



*Women and Economic Power in  
Premodern Royal Courts*

**Cathleen Sarti**

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Judith M. Bennett's seminal work, *Ale, Beer, and Brewsters in England: Women's Work in a Changing World, 1300-1600* (1996), began a significant conversation in women's and gender studies about the roles of women—elite and non-elite—in the economic world of the medieval and early modern periods. Since 1996, dozens of works on gender and economic history have demonstrated that women have long been a part of the “working world” outside the household and the practice of childrearing. These works—particularly *Singlenwomen in the European Past, 1250–1800* (1999), edited by Judith M. Bennett, and *Women and Work in Premodern Europe: Experiences, Relationships, and Cultural Representation, c.1100–1800* (2018) edited by Merridee L. Bailey, Tania M. Colwell and Julie Hotchin—signify the importance of further study of the ways in which women played an active role in the financial and cultural lives of their respective polities. Where, then, does this discussion leave the economic role of the premodern queen? Cathleen Sarti's edited collection, *Women and Economic Power in Premodern Royal Courts*, works to place royal women into this conversation on women's economic history and to expand current definitions of queenly power and authority.

In four chapters, Sarti's volume discusses the economic power of royal women, royal mistresses, and female councillors in the context of households, dowries, land ownership, patronage, and their work as advisors. Each of the women who are surveyed performed their duties in courts in Northern Europe, specifically, England, Denmark, and the Holy Roman Empire. The economic role of royal women in other areas of the globe are not included since this volume “hope[s] to inspire further studies into European, Asian, and African courts” that expand beyond the research interests of the scholars that fill its four chapters (8). This volume, then, serves as a beginning of a new conversation in queenship and women's studies that seeks to broaden current scholarship on the economic responsibilities and authority of women in royal courts around the globe in the premodern period.

While the first two chapters focus on the role of consort queens in England and the Holy Roman Empire, the last two chapters by Laura Tompkins and Sarti discuss the role of non-royal women in the economic sphere of the English and Danish monarchies. Tompkins's chapter focuses on Alice Perrers, mistress of Edward III of England (r. 1327–1377), and her role in the English court following the death of Edward's queen, Philippa of Hainault. In conjunction with Sarti's discussion of Sigbrit Villoms at the court of Christian II of Denmark (r. 1513–1523) in the succeeding chapter, Tompkins and Sarti demonstrate that “economic power” for women in premodern courts was not confined to the queen consort since women, royal or not, who were close to the monarch exerted a degree of political and economic influence. Power, as each chapter suggests, is not defined by modern definitions of “hard” or “soft” power but in the influence and authority that women exercised both inside and outside of the political realm, particularly in relation to their households, patronage, social networks, and material culture.

The economic history of queenship expands beyond expenditures and dowries since queens, as well as other female rulers, expressed financial support of religious orders (for instance, Franciscans and Poor Clares) and court favourites, while also collecting revenue from dower lands and engaging with the economic aspects of governance (such as warfare and tax revenue). “Economic power,” as this volume argues, expanded to *all* members of the royal family since the economic functionality of government has never been solely masculine.

This volume, then, raises several significant questions for scholars in the field of women’s and gender studies since it complicates the ways in which definitions of “power” and “authority” have been constructed for women in the premodern period, elite and non-elite. In particular, how does the economic function of queenship expand current understandings of queenly power? In what ways does the economic study of queenship complicate how scholars view the queen consort, queen lieutenant/regent, or queen regnant in the daily functions of monarchy? How did non-royal women, particularly royal mistresses, advisers, and aristocrats, exert their own financial interests and authority at court in ways that rivalled or aligned with the queen? Finally, how does bringing royal women into the conversation deepen the existing scholarship on women’s economic history?

In answering these questions, this volume demonstrates that further studies of the economic history of female rulership are needed to deepen the ways in which scholars understand the role of women, elite or not, as economic agents in the premodern court. As more studies in this subfield in queenship and women’s studies emerge, scholars must rethink the ways in which concepts of “authority” and “power” are defined in the medieval and early modern worlds since these terms are not purely political constructs that place all control in the person of the male leader. Definitions of power and authority, then, must extend to the participation of women in the economic, material, and social spheres of the court and the role of the queen and female aristocrat as economic agents.

Thus, Sarti’s volume captures the significance of the economic aspects of queenship while challenging the ways in which scholars view the intersections of gender and power. As Sarti observes in the introduction, it is now time for scholars to investigate this historiographical theme further and expand modern conceptions of female authority, premodern to modern, accordingly.

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