

Review of Queen of the Conqueror: The Life of Matilda, Wife of William I, by Tracy Borman

Medieval sources have been notoriously scarce, brief, and dismissing in their observations of the female members of the nobility. Matilda, the daughter of Count Baldwin V of Flanders and his wife, Adele, herself a daughter of the French king, is no exception. As Ms. Borman explains in her 2012 book, Queen of the Conqueror: The Life of Matilda, Wife of William I, the future Duchess of Normandy and Queen of England was not to be so easily brushed aside. Through her adept skill at diplomacy, ambition and illustrious pedigree, Matilda stamped her name onto the history of medieval Europe unlike any other queen consort before her.

Matilda's early life is not well recorded. We know that she grew up in the lively court of Baldwin in Flanders and was well educated. Ms. Borman considers that here she was much loved and close to her family, in a very worldly and intellectual court. She was well aware and proud of her familial lineage, and she could only expect equally well born suitors to entreat with her father. This makes her untimely and scandalous act of offering her own hand in marriage to Brihtric Mau, an English noble, without her father's permission either a misjudgment of youth or a glimpse into her budding ambitious psyche.

Unfortunately for those of us reading about Matilda centuries later, no scribe bothered to write down how she was actually betrothed to one of the most well-known and feared men of the 11<sup>th</sup> century western world, William I Duke of Normandy and future King of England. The author goes on to relate that there are several versions of this betrothal story, however, one stands above the rest as passing as truth for far too many years. Written 200 years after their marriage, which took place around 1050, the misogynistic author attempted to, and to a large part succeeded, in making it seem that the way the Conqueror wooed his chosen bride was to attack and beat her senselessly into submission. This act had supposedly warped her judgment so much so, that upon initially refusing to marry him, Matilda did an about face. After her violent lesson she decided she would only consent to marry William. Ms. Borman rightly speculates that "It seems unlikely that a betrothal between two members of the most high-profile families in Europe could begin with something akin to a tavern brawl."<sup>1</sup> It seems preposterous and completely unfounded that even though the Duke was a man known for his uncouthness, he would attack the daughter of the man he was persuading into signing a marriage contract. Because nothing that was recorded at the time has survived, it is an unfortunate loss as we will probably never know exactly what happened, let alone why Matilda changed her mind.

Throughout Queen of the Conqueror, Ms. Borman does an effective job of pointing out the boundaries of gender that Matilda crossed. Because she broke so many stereotypes of how a woman was expected to act, her story has been presented through the ages in both laudatory and condemning language. The author could, however, pen less of the "a mere woman" and "just a lowly woman" sentiment when speaking of Matilda in her own words. There exist numerous historical and personal records that already employ this type of writing of Matilda, regardless of how unfounded.

I was mostly pleased with the pace of the book and its scope considering its small size, it was exacting in how crucial Matilda was to the eventual success of William's conquest of England and to securing the Norman dynasty through her many children. Ms. Borman rightly argues that Matilda was William's right hand and was fully capable; whilst he was away settling the never-ending unrest in England she competently operated the Duchy of Normandy as regent. She set a precedent for wise and able queens to imitate for centuries to come; it was only to the detriment of

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<sup>1</sup> Borman, Tracy. Queen of the Conqueror: The Life of Matilda, Wife of William I. Bantam, 2012. pg. 36

future dynasties that queens were never given legal leeway to freely and unobtrusively exercise their intelligence and power on equal footing with their kings.