

“Strong Women Who Ruled England.” Rev. of *The Lioness Roared: The Problems of Female Rule in English History*, by Charles Beem, Palgrave/Macmillan, 271 pages, \$69.95

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Charles Beem, Assistant Professor of History at The University of North Carolina at Pembroke, prefaced his remarks about his new book, *The Lioness Roared: The Problems of Female Rule in English History*, to an audience in the Sampson-Livemore Library of UNC Pembroke on April 16 by pointing out that there is no female equivalent of the word *king* in the English language. The Anglo-Saxon word *cynig* meant a wise, potent, and cunning leader. However, the word *cwen*, which gradually became *queen*, meant the wife of a king, or a woman without the authority of a ruler.

Then Dr. Beem briefly described several situations that occurred when the British had to contend with the fact that there was no male heir-apparent to the throne. Historically primogeniture prevailed and a less than desirable person, a female, ascended into the leadership role when no direct male descendent of the previous occupant of the throne, or king, was available. The females who then became, as Dr. Beem describes them, “female kings,” had to devise strategies that would enable them to establish themselves as true rulers with all the rights and privileges associated with kingship actually belonging to them, despite their gender.

The book contains studies of four females who managed to wield power and authority despite societal expectations for submissiveness to male authority: Matilda, daughter of Henry I; Mary I, daughter of Henry VIII; Anne, daughter of James II; and Victoria, granddaughter of George III.

While never actually receiving a crown, in 1139 Matilda was a major contender for the throne, having been designated by her father as his heir. She presented herself as a female feudal lord and was bolstered with powerful supporters. However, her domineering demeanor angered even more powerful Londoners when she sought a coronation there in 1141, and she was forced to support the ascension to the throne of her son Henry, age seven, who became Henry II in 1152.

Mary I sought to reconcile her subjects to her position by declaring herself the wife of the kingdom, thereby combining the male and female roles as her *modus operandi* for assuming the leadership role. Crowned as monarch in 1553, Mary was the first English ruler to occupy an office previously held only by males, or “lions of England,” and thus she became a lioness, a queen who possessed the prowess of a lion. This role was accepted, uneasily, by the English, who did acknowledge her right to succeed her father to the throne, and she retained the throne until her death in 1558, when she was succeeded by her sister Elizabeth (I), also daughter of Henry VIII.

The focus of the chapter about Queen Anne, who ascended the throne in 1702, was on how she managed to rule without any acknowledgment of her husband's role in the leadership of England. Her husband, Prince George of Denmark, was not allowed to assume the title of king; he was her consort. No male authority figure was needed for Anne to be accorded the respect of her right to inherit the position of sovereign, a role she held until her death in 1714.

Queen Victoria, who occupied the throne longer than any English monarch, from 1837 to 1901, faced challenges that began when she was tested early in her reign in a famous incident known as the "Bedchamber Crisis;" Victoria was 20. In 1839 the Whig prime minister, Viscount Melbourne, tendered the queen his resignation. The Tory leader of the House of Commons, Sir Robert Peel, was offered the prime ministry by Victoria, and he accepted and requested that the Queen replace her bedchamber ladies, whom he assumed had husbands with Whig loyalties. Surprisingly, Victoria refused, stating that her ladies did not influence her political decisions, that they were her social circle and that she could separate the two spheres, domestic and political. Ultimately Victoria kept her bedchamber ladies, Melbourne returned to power, and the young Queen had established her intent to take a stand and make her own decisions.

The book concludes with a chapter that reviews the development of female rule in England from the precedents set by the early "female kings" to the current acceptance of the constitutional monarch, Elizabeth II, herself a ruler due to the continuing prevalence of the rule of primogeniture.

The book by Professor Beem presents some interesting insights that can be embraced by students of English history and feminist and social movements. It is well documented with copious notes that in themselves contain insightful comments about the events that are described. Readers will come to appreciate the knowledge that Elizabeth I was not the only English monarch that knew how to roar like a lion when circumstances required royal assertiveness.

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