

Methods of Queenship in Matrimonial Diplomacy: Fifteenth Century Scottish Royal Women

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Fifteenth century Scotland relied upon matrimonial diplomacy to create ties with mainland Europe and further solidify their alliances with the French and Burgundian courts. Studies of matrimonial diplomacy often solely focus on the political lead-up to the marital alliances, rather on the fates of the individual women who were thrust into foreign courts to sink or swim. Focusing on six key examples of Scottish royal women of the fifteenth century in comparison with the feminine ideals of Christine de Pizan's *The Treasure of the City of the Ladies* and the popular memory of St. Margaret, this paper attempts to address how the Scottish royal women of the fifteenth century worked within societal expectations to solidify their powerbase and create a role for themselves at court.

Matrimonial diplomacy is the practice of solidifying diplomatic ties between two states by uniting two royal houses through marriage. These diplomatic marriages were imperative in Medieval Scotland to create successful links abroad. But consider the young women who left their homes to build a new life and experience a new culture, and it is easy to see that on a personal level, the task of marrying with so much diplomatic significance must have been daunting. Marrying into a foreign court with both language and custom barriers would have presented these royal women with a difficult career of attempting to create a role for themselves in their husband's court. It was doubly difficult by the fifteenth century when the roles of royal women in Scotland and elsewhere had been greatly limited with the increase in political and court bureaucracy. Scotland was no longer the flexible monarchy that had allowed St. Margaret to directly influence the actions of her husband as a partner, rather than simply as Malcolm III's subservient wife.¹ This analysis aims to determine how the Scottish royal women of the fifteenth century--both women who married into or were born into the Scottish monarchy--worked within the societal expectations and ideals applied to women at the time and how they used their prescribed roles to gain the most power and create a role for themselves at court. Therefore, when examining a select number of these fifteenth century royal women--Joan Beaufort, Mary of Guelders, and the daughters of James I--it can be seen that the main power of royal women was derived from four main areas: religious patronage, intellectual pursuits, ceremonial dress and events, and lastly, the bearing of children. The lives of these women evaluated in conjunction with the feminine ideals present in the works of Christine de Pizan and the popular memory of the Scottish queen, St. Margaret, demonstrate that while women were definitely considered not to be political players, they in fact used multifaceted means to gain the power that was conventionally denied to them.

However, the discussion of whether a royal woman worked within societal expectations or if they rebelled, brings to light the question: "What was expected of these royal women?" It is a simple enough question in some respects; these women were expected to be good daughters, sisters, wives, and mothers. They were expected to marry and bear children. Yet, to get a better idea of what ideals women were supposed to live up to it is important to look at one particular source: Christine de Pizan's *The Treasure of the City of the Ladies*. Widowed at a young age,

¹ Fiona Downie, *She is but a woman, Queenship in Scotland, 1424-1463* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2006), 30.

Christine de Pizan was astonished at the poor treatment she received by public officials and began to see how poorly young women were prepared to deal with the world.² She was also astounded at the poor representation of women in literature in general, particularly in Jean de Meun's *Le Roman de la rose*, in which the protagonist searches for the perfect rose which he then ravishes in the final scenes of the poem.³ To support her family and respond to this inequality Pizan wrote her famous work, which was completed in 1405, was the *Treasury of the City of the Ladies*.⁴ It is an allegorical criticism of the misogyny she found in literature, in which Pizan argues that women should not be the subject of such negative portrayals and instead should focus on the beneficial roles women played in society.⁵ Written in the first person, Christine begins by building an imaginary city inhabited only by women, with the aid of the feminine virtues of Reason, Rectitude, and Justice.⁶ The foundations of the city walls and buildings are exemplary historical women who had contributed to society, such as Minerva and Joan of Arc.⁷ The fictional Christine also converses with the Virtues to gain understanding into the best method to guarantee female contribution to society, coming to the conclusion that a thorough practical and moral education will prepare a woman for her role as the wife of her husband.⁸ Lastly, Christine de Pizan also describes the ideal day of a lady, from distributing alms, hearing as many masses as possible, to assuming the roles of head of her husband's council in his absence, and embodying perfect courtly manners.⁹ To Pizan, the virtues of humility, obedience, patience, and compassion were a Princess' best friends as they allowed her to be an intercessor to her husband, embodying what were seen as "'natural' female qualities."¹⁰

These descriptions of the ideal form of womanhood also demonstrate the complex nature of Christine de Pizan's writing. In many ways Pizan's works are hugely feminist, advocating better education for women as well as citing famous women from history as positive role models for other women to exemplify. She rails against the poor treatment of women in everyday life and in literature, yet Pizan still adheres to the convention that a women's primary role was as her husband's helpmate. Despite this, Christine de Pizan was not writing to refute any kind of societal norms the way modern feminism has done, rather, as Charity Cannon Willard aptly puts it, "It could scarcely be expected, for instance, that [Christine] would undertake to change the nature of society that was so generally believed to have been ordained by divine will."¹¹ Christine de Pizan was a product of a society that believed in the dissimilar nature of men and women, yet at the same time, in her writings, Pizan aimed at encouraging women to be the best

² Charity Cannon Willard, "The Defense of Women" from *The Writings of Christine de Pizan* by Christine de Pizan, ed. Charity Cannon Willard (New York: Persea Books, 1994), 138.

³ Cannon Willard, 138.

⁴ Sharen L. Jansen, *Reading Women's Worlds from Christine de Pizan to Doris Lessing, A Guide to Six Centuries of Women Writers Imagining Rooms of Their Own* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 26.

⁵ Cannon Willard, 139.

⁶ Christine de Pizan, "The Book of the City of the Ladies" from *The Writings of Christine de Pizan*, ed. Charity Cannon Willard (New York: Persea Books, 1994), 178-179.

⁷ Joan M. Ferrante, *To the Glory of her Sex, Women's Roles in the Composition of Medieval Texts* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1997), 212.

⁸ Pizan, 195.

⁹ Downie, *She is but a woman*, 13.

¹⁰ Ibid, 11.

¹¹ Cannon Willard, 137.

members of society they could be.¹² Pizan's descriptions of the ideal day of a lady, or her fictional city of the ladies built by womanly virtues and historical examples, are both attempts to demonstrate what Pizan views as the correct way to gain influence.¹³ Pizan's ideal woman uses realistic methods to gain influence, methods that were socially acceptable, as they were the roles expected of women. The better these roles were carried out the more likely a Princess' or Queen's rule would be sound. Her allegorical City of the Ladies is an attempt to demonstrate the potential all women had to derive power through their husband's affections, religious piety, compassionate rule, and the maintenance of womanly virtues.¹⁴

Besides the ideal presented by Christine de Pizan, another idealised example of womanly virtues of the middle ages was Margaret of Wessex, later canonized as St. Margaret of Scotland. As an Anglo-Saxon princess, Margaret fled north after the Norman Conquest of 1066, where she eventually married Malcolm III of Scotland.¹⁵ Margaret, who was greatly influenced by the pious courts of her childhood in Hungary, and Edward the Confessor's England, was shocked by the Celtic Church in Scotland.¹⁶ She built St. Margaret's Chapel in Edinburgh, a church in Dunfermline, as well as shelters for the poor.¹⁷ She also began wide-scale reforms of the Celtic Church with her confessor, and later biographer, Turgot, when they discovered that priests often married and the practices of each parish varied widely.¹⁸ The effects of her reforms as well as the popular memory of her as the ideal woman is so apparent that all one has to do is look at the names given to the Scottish royal women. Indeed, the name Margaret was so popular amongst generations of Scottish princesses it is an easy demonstration of how her memory persisted.¹⁹ However, her memory also persisted in the cult of personality around her, both as a saint, and as a woman. Margaret was also fondly remembered for being the equal partner of her kingly husband, rather than his subservient wife, a role that the twelfth century Scottish court allowed, but the bureaucratic fifteenth century court did not.²⁰ She had become queen at a time in which she had a larger part to play in her husband's court and a time in which social reforms could dramatically change society itself, much as her religious reforms did.

Therefore it is hardly surprising that Scottish royal women used conventional means, such as religion to effectively to gain respect in the hope that this respect could be translated into influence and power. There are numerous examples, besides the epitomic example of St. Margaret, but perhaps the best is James I's daughter, Isabella who married "Francis, Duke of Brittany in 1442."²¹ Isabella was particularly devout, and many of her Books of Hours survive,

¹² Downie, *She is but a woman*, 14.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Kázmér Nagy, *St. Margaret of Scotland and Hungary* (Glasgow: John S. Burns & Sons, 1973), 16.

¹⁶ Alan J. Wilson, *St. Margaret, Queen of Scotland*, foreword by the Very Reverend Dr. Ronald Selby Wright (Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers Ltd., 1993), 45.

¹⁷ Wilson, 63-66, 70-72.

¹⁸ Ibid, 70-72.

¹⁹ Downie, *She is but a woman*, 29.

²⁰ Ibid, 30.

²¹ Pricilla Bawcutt and Bridget Henisch, "Scots Abroad in the Fifteenth Century: The Princesses Margaret, Isabella, and Eleanor," in *Women in Scotland c.110-1750*, ed. Elizabeth Ewan and Maureen M. Meikle (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1999), 48.

demonstrating her patronage of both book-making and religion.²² While it is hardly surprising that women used the avenue of religion to contribute to society, after the discussion of Christine de Pizan's works and the example of St. Margaret, it is still amazing to see what Isabella was able to accomplish in her role as the Duchess of Brittany. Book making at the time was a lengthy process, it was years before the printing press became wide-spread, so the five Books of Hours and a copy of *Somme le Roi*, a text discussing the articles of faith and the sacraments, that can be traced back to Isabella is a rather impressive feat.²³ One Book of Hours may have belonged to the Duke of Brittany's first wife, Yolande of Anjou, only to be inherited by Isabella, but the evidence suggests that at least one of the Books of Hours associated with her was absolutely commissioned by her. It is also very likely that Isabella commissioned another three.²⁴ Similarly, Isabella patronized both the Carmelites and the Franciscans, often being depicted in her books in dedicated illustrations wearing a Franciscan girdle made of cord.²⁵

This, however, is not unique to Isabella. Most royal and aristocratic women were involved in religious patronage at least at a local level, but Isabella serves as a prime example of how involved royal women were in using piety as a symbol. The evidence of religious patronage is patchy at best, yet even without the precise knowledge of how wide-spread the various forms of patronage were, it is rather more important to understand that any degree of religious patronage or piety would have earned Isabella and other royal women, considerable respect. Demonstrating religious piety was a role that royal women were expected to play, but at the same time, being seen as pious could gain a royal woman considerable respect. It was a demonstration that she was moralistically fit to rule, either beside her husband, or as a regent for her son. Regardless of whether the piety was sincere or not, religious worship and patronage were useful means for a woman to garner respect and position, something that was easily seen in both the cult of worship of St. Margaret and the writings of Christine de Pizan, who encouraged piety for the sake of increasing a woman's honour.²⁶

Another method of gaining prestige and honour was through education and patronage of the arts. Both Margaret and Eleanor, two of James I's daughters, serve as exemplary patrons of learning and the arts, demonstrating an education Christine de Pizan would have approved of. Margaret was married to the Dauphin of France in 1436, where she began to write poetry, a pastime she shared with her father, James I.²⁷ Unfortunately; her poetry did not win her any favours with her husband, or with some harsher critics who considered it unseemly for a woman to be a poet. Yet, despite this, Margaret did win over her royal in-laws, the King and Queen of France, as well as much of the court with her artistic endeavours and was greatly mourned after her premature death in 1445.²⁸ She had been the leader of a group of poets, musicians, and dancers at court and many of her fellow artists mourned her death. While none of her poetry exists today, she is recorded having written as many as twelve poems a day.²⁹ Her sister Eleanor was similarly

²² Bawcutt and Henisch, 48.

²³ Ibid, 48 - 49.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid, 50.

²⁶ Downie, *She is but a woman*, 13.

²⁷ Bawcutt and Henisch, 46.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

intellectual. After their mother, Joan Beaufort's death, Eleanor travelled to France with her sister Joan only to arrive shortly after Margaret's death.³⁰ Eventually Eleanor married Sigismund, Duke of Tyrol, in 1448 a union that would allow Eleanor to pursue her intellectualism further.³¹

It is recorded that Eleanor was regent to her husband during the 1450s, was also allowed to have her own seals for documents, and was a key component to raising money for her husband's armies.³² Like all of the daughters of James I, Eleanor had been taught to read and to write, but in Eleanor's case, her correspondence in "German, Latin, French, and Scots" still exist today, proving her intellect.³³ Her reputation as a learned woman was so acclaimed that even the humanist translator Heinrich Steinhöwel dedicated his translation of Boccaccio's *De Claris mulieribus* to Eleanor as a "crowning representation of all women."³⁴ Pizan had argued that women should receive better education to improve their status by becoming the best female counterparts to their husbands, and Eleanor Stewart is perhaps the best example of the popularity to be won if a woman could demonstrate her intellectual capabilities and wisdom. Her elder sister Margaret possessed similar abilities but was perhaps a bit hindered by her husband's dislike and her choice of medium. Eleanor, in comparison, married into a court that encouraged learning and intellectual advancement, something that earned her a reputation as an exemplary woman. Margaret was also hindered by pervasive rumours and a husband who limited the extent she could exert any influence, but despite her limited success, both Margaret and Eleanor were able to add to their reputations through demonstrating their intellectual acumen and education.

Yet in terms of which avenue provided these women with the greatest amount of power and influence, both religion and culture fall short. While patronage of the arts and religion earned the female practitioners considerable respect, they did not always translate into direct power the way that ceremonies were capable of accomplishing. Whether a royal marriage, ceremonial dress, or the coronation of a Queen, ceremonial procedures were hugely symbolic of power. Demonstrating the importance of a royal woman in outward symbols, such as a coronation or an ermine cloak, did elevate her position by reminding the world that as her husband's royal bride she was his helpmate and thus could act as an intercessor to him. Both Joan Beaufort and Mary of Guelders actively were involved in ceremonies that reinforced their roles as the partner of their husbands: their coronations as queens. While, of course, the practice of using coronations as a symbolic link between the king and queen to reinforce the queen's role was a longstanding tradition, the coronations of Joan Beaufort and Mary of Guelders had unique aspects that further accentuated their powerful role as queen. In Joan's case, because James I had been uncrowned at upon his release from English custody, when James and Joan reached Scotland both were actually crowned in the same ceremony. This was a dramatic break with tradition.³⁵ Their joint coronation on the 21st of May, 1424 was merely for efficiency and was not meant to demonstrate that Joan was the equal to her husband, but it is easy to see that that impression could be

³⁰ Ibid, 50-51.

³¹ Bawcutt and Henisch, 46.

³² Ibid, 51.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Heinrich Steinhöwel in Pricilla Bawcutt and Bridget Henisch, "Scots Abroad in the Fifteenth Century: The Princesses Margaret, Isabella, and Eleanor," in *Women in Scotland c.110-1750*, ed. Elizabeth Ewan and Maureen M. Meikle (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1999), 52.

³⁵ Downie, *She is but a woman*, 90.

reached.³⁶ Queens, especially Scottish queens, were generally crowned in a separate ceremony from their husbands to reinforce their position as merely his wife and an intercessor rather than a monarch with potential for power. This break from tradition would have been seen as unusual at best, and it could hardly have helped James I's precarious and unpopular rule over an aristocracy that eventually organised his murder.³⁷

Mary of Guelders' coronation hosted a different, but similarly effective symbol of her female power. It is rather their wedding and her individual coronation, both of which occurred on July 3rd, 1449, which symbolised her role as her husband's equal.³⁸ Mary of Guelders and James II were married wearing almost identical ensembles of white and gold, but it was their clothing for Mary's coronation ceremony later the same day that really was jaw-droppingly ornate.³⁹ Dressed in matching violet robes trimmed with ermine, James and Mary were visually "[underlining] the partnership of king and queen."⁴⁰ Mary was visually being tied to her husband, emphasising that her power began and ended with him, her role was his wife, but at the same time, their matching costumes also functioned similarly to the double coronation of James I and Joan Beaufort: they were equals. Both were clothed in royal purple and ermine, symbolising their united status as monarchs. It may not have been as strong of a statement as the double coronation in 1421, but rather, Mary of Guelders coronation was a more subtle version of the same desire to visibly demonstrate her power as queen. Despite whatever was socially acceptable or normal at the time, or whatever the examples Christine de Pizan or St. Margaret presented, these royal women found ways to elevate themselves symbolically to seem as equals to their husbands. It did not matter that in reality they were not their husband's equals in political power and influence, rather, it was important that they made it seem like they were. It was a form of peacocking, a purely visual sign of their strength and influence that was an attempt to actually gain a degree of the power they were demonstrating. In terms of royal women, ceremonial dress and occasions were not demonstrations of authority, as it was with their husband's coronations, but rather it was a demonstration of what a royal woman wished her power was. It was a means to gain that influence rather than to actually exhibit a reality.

Despite the success of these diverse methods to gain power and respect, it still remains that the most likely method for a royal woman, whether a queen, a princess, or a duchess, to gain recognition and power was to produce children. Not only was this fulfilling the purpose of the marriage, but it was a way to ensure a woman's connection to her adopted homeland.⁴¹ It ensured the succession as well as providing her with a genetic link to the next generation, a bond that was greater than any diplomatic match. Joan Beaufort was hugely successful in this aspect producing eight children, including twin boys and the six daughters who proved so useful in diplomatic marriages.⁴² Mary of Guelders similarly produced five children, three of which were boys.⁴³ These ties ensured that they had a continued role in the monarchy, which was especially

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Rosalind K. Marshall, *Scottish Queens, 1034-1714* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2033), 52.

³⁸ Downie, *She is but a woman*, 79.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Downie, *She is but a woman*, 79.

⁴¹ Ibid, 133.

⁴² Marshall, 51.

⁴³ Ibid, 64.

important if their husband died prematurely. By bearing sons it meant that a royal woman's power was no longer solely derived from being her husband's wife, but also from being the mother to a future ruler as well, a combination that helped improve a royal woman's position tenfold. A royal woman could be regent for her husband in absentia, but regency for an underage king allowed these royal women the greatest access to power. Joan Beaufort held the position of regent in 1428 and 1435 when James I embarked on lengthy trips "[making] his nobles swear oaths of fealty to her."⁴⁴ Similarly, Eleanor Stewart was allowed to rule Tyrol and raise armies in her husband's stead; however, these regencies were issued with an expiration date.⁴⁵ Yet, ruling in a husband's place was only ever a short-term change in the amount of political power a royal woman could have access to. Bearing sons while also being an effective method to gaining support in a foreign court, undoubtedly gave a royal woman more potential for continued involvement in her adopted country as regent for her son.

Analysing the role of bearing children into a royal marriage is more difficult than analysing the role of ceremony or piety, for example, it is hardly as if royal women could choose the gender of her unborn child to influence the amount of respect she could gain. It was not a deliberate choice to curry more favour and power, but rather a matter of chance. The best a queen could do was to produce multiple children to ensure that there were sons to guarantee her continued role in the monarchy. It was not necessarily a deliberate method to gain more power, but it did prove to be the most effective. Both Joan Beaufort and Mary of Guelders produced sons before their husbands' premature deaths, which resulted in their two short-lived regencies. Joan Beaufort ruled in James II's place from 1437 until her second marriage in 1439, and Mary of Guelders ruled after James II's death from 1460 until her own death in 1463.⁴⁶ Although these regencies were for a short duration, the fact that they had access to direct power demonstrates that both of these royal women had gained enough respect and influence that both their husbands and the court to allow them to have direct access to power. If these fifteenth century royal women had not already illustrated their influence and capabilities, it would have hardly been likely that they would have been trusted by either their husbands or the courts to gain access to any degree of political power.

However, not all fifteenth century royal women adhered to the roles that they were assigned. Annabella, the youngest of James I and Joan Beaufort's daughters was in some ways, very similar to her sisters, but at the same time, the utmost contrast of what a royal woman should be like. She is a rare example of a woman not adhering to the proscribed role assigned to her, but rather to defiantly refuse to cooperate. Betrothed to "Louis, count of Geneva in December 1444" Annabella was sent to live in her future father-in-law's court in Savoy to learn its customs and to familiarize herself with her new family.⁴⁷ The betrothal, like her sisters' marriages were part of the extended diplomacy of Burgundy, yet, by 1456 when the betrothal was no longer useful Annabella was recalled to Scotland by her brother.⁴⁸ However, Annabella refused to return, demonstrating unparalleled stubbornness and noncompliance that was a complete rejection of the

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Bawcutt and Hensich, 51.

⁴⁶ Marshall, 53, 66-68.

⁴⁷ Downie, *She is but a woman*, 54

⁴⁸ Downie, "'La voie quelle meace tenir': Annabella Stewart, Scotland, and the European Marriage Market, 1444-1456", *Scottish Historical Review* vol. 78, no. 206 (October 1999), 175.

womanly virtues that most royal women adhered to. Eventually, her fond foster father, the Duke, asked the Scots to “take her away in what way and manner they please.”⁴⁹ It was at the same time, both a nuisance for her foster family who had grown to love her but now was faced with the annoyance of continually asking her to leave and an embarrassment to her brother, who would have looked weak in his inability to force her to return. Annabella’s refusal to leave the continent is a significant exception to the rule that the other royal woman adhered to, but it is hardly surprising that Annabella did not desire to leave her foster family. Annabella was perhaps as young as nine when she left Scotland in 1445 and it is likely that her memory of her parents and the land of her birth were distant at best, making it natural that the love and affection she had received in the court of her foster family was preferable to her than returning to Scotland.⁵⁰ Savoy was a cultured, educated, vivacious court and Annabella enjoyed it. She had been educated and “prepared... for life as a woman of power” and Annabella most likely realised that returning to her birth country would not provide her with a marriage of an equal calibre.⁵¹ However, in the end, she could not resist forever without having any support from either Savoy or Scotland, and she returned to Scotland in 1458 and married the Earl of Huntly.⁵²

Examining Annabella’s ultimate marriage to a Scottish nobleman of limited power compared to the international marriages of her mother, sisters, and sister-in-law does provide an interesting comparison in what ultimately were the most successful means to gain power, respect, and support in the fifteenth century. It seems that women actually could gain the most power and have the most influence by planning the hand life dealt strategically. Adhering to paternalistic standards may not be an idea that many can stomach in the modern world, but in the case of fifteenth century royal women it is obvious that the women who took advantage of their expected roles and conformed to expectations ultimately were more successful than Annabella’s attempt to rebel against the system and refuse to return to Scotland. Royal women were a product of their time, they were raised to know they had high standards to maintain, standards that can easily be seen in Christine de Pizan or the famous example of St. Margaret, fifteenth century Scottish royal women were raised to be exemplary candidates for marriage and queenship. This did not mean that they blindly followed the path laid out for them. They were well-educated, well-bred young women who understood that they could make the most of their situations, which is what they precisely did. They sponsored religious texts and orders, they demonstrated their intellectualism, they used ceremonies to curry favour and demonstrate their influential position as intercessors to their husbands. Above all else, they bore children that ensuring their continued role in the monarchy they had married into. On the whole, they may not have rebelled against the traditional system, but instead, they found avenues and opportunities within society’s expectations to create their legacy and wield power.

⁴⁹ Downie, “La voie quelle meace tenir?...” 179.

⁵⁰ Downie, “La voie quelle meace tenir?...” 170.

⁵¹ Ibid, 171.

⁵² Ibid, 180.

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