



‘What is Royal Studies?’,

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What is Royal Studies?

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Royal studies is a new and emerging discipline, which has only begun to be recognized as a field of studies. While research on topics connected to royals and royalty has always existed, it is only in the last few years that there has been a dedicated academic forum to bring together studies in this area. The enthusiastic response to the call for papers for the original Kings & Queens conference in 2012 demonstrated the large number of scholars that were working in this area and triggered the creation of the *Royal Studies Network* and now, the *Royal Studies Journal*. These three elements – the conference series which is now in 2015 going in its fourth installment, the network and the journal – provide a platform for the field to collaborate, share, and publish research on royal studies. However, as a developing discipline the boundaries of the field are still nebulous and are yet to be fully defined. To create a better understanding of our emerging field, this editorial feature will draw together a selection of recent work in the field to identify trends and connecting themes. Comments from Royal Studies Network members who responded to our recent discussion forum on this topic, including Jennifer Mara da Silva, Sally Fisher and Imke Polland, will also be included in order to bring in viewpoints from across the field. Ultimately, this article seeks to explore the boundaries of our developing area of research and ask, what is royal studies? How can or should we define our newly identified field of study?

In defining those boundaries, it is important to be as inclusive as possible in terms of discipline, period, and geographical context – the borders of the field should not be set too narrowly and should be permeable barriers, rather than walls which attempt to “fence off” the field. Indeed one of the strengths of the field, which is demonstrated in the papers which have been featured in both the conferences and the journal, is the broad spectrum of disciplines which have fed into royal studies. Imke Polland agrees with this view, arguing that ‘its strength lies in its explicit and distinct interdisciplinarity, which offers the possibility of combining various approaches, connecting scholars and research and thus promoting the development of new and innovative concepts and approaches.’ Sally Fisher also emphasizes the advantage of such an open approach, noting that ‘Royal studies can operate as an over-arching concept which can draw together and encourage interdisciplinary collaboration, offering new avenues of enquiry.’

History is a discipline with an obvious connection to royal studies, and within historical studies, biographical and prosopographic works have long been a mainstay of the field. Royal figures have attracted attention from historians and biographers due to their very visible position, however Theresa Earenfight argues in her article ‘Highly Visible, Often Obscured’ that the activity and agency of queens and other female royals has often been overlooked or understated in both primary and secondary sources.¹ While well-known figures, such as Charlemagne, Catherine II of Russia and Henry VIII and Elizabeth I of England continue to dominate biographically based studies, recent collections

¹ Theresa Earenfight, “Highly Visible, Often Obscured: The Difficulty of Seeing Queens and Noble Women”, *Medieval Feminist Forum*, 44.1 (2008): 86-90.

have aimed to highlight lesser studied royal figures such as Henri III of France or consorts in the Holy Roman Empire.²

However, it is important to note that royal studies is far broader than biographical studies and is neither a form of “Great Man” history nor a field of study which merely exults “women worthies”. In the mid to late twentieth century there have been schools of study, such as social and Marxist history, which have discouraged excessive focus on elites and royal figures. Royal studies is about much more than simply an examination of royals themselves — it encompasses royal interaction with the court and the realm at large. Indeed the royal court itself is a microcosm of society, from the ruler at its centre and men and women of all ranks, rôles and duties — from the royal spouse or favourite down through the ranks of courtiers and service personnel to the lowest member of the staff. Olivia Fryman’s doctoral thesis on housekeeping in the royal chambers at Hampton Court Palace in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century is an excellent example of the sometimes intimate interaction between elites and non-elites within the confines of the palace.³

Other elements of historical study also merge fruitfully with royal studies. While political history and theory might be one of the areas commonly associated with royal studies, due to the power and authority exercised by the monarch, urban history provides a less obvious, but equally useful, crossover with our field.⁴ In recent years there have been many excellent examinations of royal entries and urban ceremonial as well as examinations of the impact that royal events and rulers can have on the development of the urban fabric.⁵ We can also see considerable overlap with architectural historians and even historical geographers, reflecting the “spatial turn” in a royal studies context. Archaeology is another area which has generated excellent studies both in terms of the construction of royal buildings and the royal impact on the landscape, such as Spencer Gavin Smith’s, work on medieval royal parks and gardens.⁶ Amanda Richardson’s research looks at the royal landscapes and architecture — her excellent 2003 article on gendered space in medieval palaces successfully blends royal studies with archaeology and gender studies.⁷

Beyond history and archaeology, studies which have a basis in art and literature have also been a fruitful basis for the development of royal studies.⁸ Here too, a blending

² See R. J. Knecht, *Hero or Tyrant? Henri III, King of France* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2014) which was reviewed by Estelle Paraque in issue 1 of the *Royal Studies Journal*. On German consorts, see Judith P. Aikin, *A Ruler’s Consort in Early Modern Germany: Aemilia Juliana of Schwarzburg-Rudolstadt* (Aldershot: Ashbridge, 2014), also reviewed in issue 1 of the *Royal Studies Journal* by Charlotte Backerra or Tryntje Hellferich, *The Iron Princess: Amalia Elizabeth and the Thirty Years War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), to be reviewed in an upcoming issue of the *Royal Studies Journal*.

³ Olivia Fryman, “Making the Bed : The Practice, role and Significance of Housekeeping in the Royal Bedchambers at Hampton Court Palace 1689-1737”, (Kingston University, D.Phil Thesis, 2011).

⁴ For examples of politically-based studies see John Baldwin, *The Government of Philip Augustus: Foundations of French Royal Power in the Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), Ruth McKay, *The Limits of Royal Authority: Resistance and Obedience in Seventeenth Century Castile* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) or Natalie Mears, *Queenship and Political Discourse in the Elizabethan Realms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁵ For a recently published example, see M.C. Canova-Green, J. Andrews and M.F. Wagner eds., *Writing Royal Entries in Early Modern Europe* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013).

⁶ See John Steane, *The Archaeology of the Medieval English Monarchy* (London: Routledge, 1999). For more information on Spencer’s developing research and publications see <https://mmu.academia.edu/SpencerGavinSmith>.

⁷ Amanda Richardson, “Gender & Space in English Royal Palaces c.1160-c.1547: A Study in Access Analysis & imagery”, *Medieval Archaeology*, 47 (2003): 131-165.

of gender studies with royal and patronage studies have led to excellent works such as Cynthia Brown's research on the cultural patronage of Anne de Bretagne or studies of the female Habsburg proxy rulers of the Netherlands and their agency in both politics and patronage.⁹ Given the primacy of diplomacy in royal activity and political agency, there has also been ample crossover with diplomatic studies and productive collaboration with the Premodern Diplomats network — many scholars participate in both networks and their related conference series, Splendid Encounters.¹⁰ An excellent example of royal diplomatic activity is Rayne Allinson's *A Monarchy of Letters* where she surveys the correspondence of Elizabeth I to other contemporary monarchs, stressing the importance of letters as "executive diplomacy".¹¹ Legal and ecclesiastical studies offer other examples of crossover with royal studies, including Paul Webster's work on King John's often fraught relationship with the Church.¹² Medical history is another area which has generated productive research for our field on royal maladies, medical personnel, and dynastic fertility; including a developing project on the latter which was featured at Kings & Queens 2 and 3.¹³ In addition to these areas where disciplinary crossover might be expected, royal studies has even generated research on linguistics and pedagogy.¹⁴

This interdisciplinary crossover and collaboration is one of the great strengths of our emerging field. Imke Polland argues that the field should continue to leverage this interdisciplinarity to develop research clusters:

Possible clusters of research may concentrate on geographical as well as temporal focal points. I also see a possible additional value in clustering royal studies around sub-categories strengthening the different approaches, for example cultural royal studies, historical royal studies, political royal studies etc. In this respect, however, it is important to emphasise that this should not be understood as equating with, or echoing disciplinary boundaries, but that it

⁸ See David Howarth, *Images of Rule: Art and Politics in the English Renaissance, 1485-1649* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) and Alisa Manninen, *Royal Power and Authority in Shakespeare's Late Tragedies* (Newcastle-upon-Lyme: Cambridge Scholars, 2015).

⁹ See Cynthia Brown, *The Queen's Library: Image-Making at the Court of Anne of Brittany, 1477-1514* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011) and Cynthia Brown ed. *The Cultural and Political Legacy of Anne de Bretagne: Negotiating Convention in Books and Documents* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2010). On the Hapsburg women, see Cordula van Wyhe ed., *Isabel Clara Eugenia: Female Sovereignty in the Courts of Madrid and Brussels* (London: Paul Holberton Publishing, 2011) and Dagmar Eichberger, "Margaret of Austria's Portrait Collection: Female Patronage in the Light of Dynastic Ambitions and Artistic Quality", *Renaissance Studies*, 10.2 (1996): 259-279.

¹⁰ For more information on the Premodern Diplomats Network and their Splendid Encounters conference series, see <http://www.premoderndiplomats.org>.

¹¹ Rayne Allinson, *A Monarchy of Letters: Royal Correspondence and English Diplomacy in the Reign of Elizabeth I* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

¹² See Paul Webster, "Crown, Cathedral, and Conflict: King John and Canterbury", in *Cathedrals, Communities and Conflict in the Anglo-Norman World*, ed. by Paul Dalton, Charles Insley, and Louise J. Wilkinson (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2011): 203-219 and his forthcoming monograph with Boydell, *King John and Religion*.

¹³ See Elizabeth Lane Furdell, *The Royal Doctors 1485-1714: Medical Personnel at the Tudor and Stuart Courts* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2001), H. E. Emson, "For the Want of an Heir: The Obstetrical History of Queen Anne", *BMJ*, 304 (1992): 1365-1366 and Timothy Peters, "King George III, Bipolar Disorder, Porphyria and Lessons for Historians", *Clin Med*, 11.3 (2011): 261-264. For more information on the developing project on royal fertility see <http://theresaearenfight.com/2013/02/05/the-royal-bump/>.

¹⁴ See Núria Silleras-Fernández's insightful discussion of the difficulties of translating the English term "queenship" into romance languages in "Queenship en la Corona de Aragón en la Baja Edad Media: Estudio y Propuesta Terminológica", *La corónica*, 32.1 (2003): 129-132 and also Nadia Thérèse van Pelt's pedagogically-based article in the previous issue of the *R SJ*, "Teens and Tudors: The Pedagogy of Royal Studies", *Royal Studies Journal*, 1 (2014): 37-50.

is rather a starting point for various possibilities of interrelating the varying methodological approaches.

There are a few active disciplines which have a considerable crossover with royal studies which have also seen a surge of growth in recent years; queenship studies and court studies. Both of these disciplines are entirely complementary to royal studies. Indeed queenship studies could be seen as a fundamental part of royal studies, highlighting female agency and activity within the royal sphere. Court studies shares a focus on the venue of the royal court and an interest in patronage and the royal household.¹⁵ The complementary nature of the two fields has been shown by many scholars' participation in both the Kings and Queens conference series and the activities of the Society of Court Studies which has established an excellent reputation for fostering and disseminating research in the field through its seminar series and journal, *The Court Historian*. Indeed the keynote speakers at Kings and Queens 3 in 2014 were Philip Mansel and Clarissa Campbell Orr, key members of the Society for Court Studies. A real strength of court studies is research which incorporates examinations of physical spaces, architecture and material culture; these are all fruitful areas for potential collaboration with royal studies.¹⁶ In both fields, the cultural turn proved to be a fertile area for research which has encouraged new studies and perspectives. Yet, while the two areas are enmeshed and complementary, there is perhaps a discernable difference in emphasis and focus. The role of the courtier is necessarily more prominent in the arena of court studies and the scope is perhaps wider to permit studies of courtiers outside of the court itself and court venues which may not necessarily have a royal connotation. However, we can see a considerable overlap between the field of royal studies and court studies which we hope will continue to generate collaborative research, events and publications which will enrich both fields of study.

One area which has also gained increasing prominence in recent years in both royal and court studies, is a desire to look at the entirety of the members of the royal family or dynasty, rather than just the monarch themselves. The idea of “corporate monarchy”, that the exercise of royal power is a collaborative process which incorporates not only the sovereign but their consort, core members of the dynasty and even favourites and mistresses, has become increasingly influential in recent years.¹⁷ Studies of royal children, both legitimate and illegitimate, have long been a popular focus in both popular and academic publications.¹⁸

This last point brings us to another key element of definition with regards to our emerging field; what do we mean by “royal”? We must be careful not to place too narrow definition of this important adjective nor should we limit too simply the types of titles that we link the word royal to. Jennifer Mara da Silva argues that as a field we should interpret

¹⁵ An excellent recent collection in the study of royal households with deep relevance for both royal and court studies is Nadine Akkerman and Birgit Houben eds., *The Politics of Female Households: Ladies-in-waiting across Early Modern Europe* (Turnhout: Brill, 2013).

¹⁶ For example see Marcello Fantoni, George Gorse and Malcolm R. Smuts eds., *The Politics of Space: European Courts c. 1500-1700* (Rome: Bulzoni, 2009).

¹⁷ See particularly Theresa Earenfight's seminal article, “Without the Persona of the Prince: Kings, Queens and the Idea of Monarchy in Late Medieval Europe”, *Gender and History*, 19.1 (2007): 1-21.

¹⁸ For examples see Alice Curteis and Chris Given-Wilson's classic study, *The Royal Bastards of Medieval England* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984). Works on Queen Victoria's offspring have been particularly plentiful, including the controversial biography of Princess Louise by Lucinda Hawksley, *The Mystery of Princess Louise; Queen Victoria's Rebellious Daughter* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2013) and the works of John van der Kiste, a popular historian who specialises in this area.

the term “royal” in the broadest possible sense:

Historians should continue to investigate what common ground is evident in the concerns, conflicts, ideas, and actions that preoccupy and motivate groups across the globe that consider themselves “royal”. A more fluid understanding of royalty allows us to see connections between groups both horizontally and vertically, and move beyond the nuclear (or secular) royal family. As households anchor (perhaps only temporarily) royalty in neighborhoods, the royal identification bleeds down the social ladder and “royal” becomes a connotation that can be shared by goods, spaces, and sometimes even provisioners (an early version of “By appointment to Her Majesty...”). With a broader perspective of how royalty occupied the past we can better understand its movements and contemporary (and modern) responses to it.

Kings and queens instantly come to mind in connection to the word “royal”. However, these titles tend to assume a European connotation. Indeed, the perception of royal studies is that it is focused on medieval and early modern monarchy in a European setting. While studies in the field to date have been dominated by works in these periods and areas, which has been reflected in many of the examples discussed in this article, there is excellent research on extra-European monarchies and courts, including the insightful collection *Servants of the Dynasty: Palace Women in World History* and Thomas Allsen’s wide-ranging study of the royal hunt in Eurasian history.¹⁹ Surely pharaohs, sultans and tennos have a similar rank and should be recognized as equally royal. Indeed, the term “kingship” has long been applied to studies of extra-European and ancient monarchs.²⁰ Emperors provide another potential issue, as the terms “royal” and “imperial” may or may not be perceived as synonymous in different temporal and geographic contexts. The word imperial carries with it a whole spectrum of connotations, not all of which could be assumed to connect with the concept of royalty, though they both share notions of dignity, sacrality, and rulership. Nor would scholars of Holy Roman, Austrian, French or Byzantine Emperors, Mongol Khans, Russian Tsars or Roman Caesars all consider themselves to be practitioners of royal studies, though perhaps they should. The papacy is another potential “grey area” — while ostensibly a spiritual leader, the Pope also functioned as a temporal ruler throughout the Middle Ages and early modern period and exercised considerable political influence as a virtual elected monarch. Studies of the papacy, the papal court, and papal patronage have demonstrated a considerable similarity to their strictly temporal “royal” counterparts.²¹ Even as a chosen monarch, there is the notion of divine right as well as the use of a court which connects the pope to his contemporary secular rulers, at least in the medieval and early modern eras. As Sally Fisher argues, the field of royal stud-

¹⁹ Anne Walthall ed., *Servants of the Dynasty: Palace Women in World History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008) and Thomas Allsen, *The Royal Hunt in Eurasian History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

²⁰ Examples include David Bourke O’Connor and David P. Silverman eds., *Ancient Egyptian Kingship* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), Henry Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods: A Study of Ancient Near Eastern Religion as the Integration of Society and Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948) and Aziz Al-Azmeh, *Muslim Kingship: Power and the Sacred in Muslim, Christian and Pagan Politics* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001).

²¹ See Toby Osbourne’s forthcoming work, *Popes and the Papal Court, 1503-1655: The Keys to the Kingdom* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015) and a recent collection which draws a clear link between “royal” dynasties and the papal/noble dynasty of the Della Rovere, Ian Verstegen ed. *Patronage and Dynasty: The Rise of the Della Rovere in Renaissance Italy* (Kirkville: Truman State University Press, 2007). On the Della Rovere dynasty see also Sebastian Becker, “Dynastische Politik und Legitimationsstrategien der Della Rovere. Potenziale und Grenzen der Herzöge von Urbino (1508–1631)” (University of Mainz, D.Phil Thesis, 2013), which will be published in 2015 by the German Historical Institute in Rome.

ies should also recognise the permeability of boundaries between “royal” and “non-royal”, and that historical subjects could slip between the two at different stages of their lives, leading to consideration of the associated impact (emotional, social, political, legal and economic) of these transitions.²² Jonathan Spangler’s research on the princely house of Guise and their dynastic ambition to achieve “royal” status, demonstrates the permeability of this definition at a familial level.²³

In connection with Roman Emperors, there is a perception that somehow kings or royalty as a concept only came into being from the Middle Ages onwards. Yet the exercise of power, mechanisms of dynastic succession and the dynamics of the court in the classical and ancient world can be seen to have considerable connection to their medieval and modern counterparts. Indeed as noted previously the word “kingship” has been used in scholarship on ancient and classical monarchy — Mitchell and Melville’s recent collection brings together studies of monarchs from across the ancient, classic and medieval periods.²⁴ Bringing the ancient and classical monarchs more clearly and deeply into the discourse of royal studies would enrich the field and is a key aim of both the network and the journal. We should also seek a deeper engagement with the study of modern monarchies, i.e. the study of monarchy after the French Revolution and Napoleon, another expanding area of study which engages both with the more traditional discussions of nation and nationalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and with media studies.²⁵

Monarchy continues to fascinate both historians and the general public. While the place of the *Royal Studies Journal* is to study historical monarchs and their court, rather than comment on current royal families and events, it is important to keep the current situation of global monarchy in view. Indeed drawing connections between the present and the past, as demonstrated by the necessary connection to historical analysis of gender in royal succession and changes in recent years in current monarchies to move towards systems of equal, rather than male, primogeniture demonstrates the long-term impact of study in our field.

Returning to our original question, what is royal studies; it is a field which brings together a wide range of disciplines from studies of art, architecture, literature, gender, law, religion, and history which examines the dynamic of the royal court and all of its constituent parts and analyses the exercise, extent, and limitations of royal power and authority as it changes over time and between different geographical, religious, and cultural settings. However, by doing so it also sheds light on similar dynamics outside of political systems and dynasties which are traditionally considered to be “royal”. It is an exciting prospect to be witness to the genesis of a new field of study and to have the opportunity to define it. Let us make this field as inclusive as possible and aim to find connections and

²² See e.g. the volume edited by Philip Mansel and Torsten Riotte, *Monarchy and Exile: The Politics of Illegitimacy from Marie de Medicis to Wilhelm II* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

²³ In particular, see Jonathan Spangler’s monograph study on the Guise dynasty *The Society of Princes: The Lorraine-Guise and the Conservation of Power and Wealth in Seventeenth-Century France* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009) and the chapter “Those In Between: Princely Families on the Margins of the Great Powers”, in Christopher Johnson, David Sabeau, Simon Teuscher and Francesca Trivellato, eds., *Trans-regional and Transnational Families in Europe and Beyond: Experiences Since the Middle Ages* (New York: Berghahn, 2011): 131-154.

²⁴ Lynette Mitchell and Charles Melville eds., *Every Inch a King: Comparative studies on Kings and Kingship in the Ancient and Medieval Worlds* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

²⁵ Johannes Paulmann, *Pomp und Politik: Monarchenbegegnung in Europa zwischen Ancien Régime und Erstem Weltkrieg* (Paderborn: F. Schöningh, 2000), or Philip Mansel, *Dressed to rule: royal and court costume from Louis XIV to Elizabeth II* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

comparisons rather than construct too many artificial barriers in an attempt to justify ourselves as a discrete area of academic study.

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