Compare and Contrast the Queen of Late Anglo-Saxon England and Early Norman England

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Abstract. After William the conqueror took the England, the new era of the Normans had started. William’s wife Matilda, as the Queen had helped him enormously. What are the differences in the Anglo-Saxon women? Are there any commons? This article is mainly a comparison between Anglo-Saxon women and early Norman women. To compare the two kinds of women who were living in the same ground at different times, it is expected to know the variation of the roles of the female characters and the transformation of the English society. The methods are reading the relevant materials and comparing the function of the women from the two eras. Through this way, the common and difference of women from the two dynasties are expected to be found and well discussed. Education of women in middle ages was also well-discussed in this article.

Marriages in Medieval Times

Before the conquest happened in 1066, in order to obtain a stable position or higher ranking, aristocratic males from Anglo-Saxon society tended to marry women from glorious family who can bring them either wealth or strong power. Marriage is a quite paramount modality of circulating and transferring power within the noble families. In this way, women who brought dowry from one family were the subject of those ambitious males who would like to utilize them for fulfilling their targets. William the conqueror was originally a duke of Normandy, after marrying Matilda, a woman from an honorable family; William’s status had enhanced dramatically and helped him be closer to the throne. In William Rufus’ time, some men from lower class were keen to marry a rich and noble widow to improve their prestige. Although being engaged to men who were inferior to them by the king summoned complain from the dowagers, their marriage indeed changed the status of the men.

In the relationship between the King and the Queen, it would be more complicated. It seems that due to the preferred advantage of male in the process of inheritance, female inheritors for instance the Queens were like to be dominated by males and when the country was governing by the royal couple, the Kings were able to enforce not only his own but also the power brought from the Queens. Sometimes the Queens were not from the country in which the king was in; therefore the foreign Queens were likely to invite resentment from the country. A common method of solving this problem was to let the potential future Queen to the country she will marry whose king and this way led the Queen in a dilemma that she was neither familiar to her own country nor family nor to the country she lived in. The Queens might not that welcome in her husband’s country but what all the Queen would do was to try their best to provide their children with protection and planned for them.

Emma of the Normandy was a famous foreign Queen who played an important role in late Anglo-Saxon England. She had three children, Edward the Confessor, Alfred and a daughter. Emma was not the only wife Æthelred had, because of which after King Æthelred died, the son of his first wife Edmund took the throne and led Emma spent a difficult time from her husband’s death until she married her second husband. During her first wife, it is said that she was dominated by husband and weighed her importance on all her children. After Æthelred’s death, Emma wanted to name her own son Edward as Æthelred’s successor but objected so that she could only ask her young son to flee England. When the second husband died, Emma’s two sons Edward and Harthacnut were governing the country together, with Emma be the role to balance them. On one hand she was mother of both two Kings, on the other hand she attempted to maintain the order of the whole country so that she can protect all her offspring.
Marriages Used as Tools

Both Anglo-Saxon noble women and noble Norman women were tools of politics and power, especially the Queens. There were also some women who devoted themselves into church and left with no child. Because of the limited influence they had, people tended to pay more attention to those women who married a high-level aristocrat and had children who were the heirs of a vast land or abundant wealth. Although Anglo-Saxon period and Norman period were quite different, Queens in two eras still share the same traits. One of them is that their marriages were decided by their family and they had little freedom to choose their husband. Unfortunate marriage happened not only in royal family but also in commoners. Daughters didn’t have the right to choose whom to marry but to follow the decision of their parents or the prior. In Leyser’s book, she narrates a story of Christina of Markyate which could be used to explain that medieval marriage for women was sometimes a nightmare. Christina refusal to the groom chosen by the prior annoyed her parent who decided to take some actions to their daughter’s incoordination. They locked her up, deluded her and offered her benefits to tempt her. The solution of this deadlock was that Christina went to nunnery and dedicated her life to God. Apart from this, if the family didn’t follow the decision made by prior, penalty would be charged.

The person who had the right of deciding whom his female relatives to marry was usually the head of the family for that marriages to them were more about the wealth, benefits and allies, not only the common affairs in people’s life. In order to maximize what they can earn from the marriage, the heads of the families would consider more about the wealth, land or power of the potential candidates rather than the character or merit they held. On the other hand, marriages were regarded as the olive branch that could end a war or meant that the alliance of the two families were formed and they could work together to fight their common enemy. When William the conqueror married Matilda of Flanders, he was only a duke of Normandy. However, Matilda came from a glorious family that her father was descendent of Alfred the Great and her uncles from her mother’s family were King of France and Count of Burgundy. This marriage helped William improved his ranking and enabled him to hold a strong power that he could be closer to the throne.

The other two English Queens Emma and Edith’s marriage probably shared the same reason. Stafford described in her book that “In 1001-2 family politics and national concerned chimed closely together… The protectors of the bones of a murdered brother were enriched…Emma’s marriage was part of all this.” King Emma coming to England was a way to repair this relationship and gave the attackers some strike that they cannot divide the two alliances. Her second marriage was in the same situation of trying to ally with a strong power to beat back the Vikings. What’s more, to find her sons and daughter a protective umbrella so that they can end the exiling life and come back to the normal political life. When Emma married Æthelred, the groom was nearly twice her age which means that she was not his first wife and she had to live many years longer than him. The crown was succeeded by son born by Æthelred’s first wife so that Emma’s son was forced to start exile life. The marriage with Cnut brought them back to England’s politic world and left Edward a tiny space. One reason Edward the confessor could become the King of England is that his mother married the King of England and he was again in the line of inheritance. Similarly, when Edward the confessor back to England, he was only a stepson of the King and if he wished to seize the throne, he needed a powerful wife to help him. Therefore, the marriage between Edward and Edith has been put on the agenda. Due to that Edith was the daughter of Godwine who followed King Æthelred during his late rein time, this marriage could helped Edward a lot because that the Godwine family was almost the most paramount one in England. Although giving Edward no son arouse some crisis and uncertain, the authoritative background of the bride gave Edward an advantage position in coming to power.

Education Background in the Marriages

Another common they share was education. Education could teach them to survive and control in the dreadful medieval world. Moreover, the intelligence influence and the wisdom of the wife
possesses can help her husband in many ways for instance acting like regent, weighing advantages and disadvantages and advising the husband when he was making big decisions. Stafford asserts that she might have picked up some female power and regency before her marriage. According to Stafford, she was depicted as regent in 990s and during the time when Emma was a widow, her politic influence was still remaining which means that she was quite good at politics so that the political education she had received was real and successful. After her second husband was dead, her two sons were ruling England together. When England was governed by two Kings who were brothers, it was quite peace under the control of their mother. Through Tracy Borman’s book a clear idea could be obtained of what Matilda of Flanders had learned. In general, there were four elements of her education content, Latin, religious instruction, how to become a consort of a ruler and how to run the land using the position she had. Because that William had little education, marrying a learned wife like Matilda would be a wise choice. Learning Latin enabled her to tackle the political affairs more freely and skilled. Matilda learned how to aid a ruler before her marriage. After William the conqueror married Matilda, he trusted her and let her deal with most of the affairs.

Norman Queens Dealing with the Affairs

The Conqueror happened in 1066 started a new era in history of England and also a new chapter for Queens. As the first Queen of the Norman period, Matilda did a good example of a wise wife. One distinguishing difference that late Anglo-Saxon Queens and Norman Queens held is that the Norman Queens can play a very crucial part in the main business of the country. Before Matilda, the Queens were only regarded as company and affiliation of the King. Along with Matilda’s husband, she was admitted by God and had the right of ruling the country so as to assisting her husband. Indeed, during the lifetime of William the conqueror and Matilda, the most paramount work for the wife was to govern the duchy before the conquest and run the country after becoming the Queen. She was acting like regent while William was absent and that she was not only the wife and company of the King but also she shared large part of William’s political works.

The influence of Matilda were derived from two parts, one of which was her glorious family, more importantly was her endeavor of dealing with government administration. Another Matilda, Queen of Henry I, who was the daughter of Malcolm III of Scotland and Saint Margaret, started to show her appearance in public after crowned as Queen of England. According to Huneycutt, she spent a lone time at the place in which all the considerable decisions were made. Even when her husband Henry was in tour to Normandy, Matilda was totally holding the main power that she worked in conjunction with the King’s barons and ‘curiales’, Matilda sat in judgments and issued charters dealing with a wide spectrum of cases. She had the means to patronize ecclesiastical institutions of her choice.

By contrast, the impact of Queens in late Anglo-Saxon England was mainly from their native family. Although Queen Emma was famous for her Norman blood, during her first marriage, all her life was surrounded by her husband and children and her name on record was intermittent. She didn’t engage in official political or religious affairs widely. Even when she was the widow of King Æthelred, she had to bring all her children back to Normandy, her native land seeking sanctuary. If she had impact on any part of her land, she would take the children to the place and raise army for her son. The marriage between Edith and Edward the confessor were barren so that Edward wanted to divorce her for a new wife who can bring him important heirs. Her later time was most spent in nunnery which decided that she cannot work in politics like Matilda of Flanders and Matilda of Scotland. The life of Queens in late Anglo-Saxon England had little to do with the political affairs while the Queens from early Norman England had to deal with great deal of politic and religious matters.

Norman Queens Owned Equality as Their Husbands

Another feature which worth mentioning was that between the King and the Queen, the position of
Queens in late Anglo-Saxon time were inferior to the King no matter what kind of family they came from while the early Norman Queens were almost equal to their husbands, even if their husbands were the Kings. This could be indicated in the coronation of them. In both Emma and Edith’s coronation, the rites of the Kings and the Queens had a little difference, which was to stress that the King was chosen by God and was the only sovereign ruler of the country while the queen was merely chosen by her husband, the King. As mentioned before, some rites in the ceremony was to underline that the Queen was also chosen by God and the country was governed by both the King and the Queen. For women in medieval century, marriage meant entering a new family and there were expects for them that they could become the hinge of connecting two families. In order to reach this goal, Queens were likely to turn to the church. They hoped that they can obtain the support that they were looking for. Queens in late Anglo-Saxon time would tend to spent money on church and to be the patronage. Becoming close to the church would be a great help for them while the Queens in early Anglo-Saxon time would direct participated in administrating the church affairs. The two differences between late Anglo-Saxon Queens and Early Norman Queens illustrated that with the flux of history, women’s role has always been changing.

The conquest in 1066 divided two times of England history, Anglo-Saxon and Norman. For women living in this period, the fate of most of them was decided by marriage, even for the Queens. All the marriages happened in medieval century held the same purpose, which was to obtain the interest and benefits from the marriage for both of the family, especially the highest-ranking family. No matter Anglo-Saxon Queen Emma, Edith, or Norman Queen Matilda, all of them were married for the common reason that their families needed them to devote themselves for the alliance of the two sides. Another same feature they had were that they were well-educated before they got married. Men were believed to be at war for earning more wealth and land therefore the purpose of women’s education was quite obvious that despite they needed to improve the self-discipline, they needed to learn how to help their husbands they were fighting on the battlefield or absent. However, Queens who were living in two different times held some differences. One is that Queens from Anglo-Saxon time didn’t have the right to tackle the politic affairs while the early Norman Queens like Matilda of Flanders and Matilda of Scotland were governing the country in terms of not only the politics but also the ecclesiastical business. Moreover, Anglo-Saxon Queens were treated as company of the King and their impact were coming from the background of their native family while the Norman Queens were quite equal to their husbands and almost can share the same position with the King when it comes to governing the country. Due to the limited time and the finite academic ability, there must be other differences which were not found in this essay. Some other unread useful sources and the length of the essay are also the reason why this essay is not satisfying. To work out problems like this, enormous reading and reasonable time management are necessary.

Reference


