ROYAL STUDIES JOURNAL

2020 VII

Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior

Catherine Hanley

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019

Review by: Lois Huneycutt

WINCHESTER UNIVERSITY PRESS

Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior. By Catherine Hanley. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019. ISBN 978-0-300-22725-3. xviii + 296 pp. £20.00.

Biography is crucial to our understanding of royal figures, both for understanding individuals and for discerning patterns in the births, educations, marriages, rituals, alliances, governing practices, and succession policies of kings and queens. Any number of scholarly biographies on kings and queens are now standard reading material for scholars of all areas, in all eras. There are also, of course, the popular biographies, which, judging from the regularity with which they appear, are eagerly consumed by the reading public. Catherine Hanley's work on Matilda, daughter of Henry I of England and his consort Edith-Matilda of Scotland, queen to Emperor Henry V, Countess of Anjou, Lady of the English, very nearly a reigning English sovereign, and mother of three sons including Henry II, is an excellent and provocative study that straddles the line between the scholarly and the popular.

Despite her prominence in Western European political and military life during two-thirds of the twelfth century, Matilda has been the subject of only one modern scholarly biography, although she has been examined as a key figure in numerous studies of the political history of the Anglo-Norman world of the twelfth century, and figures largely in biographical work of her family members and her rival for the English throne, Stephen of Blois. Yet, as Hanley notes, analysis of Matilda often concentrates more on those familial relationships than on Matilda as an actor and agent in her own story. Hanley's work is the first full-length study in nearly thirty years and takes advantage of a generation of scholarship, particularly in the area of gender studies, to address questions that Marjorie Chibnall either shied away from or did not think to ask in her 1991 *The Empress Matilda: Queen Consort, Queen Mother, and Lady of the English*. Hanley's work does not duplicate Chibnall's scholarly biography, which Hanley claims "assumes a great deal of prior knowledge" about the twelfth-century world. Instead, Hanley's stated purpose is to "inform those who are perhaps less familiar with the subject about Matilda's life and times in an accessible—and hopefully engaging—way" (3). The choice to write a popular rather than a traditional scholarly work allows Hanley freedom to speculate about unanswerable questions often considered outside the realm of traditional academic inquiry. And although she did not aim to write for an audience familiar with the sources, the subject, and the existing scholarship, she has produced a book that will prove thought-provoking to that audience as well.

The fact that Hanley has produced a study with broad popular appeal does not mean that she has not researched her subject thoroughly. The book

opens with a discussion of sources, including an essential introduction to the contemporary chroniclers and their biases before moving into a largely chronological discussion of Matilda's childhood, first marriage and time in the Empire, return to England, marriage to Geoffrey of Anjou, bid for the throne following her father's death, activities during the civil war, and, perhaps more briefly than one would wish, years as queen mother during Henry II's reign. The chronological narrative is broken by a chapter providing an overview of the Anglo-Norman political situation in the years leading up to and immediately following the 1135 death of Henry I. The style is, as Hanley hoped, clear and engaging.

The book, however, is sometimes frustrating for specialists who may recognize the ghosts of scholarly debates as Hanley sometimes comes down on one side of a disputed question without explaining her choice, or rides roughshod over areas of uncertainty. Hanley's narrative style and the freedom with which she speculates about her subject's feelings, reactions, and preferences are not unexpected in a popular biography, nor are the lack of references to matters of historiographical interest. Readers outside academia are seldom interested in engaging in historiographical conversations over what might seem to be minutiae, and popular presses and historical fiction do not demand the same level of engagement with other scholarship that academic monographs do. Popular readers are also less likely to question the wisdom of speculating about things such as whether the eight-year-old Matilda wept on that cold, grey February day as she stood looking over the English Channel on her way to her new husband and new home in Germany. According to Hanley, she did not, because the dignity of her position demanded it, and "crying for her mother was not an option" (17). These are the kinds of questions that humanize subjects for the interested public, yet may often seem misplaced or irrelevant to academic readers. Hanley has, however, included a full bibliography attesting to her mastery of the secondary literature and has published with Yale University Press rather than a trade press, raising the question of which audience this book will ultimately reach.

More troubling than the omission of historiographical context for scholarly readers or intriguing but imaginative speculation are anachronistic assertions such as that decrying the rather conventional inscription on Matilda's tomb making reference to her father, husbands, and sons, as an example of an "all-too-common error of defining a woman only by the men around her" (1), or the speculation that Matilda's period of widowhood opened the "enticing possibility" that she would have her own agency and control of her own fate (61). There is evidence that Matilda was less than happy about marrying Geoffrey of Anjou, the second husband her father chose for her; there is none whatsoever that she even considered trying to rule

without a husband and the possibility of heirs. Hanley's discussion of Matilda's loss of the throne on the eve of her coronation in 1141 glosses over more questions than it answers, but no explanation to date has been quite satisfactory. Hanley does not demonstrate familiarity with recent work on royal anger and its performance that may explain this episode better than anything else, but at least she does not follow the lead of other commentators in blaming the Empress's actions on arrogance or early menopause.

The quibbles raised here should not be seen as failings that negate the book's value. On the contrary, Hanley's work will achieve its purpose of attracting non-specialist readers, and it provides the means for them to read further into the scholarship and the sources if they are intrigued—and many of them certainly will be. Hanley also has done more than anyone else to show Matilda's competence as a leader, a military strategist, and a woman who had to deal with issues raised by female biology, such as the failure to produce an heir to Emperor Henry V, or being hampered in her ability to respond to Stephen's seizure of the throne by an unfortunately-timed pregnancy following closely on the difficult birth of her second son. It is somewhat unfair to criticize a book for failing to meet the needs of an audience it was never intended for, although it is so good that it is difficult not to wish that it provided the context for beginning scholars who wish to delve deeper into the historiography to do so. But even without that context, this work will be of immense value to scholarly readers simply because Hanley's engagement with questions of gender provide a masterful addition to scholarship on the Empress.

LOIS L. HUNEYCUTT
University of Missouri, Columbia