FILIA NOTHA OR *FILIA REGIS*?: KINSHIP AND THE ACQUIESCENCE OF ROYAL ILLEGITIMATE DAUGHTERS (C1090-1440)

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ABSTRACT

During the Middle Ages some illegitimate daughters were accepted and recognised within the royal circles of England, Scotland and Wales. The purpose of this article is to introduce ideas of why and for what reasons some women were acknowledged and to what extent medieval ideals of kinship contributed in the acquiescence of illegitimate royal daughters. Some rulers recognised the political advantages that their illegitimate daughters offered and used them to extend power throughout the realm by ways of marriage.

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Although the historical research that has been completed on past attitudes and laws concerning illegitimacy is rich with information, typically these studies tend to examine exclusively the legal and/or social aspects involving allegations of illegitimacy (Adams, 1946; Given-Wilson and Curteis, 1984; Sheppard, 1965, 1968). Little focus has been placed on the social and political repercussions of being labelled 'illegitimate' in regards to specific case studies, especially for women of any class, and certainly not those of royal blood. Evidence available suggests that, for certain rulers, female bastardy was an acceptable route to establishing greater authority by using their illegitimate daughters as 'political pawns'.

Because of a collective emphasis on kinship, ancestry and descent, marriage and legitimacy were obvious issues of concern for the economically, socially and politically powerful families in medieval England. There appears to have been a strong desire among many members of the nobility to belong to a great family or cousinage and many recognised the partisanship of extended family as routine. It was widely understood that bonds of kinship beyond the household were indeed important, especially in specific circumstances (Cressy, 1986; Crouch, 1992). For some, attempts to construct and uphold strong familial ties were often coupled with desires to exert authority and widen control. Once familial intimacy was established, usually through marriage, potential paths were paved towards career advancement and the like, with the cursory objective of constructing family (political) solidarity.

In a society that lacked the cohesiveness of a strong, national identity, or even an ability to create an enduring confederacy amongst its elite, marriages in the Middle Ages, especially royal marriages, were important instruments in creating alliances. Recent scholarship suggests that marriages were a sure-fire way to increase legitimacy, in terms of control and power, and this was done by quenching other claims, essentially by becoming an heir. Claims of inheritance were often made through the marriage of noble women, which had the potential to be 'political dynamite' (Coss, 1998). Because there was a need to succeed for both parties, a viable avenue materialised that allowed nobler families to acquire a more prominent position and rulers more formidable political

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connections. The answer was the acquiescence of the political, thus marriageable worth of illegitimate daughters who came from royal families. The position of these women offered distinctive opportunities to authenticate valuable alliances.

Just how far did the 'family of the father' or 'family of the king' extend beyond immediate and legitimate relations? The livelihood of a bastard daughter was dependent on her father's interests in enhancing the family reputation. Seemingly, many were given the advantages that their parents could afford politically. Socially, morally and even legally it seems that specific questions of bastardy and legitimisation focused on the individual, personal situations and, at times, classifications were shaped to suit the desired outcomes of the parties involved (Helmholz, 1969). Indeed, as more information becomes available about the realities of women's lives, it is clear that there was great value in the role of a woman as her father's daughter, legitimate or not.

Research into this topic has shown that it was politically acceptable for ruling families to exercise their authority, garner support and sustain allegiances by expanding family loyalties and blood-ties through the marriage of their bastard daughters. At least in the cases of three specific women who were known to be illegitimate, their identities as a king's, or prince's daughter, far outweighed the effects that the stigma of bastardy may have had. These three women are: Sybilla (*c* 1090-1122), Queen of Scotland and daughter of Henry I; Joan of England (*c* 1190-1236), daughter of King John and wife to Llywelyn the Great, Prince of North Wales; and Joan Beaufort (1379-1440), daughter of John of Gaunt and Catherine Swynford. It was essential for powerful men like Henry I, King John and John of Gaunt to acknowledge publicly their bastard daughters because they desired to strengthen their authority. They understood they could do this by marrying and entrusting a child of their blood, regardless of the child's legitimacy, to a loyal vassal, thereby strengthening their rule. The men who married these bastard daughters, Alexander I, Llywelyn the Great and Ralph Neville, earl of Westmorland understood that their claims to power would be greatly improved if they had the backing of the English king, especially as a father-in-law. For these reasons alone, it can be said that some rulers in England, Scotland and Wales believed that an illegitimate daughter's status simply as the king's daughter was an asset rather than a hindrance.

The purpose of marriage was to create heirs. The heart of inheritance, or the hereditary succession to an estate or title, was to propagate and safeguard the family line. Therefore, the collective interests of children, the family and the individual were linked to the long-term interests of the dynasty. In fact, evidence shows that the status of some royal bastard daughters increased with disputes over royal lineage. In many ways, it seems that the power of lineage helped to define and secure the power of an illegitimate royal daughter and her descendants. A case can be made to say that a good reason for a female bastard to request legitimisation, like Joan of England and Joan Beaufort, was to secure the prestige of her blood line, which would be advantageous for future descendants. The political reasons for both parties to want to secure legitimisation was the need to strengthen the family bonds that were seen as necessary in order to secure the power and prestige of the family's royal stock.

Like the children of Joan of England, the marriages of the Beaufort-Neville children served to help integrate their own families into the greater English nobility, and thus link many nobles to the royal house, however distantly. In theory, alliances such as these served to provide proof of family loyalty for some members of the aristocracy who were former opponents to the Crown. If these women were considered to be the legitimate daughters of the ruling men of England, then their children were direct descendants to the English monarch. Legitimisation may have helped to back various claims to the throne, by proving that these families were descendants of legitimate royal blood.

It is obvious that the importance of blood-ties helped secure some women in higher society because their fathers accepted them as their own and integrated them within the *familia Regis*. Illegitimate women who secured places in the upper echelons of society did so because their royal identities were appreciated. Also, the bonds of kinship, regardless of degrees of legitimacy, were often recognised as integral to political solidarity and power. The activities for some women are well documented and the terms chroniclers use to describe them, usually as *filia Regis*, infer that their worthiness as the daughters of kings superseded their status as bastards[2]. If this is true, then it becomes obvious that the status of their fathers and their family lineage were important and defining factors in the advancement of their identities as women of royal blood.

The credible significance of these women as historical subjects warrants further research for this reason: they are examples of women of royalty, albeit illegitimate, who successfully used the authority they inherited through birth and acquired through marriage to earn a high reputation and secure the lineage of their own descendants. When approaching the genealogy of medieval royal families the lines of illegitimate children, especially women, should indeed be investigated. Obviously in doing so a wider and more accurate perspective of historical events emerges. More importantly, taking female illegitimacy into consideration opens the door to a more comprehensive genealogical enquiry, which will ultimately facilitate further discussion and hopefully encourage genealogists interested in medieval pedigrees to explore other such avenues.

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[2] References to these women also include the term *filia notha*; in other words, they are described as the natural (bastard) daughters of their fathers. Though technically defined as bastards, they were still wholly recognised as daughters of kings. For bastardy laws see Pollock and Maitland (1911).