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Book Review

Finn, Kavita M. *The Last Plantagenet Consorts: Gender, Genre, and*

Historiography, 1440-1627. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

280pp. \$76.00.

The significant current scholarly interest in the nature of queenship and its medieval and early modern representations is marked by a decidedly fruitful intersection of various critical discourses. Alongside understanding gleaned from available biographical and historical material, in such scholarship traditional feminist concerns overlap with historical, cultural, and literary approaches to produce insightful analyses of the performative, representational, and rhetorical role of the queen. In *The Last Plantagenet Consorts: Gender, Genre, and Historiography, 1440-1627* Kavita Mudan Finn has undertaken to explore portrayals of queenship and power from "embedded narratives" found in historiographical and literary

texts, examining the ways that these portrayals are constructed through various generic conventions. The primary historical figures she studies are Margaret of Anjou, Cecily Neville, Anne Neville, Elizabeth Woodville, and Elizabeth of York, as well as other powerful women associated with Plantagenets and the Wars of the Roses, Eleanor Cobham and Jane Shore for example, and fictional queens like Gwenyvere are also addressed. She is especially interested in the interplay between socio-political anxiety regarding the regnant queens Mary and Elizabeth and contemporaneous depictions of their queenly predecessors. Kavita Finn has chosen a project worthy of study, and she offers an ambitious range of readings regarding the Plantagenet consorts in terms of the genre conventions through which they are portrayed.

Kavita Finn's material is organized along generic and roughly chronological lines. Her first chapter explores a wide variety of late fifteenth-century chronicles and histories as well as *Le Morte Darthur*, explaining the influence of genre on depictions of queens in various texts. Noting the deployment of romance tropes (by which she seems to mean *fin amour* literary conventions), *de casibus* narrative, and tragedy in depictions of queens and queenship, Kavita Finn suggests that these texts serve political and literary goals that may be at once conservative and subversive. She argues that Malory's representation of Gwenyvere's transgressive nature and symbolic function "demonstrates awareness of how the queen's body and image could be manipulated to serve factional ends" (46). In her second chapter, Kavita Finn continues the argument that representation of queens and queenship holds the potential for multivalent political and social significance by tracing representation of the Plantagenet consorts in the histories of Polydore Vergil and Thomas More. Following Roman models for his history, Vergil "sets [Margaret of Anjou] up as a *de casibus* figure, whose entire history is informed by knowledge of her ultimate fall from power," but displaces any

power attributable to Elizabeth Woodville, rendering her a mere stereotype of female inconstancy (57). Kavita Finn argues that Vergil models Elizabeth of York using hagiographical and romantic tropes, asserting that with these and the other Plantagenet women who appear in the narrative Vergil's aim is containment of queenly agency and power. More, on the other hand, represents Elizabeth Woodville as a tragic victim, a "*mater dolorosa*," in order to highlight the viciousness of Richard III. In her third chapter, Kavita Finn continues the theme with her examination of queenly portrayals in the historiographical works of Hall and Holinshed. In chapter four, she reads the depictions of queens, Eleanor Cobham, and, notable for her status as powerful commoner, Jane Shore in *Mirror for Magistrates* primarily in generic terms of allegory and complaint. Readings of queenship in the dramatic works *Ricardus Tertius*, *The True Tragedy of Richard III*, and Heywood's *Edward IV* are the topics of chapter five.

Throughout the introduction and first five chapters of *The Last Plantagenet Consorts*, the reader is reminded that eventually the author will address Shakespeare and his treatment of the Plantagenet consorts, and chapter six finally fulfills that promise. While Kavita Finn does offer sound readings of the representations of queens and queenship in the first tetralogy, and touches briefly on the second tetralogy, the payoff for the reader is unfortunately unfulfilling. She adequately demonstrates that Shakespeare, as one would expect, both uses and subverts source material and that he deploys the various generic conventions to excellent effect, but convincing analysis of the meaning of the comparisons is lacking. What might have been Kavita Finn's strongest point for this chapter, analysis relating to the "supernatural circle" of women, their capability to curse and associations with witchcraft, and queenly voice and agency is too diffusely handled to be effective, though her

final point in the chapter regarding Elizabeth Woodville demonstrates the importance of this aspect of Shakespeare's portrayal to her thesis (169). In spite of its weaknesses, however, this is Kavita Finn's strongest chapter and, perhaps, should have been her last. Instead, she follows it with a seventh chapter treating the historical poetry of Michael Drayton and Samuel Daniel. Kavita Finn is correct in asserting that the representations of queens and consorts in Drayton and Daniel is "part of a larger interrogation—begun in *Mirror for Magistrates* and persisting through ...historiography, poetry, and drama into the Jacobean period," but her analysis here merely lengthens the book rather than significantly expanding and extending the argument (175).

The Last Plantagenet Consorts is carefully researched and thorough, and its attention to lesser-known texts gives Kavita Finn's work real scholarly value. However, Finn's comprehensive treatment of her topic renders the book more encyclopedia than argument. Her organizational choices are also problematic because readers may easily become lost in a sea of Elizabeths, Henrys, Yorks, Lancasters, Beauforts, Nevilles, dukes and duchesses as Finn leaps rapidly through one example after another. Although its breadth seems to make this book appropriate for an audience of scholars with extensive knowledge of Plantagenet history and literature, its depth is insufficient to truly satisfy these readers. Less experienced scholars with an interest in the representation of queens and queenship in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, however, are likely to find some useful insight into genre as a factor in these representations.

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