, historically, been exercised mainly through informal channels, the increasing formalization of queenly roles might have limited queens’ power by erecting institutional barriers that prevented queens from taking up roles that had not been designated as rightfully theirs. So too such changes as new titles for queens, formal coronation ceremonies, and increased esteem for royal maternal lineage may simply point to an increased emphasis on the symbolics and rituals of queenship, an emphasis that, as Paul Strohm points out, corresponded with a decline in queens’ actual power during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. It is also worth noting that many of the roles taken up by tenth-century queens, in practice, differed little from those of seventh- and eighth-century queens. Changes in late Anglo-Saxon queenship point less to the emergence of new roles for queens than to an increased interest in codifying and formalizing queens’ roles by recording them in such official documents as the Regularis Concordia and coronation ordines. While the burgeoning references to queens in these writings may be explained in part by the greater documentary evidence surviving from the later period, they also point to an emerging sense of queenship as a social role accompanied by specific rights and responsibilities. New understandings of queenship in the tenth century may well have been facilitated by literary representations—for it was during this very period that all of the major Old English poetic codices, as well as a significant portion of the prose texts, were copied and circulating.

In light of the highly unstable nature of Anglo-Saxon queenship, reading legendary queens historically is less a process of situating them within a fixed (or even debated) institutional discourse than a practice of reading them in light of the very few pre-Conquest references to general roles for queens and the more numerous references to roles assumed by individual royal women. Yet the lack of a clearly defined historical discourse of Anglo-Saxon queenship which renders it so difficult to historicize representations.
Introduction

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of queens in Anglo-Saxon literature may, paradoxically, be partly responsible for our having so many rich and complex depictions of queens to work with in the extant Old English corpus. In short, queens may have held a topical appeal for early medieval writers precisely because queenship was less a construction manufactured by rigid institutional definitions than a nascent interpretive possibility that writers took power and pleasure in shaping within the fictional courts of their texts.

Chapter 1, “The Costs of Queenship,” investigates queens as agents of Christian conversion in Bede’s Historia Ecclesiastica (a.d. 731). I argue that Bede exploits the historic synonomy between queens and the earthly wealth and power they offered kings through dynastic alliance in order to lessen the gap between the values of pagan warlords and the desires of Christian missionaries. Royal women become, for Bede, a means of synthesizing incongruities between a history of pagan kings who viewed conversion as a one-time price for acquiring a well-connected royal wife, and Bede’s own vision of conversion as an ongoing process of spiritual transformation effected by recognition of the intrinsic beauty not of the worldly lovely wife but of the divine heavenly kingdom. Chapter 2, “Crossing Queens, Pleasing Hierarchies,” interrogates how a queen serves to define and challenge social and gender hierarchies in Cynewulf’s Elene. I argue that, in translating the Roman empress into an Anglo-Saxon queen, Cynewulf creates a provocative and almost paradoxical female figure whose experience of subservience as productive of personal happiness works to naturalize and perpetuate highly conservative institutional and ideological formations, even as her own representation through Cynewulf’s revisionist history encourages readers to imagine those formations as open to negotiation. Chapter 3, “Beowulf and the Gendering of Heroism,” shows how royal women become vehicles for addressing the sustained tension in Anglo-Saxon culture between competing models of heroic masculinity. The Beowulf poet uses royal feminine voices and tears to redefine the criteria for cultural memorialization, a challenging enterprise in a society that clung fiercely to the belief that heroism ensued from the strength of one’s handgrip and the capacity to terrorize neighboring kingdoms.

My final two chapters, “Queenship and Royal Counsel in the Age of the Unread” and “Queenship and Social Reform in Ælfric’s Esther,” turn to Ælfric’s discussions of the Old Testament queens Jezebel and Esther in his alliterative prose renditions of Kings (a.d. 992–1002) and Esther (a.d. 1002–5). Focusing on differences between Ælfric’s queens and their
biblical counterparts, I situate these differences in the context of contemporary changes in the social and symbolic power of Anglo-Saxon queens. “Queenship and Royal Counsel” demonstrates that Ælfric uses the Old Testament queen Jezebel to offer a veiled critique of late tenth-century royal counsel, a tense issue at this time given queens’ increased participation in court politics and the young king Æthelred’s notorious inability to distinguish between good and bad advice. Although it would be many years before the king’s problems with royal counsel would be publicly codified in his unfortunate epithet “Æthelred the Unready,” Ælfric’s efforts to articulate the social dangers generated by an ill-advised king reveals that Æthelred’s early troubles were by no means overlooked by his contemporaries. “Queenship and Social Reform” focuses on Ælfric’s threading of such issues as female beauty, spousal abandonment, and royal concubinage through the figure of Esther—his registering of the rather frenzied reassessment of gender emerging from tenth-century Benedictine reformers’ efforts to bring the social and spiritual practices of the laity under heightened surveillance. Here, I explore how the biblical story of a queen who saves her people from a royal mandate of genocide becomes, for Ælfric, an occasion to propagate reformist ideologies of gender, marriage, and lay spirituality, and thus becomes a way to enhance our understanding of the role that literature played in the Benedictine reforms.

Considering queens as illustrative of reformist ideals returns us then to the question of what queens had to offer early medieval writers. It brings us back to the Liber Vitae drawing, in which Ælfgifu’s outstretched hand recalls queens’ potential to endow monasteries, and indeed long after her husband lay dead and entombed in an elaborate casket in Westminster, Ælfgifu continued to patronize the New Minster, enriching the foundation in 1040 with the much-coveted relic of Saint Valentine’s head. Yet, unlike Cnut’s hand, which firmly grasps the Cross, Ælfgifu’s hand merely reaches toward this material object, ultimately effecting nothing except the division of the word regina on the manuscript into two distinct parts. The queen’s suspended hand slicing through this word is a fitting reminder of the kind of queenship this book seeks to describe: one that is full of possibility, imbricated in the material and social practices of Anglo-Saxon culture, and both created and disrupted by representation.

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Chapter 1

The Costs of Queenship

One of the roles most often attributed to early medieval queens by contemporary writers was in the service of Christian conversion. The Germanic prototype of the proselytizing queen was Clotild, the sixth-century queen of the Franks, who, on her wedding night, was reputed to have taken the customary moment of marital consummation as an opportunity to urge her husband Clovis to burn his meaningless idols and to worship the Christian God. Numerous other missionary queens, including Clotild’s daughter (also named Clotild), Helena, Clotsinda, and Theudelinda, appear in the writings of such churchmen as Gregory of Tours, Pope Gregory the Great, Bishop Nicetius of Trier, and Paul the Deacon, who alternately praise and chastise queens for their valiant or inadequate efforts at spousal conversion. Perhaps no text more powerfully grapples with the model of “conversion by marriage” than Bede’s Historia Ecclesiastica, a work that is deeply concerned with conversion—in all of the term’s complex senses. Understanding precisely what conversion meant in medieval culture has proved notoriously difficult for modern scholars, in part because “conversion” was less a term used to denote a particular spiritual event than a broad rubric to capture a variety of religious experiences, and in part because the defining characteristic of those experiences is their ineffability. Conversion was understood to encompass such experiences as the formal adoption of a new...
faith, marked by a public ceremony such as baptism; the dramatic flashes of divine revelation that shatter the self so that it might be remade in the image of that which has been revealed; and the ongoing attempts to transform one’s spiritual self, a process that Karl Morrison captures in his description of the High Middle Ages as a period when “all of life, rightly lived, was conversion.”5 These various aspects of conversion constitute both the *topos* and the *telos* of Bede’s *Historia Ecclesiastica*, which details England’s spiritual transformation from paganism to Christianity in order to inspire spiritual transformation in contemporary readers. While queens and royal women appear throughout the *HE*, Bede never illustrates a queen’s conversion, focusing exclusively on the conversion of kings and their people.6 One of the reasons that queens in the *HE* are never shown to convert may be that, generally speaking, they tended to come from Christian families—either Continental or recently converted English—and were thus already Christian. These queens were typically married to pagan husbands, leading numerous modern historians to believe that queens played a vital role in England’s conversion and thus merited inclusion within the Anglo-Saxon historical record as well as modern histories of the period.7 More recently, however, scholars have questioned the extent to which royal women participated in England’s conversion, as well as the extent to which Bede’s depictions of them can be taken as at all representative of women’s roles in early medieval society.8 Scholars have long recognized the profound biases in Bede’s work—his Deiran and pro-Roman loyalties, or his reluctance to write extensively about the content of pagan practice—and Bede’s lack of attention to women’s contributions to the establishment of Christianity in England has been seen as arguably another symptom of his biases.9 Viewed on the one hand as a mark of female presence within a largely male historical record, and on the other, as a mark of women’s erasure, the figure of the queen in Bede’s *HE* has occupied a rather vexed position within modern criticism.

My concern in this chapter is not to use the *HE* for historical insight into queens’ participation in England’s spiritual transformation; nor is my intent to use Bede’s treatment of queens as evidence for the partiality of the *HE*’s account of a past that Bede hoped to have been rather than one that really was. To draw a rigid line between history and hope would be at odds with the historiographical principles of the *HE*, from which the twin pillars of eyewitness and exemplarity—the reports of the human and textual witnesses that Bede claims as his sources, and the intratextual examples...
that he hopes will spur the faith of his readers—emerge as equally crucial structural supports guiding the text's design. Rather, my intent is to trace the rhetoric of queenship, royal marriage, and "domestic proselytization" in the HE, and to elucidate the cultural work attempted through Bede's treatment of these gendered constructs. My conviction is that Bede uses queenship and royal marriage in the HE to lessen the gap between the values of pagan warlords and the ideals of Christian missionaries. By foregrounding the historic synonymy between queens and the earthly wealth and power they offered kings through dynastic alliance, and then distancing queens narratively, geographically, and figuratively from conversion, Bede constructs a spiritual past that looks less like an unbroken trajectory of royal conversions motivated by kings' unadulterated desire for earthly gain, than one interspersed with spiritual transformations effected by recognition of the intrinsic beauty of Christianity and the heavenly kingdom. As Bede rewrites the traditional—and to him, overly secular—tale of the queen's role in her husband's conversion, he refuges such entrenched Anglo-Saxon queenly roles as secular peacemaker and catalyst for dynastic alliances, suggesting that royal women might be used, instead, to weave peace with God and to forge alliances between kings and clergy. The result is an exemplary narrative that promises that bonds between men, and the military victory, peace, and secular gain that were thought to ensue from those bonds, were more readily and permanently accessed if forged through union in Christ rather than marital alliances with women. Yet even as the HE works to revise readers' views on the most effective routes to earthly gain, it also teaches that such gain is rightfully understood as one of the delightful fruits of, and never the ultimate rationale for, adherence to the faith. As Bede distances queens from royal conversion, he "remembers" an English past that naturalizes the separation of the sexes and minimizes the important social roles that royal women played in England's spiritual transformation, while inadvertently revealing queens' powerful social and symbolic functions in that process.

Irishmen Bearing Gifts

Bede's first reference to royal women is to an unnamed collective of Irish women, each of whom is seen as having the potential to become a queen when handed over to an all-male band of Pictish settlers on the condition...
that in cases of doubted succession, the Picts would choose their new king from the female royal line.

Cumque uxores Picti non habentes peterent a Scottis, ea solum conditione dare consenserunt, ut ubi res uniret in dubium, magis de feminea regum prosapia quam de masculina regem sibi eligerent; quod usque hodie apud Pictos constat esse seruatum. (HE, i.1, p. 18)¹¹

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As the Picts had no wives, they asked the Irish for some; the latter consented to give them women, only on condition that, in all cases of doubt, they should elect their kings from the female royal line rather than the male; and it is well known that the custom has been observed among the Picts to this day. (HE, i.1, p. 19)

Precisely what Bede meant by this statement, as well as its historical veracity, are matters for debate. Cases of doubted succession may refer specifically to instances in which there was no brother to inherit the throne, or simply to any time that the question of succession arose (i.e., whenever the throne became vacant), while election of a king from the female royal line may refer either to matrilineal succession or to the actual occupancy of the throne by a woman.¹² Both Henry and Nora Chadwick argue that Bede’s statement is devoid of historical truth and is simply a conflation of one of the various Irish Cruithnig myths with Bede’s own misunderstanding of the principle of matrilineal succession as practiced in contemporary Pictish society.¹³

The difficulty of ascertaining either the meaning or the historical veracity of Bede’s remarks ought not to obscure the fact that they nevertheless capture a number of undeniable truths about the symbolic function of the exchange of royal women in Anglo-Saxon culture and within the HE. Both the Picts and the Irish view women as commodities, a term that I am here using in its broadest sense, as any thing whose exchangeability has become its most socially relevant feature.¹⁴ Yet for the Picts, women are interchangeable—Pictish women left at home are easily replaced by Irish women acquired along the way—whereas for the Irish, women are not interchangeable but simply exchangeable, and indeed valuable, goods whose value resides in the fact that they are, as Annette Weiner puts it, “inalienable”.

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