

William Layher: *Queenship and voice in medieval Northern Europe*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. 237 pp. ISBN 978-0-230-10465-5 (hb.)

REVIEWED BY KIM BERGQVIST

Research on medieval queenship has been around for twenty years, more or less, and during this time many interesting studies have been produced, in a number of disciplines and dealing with different geographic areas. Still, compared to studies on kingship the field is both smaller and considerably younger. William Layher's book is the first full-length study in this vein that sets out to explore queenship in medieval Scandinavia.¹

William Layher is an American medievalist who specializes in German and Scandinavian literatures and culture. His 1999 Harvard dissertation was entitled *Queen Eufemia's Legacy: Middle Low German Literary Culture, Royal Patronage, and the First Old Swedish Epic (1301)*. He has since published widely in English and German on print culture and literary circulation, monstrosity and the heroic codes of the pre-modern epic, as well as on medieval female lordship and political voice. Part of the study in the present book was previously published as "Elephants in the Garden. On Wild Beasts and *whwalla* in the Old Swedish *Dikten om kung Albrecht*," in the anthology *Lärdomber oc skämptan. Medieval Swedish Literature Reconsidered*.

The book under scrutiny takes a somewhat original approach to the study of queenship and medieval literature. Layher does not propose to study queenship *in* literature, but rather queenship *through* literature. His method is to analyse the political action of the queens as patrons of literature, thereby seeking to explore how the female voice could speak indirectly in political circumstances.

Layher justifies his study by pointing out the research gap concerning queenship as a political institution in peripheral medieval European areas. At the same time, the author takes care to call attention to the specificity and distinctive character of the Scandinavian case in particular (due in large part to the lateness of the arrival of courtliness to these parts), and the overall variability of medieval queenship in general. Layher does, however, not intend to fill the gap by writing a synthesis in this field. Instead, his book delivers arguments related to the self-representative aspect of

¹ For a short but comprehensive study on this topic, see Imsen 1997.

queenship, studied through examples of cultural transfer. Layher's study concerns foremost "the connection between power and authority in the construction and exercise of female lordship," examining how three queens augmented and conveyed their authority by the use of voice for representation. (2)

Layher also contributes a study of auditivity to challenge the existing paradigm of visibility as the primary mode for cultural and historical analysis. Although posing more difficulties, analysing the process of hearing can lead to conclusions as interesting as analyses of the process of seeing, states Layher.

The questions involved in the study are about the presence, permanence, and flexibility of self and voice, how these two are interconnected and how the one can be used to further the aims of the other. Chapter two, "Sound, Voice, and *Vox*: The Acoustics of the Self in the Middle Ages", describes the medieval understanding and theoretical discourse on sound and voice. Layher prompts the point that voice was understood to be the manifestation of the imagination and intent of a soul. Basing his perception of medieval voice both in the tradition that ran from Aristotle through Thomas of Aquinas to Roger Bacon, as well as in modern theoreticians' work, such as that of Paul Zumthor, Layher proposes to study the embodiment of the (vernacular) political voice of medieval Nordic queens. His investigation places the focus on the queens' role as literary patrons, combining their authoritative voices with the performative lyric voice of the poets. Furthermore, he argues that the manner in which the queens' voices was expressed—in which literary form, in which language, and through which mediators—defined its political gain.

The first example and the first case study, which makes up chapter three, is that of the stanzas written by Rumelant of Saxony (von Sachsen) on the request of Queen Agnes of Denmark, upon the murder of her husband King Erik V. Layher shows how the German lyric tradition fitted the queen's purposes in awakening the anger of the people at this horrible crime, the regicide carried out by the king's own men. He argues that the German poetic tradition of *Spruchdichtung* was more suited than Danish poetry to shape public opinion, and therefore, for literary reasons, Rumelant was chosen to write the murder stanzas. He also demonstrates how the poetic stanzas, by their use of pronouns, is made to speak for the patron rather than for the masses, as well as defining two opposing groups in the conflict that ensued the murder.

Chapter four concerns Queen Eufemia of Norway and the translation of three courtly romances into Old Swedish. Layher's primary argument is that the choice of target language for these translations—which indeed was not suited to the Norwegian noblemen and Eufemia's own royal court in Norway—had much to do with her wish to attract potential suitors from Sweden for her daughter, but in another way than

previously presumed. Layher contends that we should see these texts not as a gift or an act of cultural diplomacy to bind the Swedish prince she wanted to marry her daughter closer to her own court, but as a means of reaching new listening communities as well as strengthening the cultural capital and status of Ingeborg, the daughter, and to maintain the Norwegian royal line, which depended on Ingeborg as sole heir. By having these romances translated into Old Swedish, Eufemia saw to it that for the first time in Scandinavia, end-rhymed narratives that could match continental examples were composed and performed, thereby creating a politically attuned and receptive audience of Swedish courtiers.

In chapter five, Layher makes a fascinating comparison between the allegorical imagery of Saint Birgitta's revelations and that of a fourteenth-century poem that goes under the title "Dikten om kung Albrecht" ("King Albrecht"), which deplores the current state of affairs in Sweden, governed as it was by a foreign king and his foreign bailiffs, in the allegorical form of a discourse on beasts in the garden. Layher's discussion of this text rests on the argument that it makes the case for the Danish Queen Margareta to make an intervention and seize power in Sweden. He argues that although Margareta may not have been the patron of the poem, she should be considered a pseudo-patron of this polemical work, due to its correspondence with her political aims at that time. Layher makes an interesting analysis of how voice and vernacularity and the manner in which these were appropriated served to present Margareta (in charters sent to Swedish noblemen during the crisis) as a Similar, while they made a distinction that situated Albrecht (in the poem) as an Other, unable to voice his authority to the people of Sweden. Lordship was dependent on the successful use of voice.

"Through their patronage and influence, the cultural authority that rests inherent in medieval queenship was transformed into an acoustic reality, and as a result of this incarnation their voices were able to reach new listening communities," (173) states Layher in his concluding afterword. He notes how an absence of or a crisis in male lordship is common to all three cases studied. For the queens' voices to resonate within the political landscape, something had to disturb the normal order of things. Layher asks whether the political voice of the queens was always "speaking", or whether the disturbed equilibrium of power and the silencing of the king were needed for this "broadcast" to be possible. (174)

Taking as his departing point Ernst Kantorowicz's *The King's Two Bodies*, and relating further research on the political authority of the medieval queen as connected to her corporeality and sexuality, Layher goes on to argue (as he has all through the book, really) that when male lordship was interrupted and the king's voice silenced,

through literary patronage, the voice of the queen (previously merely ornamenting and contemplating, in her capacity as *consors regni*, the voice of the king) is doubled and brought out into the political arena, combining itself in performative circumstances with the voice of the poet, and thereby transforming itself completely. The queens' voices did not go on as before in times of upheaval, but were actively and deliberately used to further political and strategic aims through the mediation of literature and for self-fashioning. This changed voice is founded in "an intrinsically female modality of lordship" (183), and it is characterized by discursive authority, the accurate seeking out of new listening communities, susceptible to the queens' messages, and by its very entanglement with the voice of the poets; they did not speak for, but with, the queens, thereby "drawing the ear in ways that the queens –speaking for themselves– never could." (183)

To move from the summarizing towards the purely evaluative aspect of the review, let me discuss the historical explanations offered. Explanations are primarily found in the literary sources that rest at the centre of Layher's study, but he is also admirably apt at borrowing explanatory factors from a wide range of historical processes and other textual genres that make up the context within which these texts were produced. The juridical, political and cultural fields lend their voice to William Layher in his attempt to investigate the role of female authority, the political voice of the queen, and how these intersected with the performative literature that comes down to us only in the rigidified form of written sources. It is indeed impressive how neither the uniqueness of the literary works nor the wider context(s) and their implications in the creation of these works are neglected in this study.

In part at least, I believe this to be connected with the methodology used by Layher. Although it consists at a basic level of a close reading and detailed analysis of the source texts in question, it also very much seeks to address the performances of these texts, the situations wherein these texts were read and heard by an audience, thereby treating them not only as written but also as spoken texts. This method is in my view fundamental to the strengths of the arguments and conclusions that the author presents. The combination of medieval theory on sound and voice with modern theoretical understanding in this field serves Layher's analysis and interpretation well.

At a few points I want to question Layher's presentation. The foremost example is when he discloses, after an argument that is both long and rich in information, that Queen Agnes' patronage of Rumelant's poem is not a stated fact but merely an interpretation or a hypothesis made by Layher (in opposition with views held by other researchers). This presumption is the basis for the whole line of argument

brought forward by the author. The discussion of possible patrons is, however, not brought up until the very final pages of the chapter. Perhaps —probably, even— this annoyance of mine stems mainly from a difference in argumentative techniques and different modes of scholarly writing. However, to me this seems like the wrong way around presenting an argument: disclosing one's hypothesis at the end of the argumentative chain.

Also, the argumentation as to why Rumelant came to be the author of these stanzas is in my opinion somewhat lopsided. Rather than argue against the possibility of a Danish poet or an Icelandic skald (and in doing so slightly denigrating two poetic traditions) composing a poem of the sort, Layher could preferably have put more emphasis in his argumentation on the positive aspects of Low German poems and their ability to influence and possibly sway public opinion.

Besides, I would like to question Layher's statement about the spread of courtliness in medieval Scandinavia, which I consider hasty. "By the year 1300, courtliness and chivalry had already become commonplace among the Scandinavian nobility," Layher writes, and continues "... the *Eufemiavisor* ultimately had no lessons in courtly demeanor to transmit to their audiences." (128) I tend to disagree, and would say that more research on the subject is needed; at least as regards the Swedish nobility.

To take two examples: on the one hand, his reluctance to believe the predominant opinion that Eufemia's patronage was governed by emotional motives, rather than political ones; and, on the other hand, his calling into question earlier readings of the *Eufemiavisor* that posit too close a connection between the content of the texts and the political reality surrounding them, speaks well of his interpretive and critical abilities.

On the whole, I am much impressed with Layher's work. This book proves his profound understanding of medieval Scandinavian literature, as well as his comprehensive knowledge of previous research in Scandinavia on history, literary studies and philology.

William Layher has written an important book and made a significant contribution to the subject of medieval Scandinavian queenship, indispensable to anyone looking to do further work in this field. He has also proposed a new and fresh approach to the study of Rumelant's stanzas, the *Eufemiavisor*, and "King Albrecht," taking its primary force of argument not from the texts themselves but from their contexts; a perspective which can hopefully stimulate further research.

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