Queen Emma & Queen Edith

Queenship and Women's Power in Eleventh-Century England

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Queen Emma and Queen Edith

For Bill

Preface

On the Wednesday of Ember week, during Lent 1072, a small group gathered in the upper room of the westworks of the new stone church of Wilton nunnery. There was a bishop, half a dozen priests and deacons, rather more lay nobles, two goldsmiths and a couple of cooks. All but the bishop and one of the goldsmiths were English; all, without exception, were survivors of the pre-1066 English regime. They were transacting a gift of land by one of the nobles to the church of Wells, and the scribe of the charter recorded the event, not in Latin, but in Old English. At the centre of the group, and the principal witness to the proceedings, was a middle-aged woman. She was, as the recorder of the events described her, Edith 'the Lady, the widow of King Edward'. This is the last recorded public appearance of Queen Edith, the last pre-Norman Conquest English queen. The choir had just sung the psalm for this Wednesday in Lent 'Remember thy mercies O Lord'. There is no knowing what Edith was prompted to recall; it is the purpose of this book to supply the story of seventy years of queenship on which she might have reminisced.

The two women with whom it is concerned are Emma, the Norman woman who came to England in 1002 as the bride of King Æthelred II (the Unready), and her daughter-in-law Edith, who married Edward, the future Confessor, son of Emma and Æthelred and the last native English king. The careers of these two queens span a turbulent period in English history, involving two foreign conquests, the second by the Normans in 1066 a permanent one, and a protracted succession problem of which the Conquest of 1066 was the dramatic outcome. The part played in all this by both queens is a central concern of this book. It is not, however, its intention to retell the eleventh century with the queens added in. Instead it is a retelling from a perspective focused on these queens which will, it is hoped, provide new insight into that century.

This is not a conventional biography. The materials do not exist to permit such a biography for eleventh-century English men let alone women, though Emma and Edith are especially well served by two

almost unique sources which they themselves commissioned, the *Encomium Emmae Reginae* and the *Life of King Edward who rests at Westminster*. These are rare works of political apologia from the English eleventh century, and are in themselves compelling reasons to explore the lives of the women for whom they were produced. Neither, however, provides the basis for a sustained biography of either queen. This problem of sources is a challenge and an opportunity. It focuses attention on what little we know about eleventh-century political actors, male as well as female, and invites a detailed consideration of the sources of this knowledge, with a view to asking not merely who wrote and when, but to what purposes, from what perspectives, and especially to tell what overall tale. It is the structure of the narratives which people chose to write at the time and soon after which determines the structure of the lives which can be told. The story of Emma and Edith is thus told three times in three different ways in what follows: once briefly as a set of facts as far as possible without interpretation in the prologue to Part I; secondly through the various contemporary and near-contemporary chronicles of the eleventh century in which Emma and Edith feature, which form the bulk of Part I; and finally in my own reconstructed and interpreted late twentieth-century narrative in Part III. This final narrative is as close as the book comes to a biography of these women. It draws heavily on the sources from Part I, and on the wider comparative framework which study of tenth- and eleventh-century powerful women more generally can provide and especially on recent work informed by the concerns and interests of women's history. It also derives insight from Part II. Part II is a study of the structures of eleventh- and, since a longer perspective is necessary, tenth-century English queenship. The problems of eleventh-century biography compel a consideration of the deeper structures which underlie and shape even if they do not determine all individual lives. Neither Emma nor Edith can properly be understood without attention to the structures and frameworks within which they lived and to the roles and identities which they, as individual women, combined. The sum total of those roles and structures is the 'Queenship' of the title; Emma and Edith the 'Queens'.

The book is a study of eleventh-century English queens and queenship, but it stops well short of the end of the eleventh century, with the death of Edith in 1075. It therefore excludes the third eleventh-century English queen, Mathilda. This exclusion has been made with some regret. It might appear to reinforce the idea of 1066 and the coming of the Normans as a sharp turning point, a thesis by which I am far from convinced; many of the conditions of English queenship remained constant across this divide. The reasons were largely pragmatic. The inclusion of Mathilda would have required more consideration of Norman inheritance and family, which would have extended an already lengthy

book. Whatever the common threads across 1066, later writers often felt the date significant, and exploration of the differing interpretations of two pre-conquest English queens in these sources raised interesting comparisons to which the Norman queen would have been extraneous. And finally Emma and Edith were an especially interesting pairing because of the works of self-presentation they commissioned. The decision to stop in 1075 is, nonetheless, a rather arbitrary one, and one with which I still feel some unease.

In the writing of this book there was a recurrent problem of terminology posed by the term 'queen'. It is only with the queen as the king's wife or mother, not as a female king, 'rex femineus', that this book is concerned; with the exception of Æthelflæd at the beginning of the tenth century there were no regnant queens in the period it touches on. 'Queen', even in this more restricted sense, is both a general term, denoting all the various identities of the king's wife, and one with a specific meaning, denoting a consecrated Queen and a partner in or parallel to the official and public duties of the King. I have tried to maintain this distinction of meaning by using the capitalized form 'Queen' only in the latter sense and as a title, as e.g. Queen Emma. 'Queen' and 'Queenship' have thus been restricted to discussions of the official, quasi-kingly role and identity of the 'queen'; 'queen' has been used to describe kings' wives and mothers more generally, whether or not they were consecrated and had this official role.

Finally I have called Emma by her Norman name, and not 'Ælfgifu' the name she was given when she married Æthelred and by which she was always known in England before 1066. This is for several reasons: to avoid confusion, since Ælfgifu is a common name in the English royal family; because it is the name by which she is most generally known in English historiography, but especially because Emma was her own given name in Normandy.

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Much of the research and all the writing of this book took place during my tenure of a British Academy Research Readership from 1994 to 1996, and I owe a major debt of gratitude to the British Academy for providing me with this unique opportunity without which this book would probably not have been written and certainly not in this form. Thanks are also due to the staff of the Interlibrary loans section of the University of Huddersfield, of the Brotherton Library in Leeds, and of the Manuscript Room at the British Library for unfailing courtesy under whatever pressure.

The book is the fruit of a long-standing interest in the history of the tenth and eleventh centuries and in the history of powerful women. Over the years I have incurred innumerable debts for help and inspiration in pursuit of these interests; it is impossible to acknowledge them all, and in many ways invidious to single out a few. I owe, however, particular thanks to those who have answered questions, provided information or allowed me to see work in advance of publication in the course of the writing of this book: to Simon Keynes for providing me with a copy of his invaluable Atlas of Attestations to pre-1066 charters; to Julia Crick, for letting me see her work on nunneries, and to George Garnett for his on the Third Coronation *Ordo*; to Erin Barrett for discussion of the iconography of the royal couple; to Tim Thornton for advice on the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century court for comparative purposes; to Lesley Coote for references to Henry of Huntingdon and prophecy; to Michelle Brown for advice on the dating of manuscripts of the *ordines*; to David Bates for critical scrutiny of the Norman genealogy, and to Katharine Keats-Rohan for allowing me to see her own unpublished work on this subject. Most of all my thanks are due to Susan Kelly, for an advance copy of her edition of the Shaftesbury charters and for her working copies of the charters of 975–1066, an interim supplement to Birch, and of her forthcoming second edition of *Sawyer's Handlist of Anglo-Saxon Charters*. All historians of early England will owe her a huge debt when this finally

appears, and those who have had the benefit of it in advance an even larger one.

Some debts are more general than these. I shall always be grateful to Stuart Airlie for first prompting me to pull together my thoughts on Emma and Edith by asking me to address staff and students in Glasgow; they remain the audience for Emma and Edith in their earlier incarnations of whom I have the fondest memories. My own students have given me much stimulus, not least those whose horror at Emma's lack of maternal feeling forced me to think hard about eleventh-century motherhood. Three people in particular have been a source of friendship and sustenance, intellectual and other, over many years: Nicholas Brooks, Janet Nelson, who also read the chapter on 'Queenship', and Susan Reynolds. My thanks are due to all of them. Finally my husband has been an unfailing support. He read the whole manuscript in draft and clarified it at many points, and provided encouragement when it was most needed. This book owes more to him than to anyone else, and it is to him that it is dedicated.

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Part I

The Stories

Prologue

Shorn of interpretation and judgement, the bones of Emma's and Edith's lives are bare and sparse.

Emma was one of the nine known children of Richard I of Normandy; almost certainly his daughter by his Danish-descended wife Gunnor and thus the sister of Richard II, who became duke of Normandy after his father in 996, and of Robert Archbishop of Rouen. She was the aunt of dukes Richard III and Robert and great-aunt of Duke William, better known in England as the Conqueror. In 1002 she came to England to marry King Æthelred II, the Unready. Emma was not the English king's first wife. He had been married before, once if not twice, and already had a large family of six sons and at least four daughters. At the time of the marriage Emma's French/Norman name was changed for an English one, Ælfgifu. She bore Æthelred three children: two sons and a daughter, Edward, the future Confessor, Alfred and Godgifu.

Emma's marriage took place against the background of the Scandinavian attacks which plagued Æthelred's England. These culminated in Swein of Denmark's conquest of England in 1013. Emma, her sons and later her husband then took refuge at the Norman court with her brother Richard II. After Swein's death early in 1014, Æthelred returned to rule briefly until his own death in 1016. An armed struggle for the throne ensued between Æthelred's eldest surviving son, Emma's stepson, Edmund Ironside, and Swein's son, Cnut. Fierce fighting, the division of the kingdom, then Edmund's death made Cnut king of all England by the end of 1016.

In 1017 Cnut, the Danish conqueror, married Emma, Æthelred's widow. By this second husband she had two more children, a son Harthacnut and a daughter, Gunnhild, who in 1036 married Henry III, then king of the Romans, future emperor. Again Emma was not a first wife. Cnut already had a union with an English noble woman, Ælfgifu, daughter of a former ealdorman of York, a union which his marriage to Emma may not have terminated. Before or after 1016 Ælfgifu bore him

two sons, Swein and Harold Harefoot. Cnut's reign is the second stage of Emma's career in England, and is marked by most references to her in charters and similar documents.

The death of Cnut late in 1035 put an end to this phase and inaugurated a third, dominated by questions concerning the succession to his several kingdoms of Denmark, Norway and England, particularly concerning that to the English throne. During his lifetime Cnut had sent his son Swein and Swein's mother Ælfgifu to act as regents in Norway, and despatched Harthacnut to be regent in Denmark. At the time of his father's death, Harold Harefoot was the only son in England. From late 1035 until 1037 the English throne was once again at issue. Harthacnut remained in Denmark, whilst Harold collected support in England. At first Emma remained at Winchester, with Cnut's military household and in possession of the royal treasure; Godwine earl of Wessex was close to her. In 1036 her sons by Æthelred, Edward and Alfred, returned to England from their refuge in Normandy. Alfred was captured, blinded and died in circumstances which left suspicion attached to both Godwine and Harold. Edward, who had gone to his mother at Winchester, now returned quickly to Normandy. In 1037 Emma's stepson Harold became king of the English and she was exiled to Flanders; there she lived, enjoying the hospitality of Count Baldwin, until 1039.

In that year her son Harthacnut joined her, and in 1040, on the death of Harold Harefoot, mother and son, accompanied by a fleet, returned to England where Harthacnut was accepted as king. Emma now entered the final stage of her life, as queen-mother. In 1041 Edward was recalled from Normandy, and associated in some way in rule; after Harthacnut's premature death in 1042, he became king in turn. A year later, in 1043, Edward deprived his mother of much treasure and land. Although Emma was restored to court by 1044, little or no evidence has survived of her activity after this and she disappears from view after 1045. Emma probably lived the rest of her life at Winchester, where she died on 6 March 1052. She was buried there in the Old Minster alongside her second husband, Cnut.

The bones of Edith's life are even barer. She was one of the nine or more children of Earl Godwine of Wessex and the Danish noblewoman Gytha, the sister of jarls Ulf and Eilaf, whom Godwine married after Cnut's conquest of England. Through her mother's brother, Ulf, Edith was cousin to Swein Estrithson, later king of Denmark. She was raised at the royally-connected nunnery of Wilton. Edith's family survived the return of the English dynasty when Edward succeeded to the throne in 1042 with their standing confirmed: her father remained earl of Wessex, effectively of England south of the Thames, and her brothers Harold and Swein were given earldoms in 1043. On 23 January 1045, Edith married King Edward, Emma's son. The marriage was childless. In 1051 she was