MEDIEVAL MONARCHS, FEMALE ILLEGITIMACY AND MODERN GENEALOGICAL MATTERS[1]: PART II: JOAN OF ENGLAND, C.1190-1236/7

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ABSTRACT

Through the marriage of their illegitimate daughters, some English rulers spread themselves outwards to Welsh and Scottish royal dynasties. In the thirteenth century King John used his own illegitimate daughter, Joan of England, as the perfect 'pawn' in an arranged marriage with Llywelyn ap Iorwerth, prince of North Wales, in an attempt to secure power over the principality. Joan of England's situation highlights the policies regarding the marriage of royal female bastards which helped to mould the political establishment of medieval Britain. This article seeks to look beyond traditional 'textbook' ideologies of historical institutions and the conventional structures of political life. Closer scrutiny of a subject like royal bastardy helps to reveal other possible motives of political leaders and calls attention to the wider historical implications of such actions.

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Background

Up to the twelfth century, attitudes of the English Crown towards the Welsh varied according to changing circumstances. Medieval Wales was often beset with internal strife; ruling princes warred not only with the encroaching Normans, but also with each other over territory and rights to rule. This made Wales more important to the Norman marcher lords and the Welsh rather than the English Crown. It is likely that the invasion, domination and subjugation of Wales were not main objectives for many English rulers before King John (1167-1216). However, by the thirteenth century there was a continual increase of Welsh threats that resided in a potential alliance between an ambitious marcher baron and a warring Welsh prince. King John possessed a great understanding of the complicated Welsh politics and tried to centralise his power by binding many of his vassals to him by way of marriage.

His foremost rival was Llywelyn ap Iorwerth (c.1170-1240), prince of North Wales. John was sagacious in not underestimating his opponent's rising influence within Wales. He knew he had either to eliminate Llywelyn as a threat completely or make him an ally. In 1201 both men signed a treaty: one that required Llywelyn to pay homage and acknowledge John as overlord of Wales. In turn, and in order to maintain a policy of friendship, John offered his illegitimate daughter Joan's (c.1190-1237) hand in marriage.

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1 For part I on this theme see *Foundations* (2003) **1**(2): 99-103.

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In the five or six years preceding his marriage to Joan, Llywelyn negotiated with Pope Innocent III for permission to marry a daughter of Reginald, the king of the Isle of Man[3]. After years of bureaucratic dallying, permission was finally granted in 1203 (Lloyd, 1967). By this time, however, Llywelyn was enticed by the prospective advantages a marriage to Joan could bring. He understood that an alliance of this nature would be of great service to him for two reasons: one, he would be forming personal relations with the king of England; two, the marriage would offer Llywelyn and his future descendants opportunities to extend control beyond North Wales, warranted through means of their familial connections to both the house of Gwyendd and the throne of England.

It is well known that personal relationships played a primary role in the internal workings of both familial and political structures within medieval Britain. The two are perceptibly interrelated. Ideals of kinship were unquestionably decisive factors in medieval politics and were exploited by rulers to create marital alliances to help them achieve centralised power. King John extended this principle by using an illegitimate child to seek influence over Llywelyn. Through Joan, John could keep a potentially dynamic adversary within arm's reach. It also spoke volumes about how the king of England perceived one of his greatest opponents. To offer a daughter of royal blood in marriage was surely a compliment of trust in diplomatic expectations. All the same, to offer an illegitimate daughter was also an explicit caveat. It was a clear demonstration of power by John that publicly confirmed Llywelyn's status as a vassal. For Llywelyn himself the marriage was unmistakably profitable. His direct connection with the English crown promised opportunities of more power. It may even have helped him to move further into the realm of international politics and eventually garner support against John from powerful leaders abroad.

Through her marriage, Joan became a dominant figure in medieval Welsh politics; a position that was reaffirmed by both John's and Llywelyn's confidence in her[4]. Her first opportunity to assert her authority as the king's daughter was in 1208 when she petitioned to have Llywelyn pardoned by the Crown. And during the apex of the Anglo-Welsh conflict between 1210-1212, Joan played a large role as political emissary, liaising between the two rulers. Contemporary sources even claim that Joan was instrumental in halting John's planned invasion of Wales in 1212[5]. She continued her role throughout her life until she died in 1236/7[6].

She was able to exercise a considerable amount of authority and, ultimately, secure the status of her family. The credibility of her position was strengthened when she

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[3] As a young child this woman was married to Llywelyn's uncle, Rhodri. When he died, Llywelyn stepped in as a candidate. Canonical law decreed they were related.

[4] Joan was a valuable asset to the rulers of England and Wales and the significant influence she had with both her father and her husband is documented by many thirteenth-century sources. In some cases, her illegitimacy is mentioned. However, most English and Welsh records refer to Joan as *filia Regis Johannis*. At times, she is simply called *domine Norwallie*, *Johanna uxor Lewelin Principis Norwallie*, or, when Henry III became king, *sorore domini Henrici Regis*.

[5] Roger of Wendover writes that, via an expedient letter, Joan advised her father not to carry out his plans because she was aware of a plot to seize and kill him. It was quickly called off (Coxe, 1841).

[6] Joan is well-known for the story surrounding a possible affair she may have had with William de Braose in 1230. William's father Reginald was married to Llywelyn's (and possibly Joan's) daughter Gwladys Ddu. Though William was hanged and Joan banned from court, she was reinstated at her husband's side within a year; her reputation seems to have faltered little. Because of the politics involved, many scholars have been hesitant to assert that Joan's involvement was more than as her husband's accomplice.

was declared legitimate in the eyes of the Church. In order to identify some of the reasons why formal legitimisation was significant we must first identify the genealogical matters that are of concern.

Genealogical Concerns

Like his grandfather, Henry I (1068-1135), King John was known to have had many mistresses. In fact, chroniclers such as Roger of Wendover, Giraldus Cambrensis and William of Newburgh comment on John's adulterous nature and particular thirst for often married, aristocratic women. Due to his apparent predilection for unattainable women, and, more importantly, a lack of substantiated sources, the facts surrounding Joan of England's birth and background remain particularly elusive[7].

Without further concrete evidence her origins are a matter of on-going debate amongst historians and genealogists alike[8]. A record of Joan's death found in the *Annales de Theokesberia* in 1236 declares her mother to be "Queen Clemencia"[9]. Genealogical discussions concerning Joan's maternal line are largely concentrated on this specific statement. The numerous theories of her mother's identity, which characterize the Clemencia debate, are beyond the scope and theme of this article. However, it is essential to expand upon the approaches that have been used to uncover evidence that could eventually provide a clear-cut answer. A meticulous and detailed account of John's itinerary and his associations around the time of Joan's birth, both in France and in England, may lead to further revelations. More importantly, the use of onomastics is probably the best medium for finding the answers. Additional clues as to the identity of Clemencia may be obtained by focusing on the derivations of namesakes, like Joan and even those of her children and descendants.

Legitimisation

Why did Joan receive formal legitimisation when it is most probable that she was, indeed, a bastard child? Although ecclesiastical law clearly stated that children

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[7] John had at least five known bastards, and possibly as many as twelve. Most of these children were old enough to have been born either before his first marriage to Isabel of Gloucester in 1189, or during their marriage and were the results of his numerous infidelities. Joan of England appears to be his only definite illegitimate daughter, or at least the only female bastard that was wholly recognised by both king and contemporaries. I believe it would be advantageous to genealogical, political and gender history to explore, compare and contrast the prosopographies of all of John's illegitimate children, in terms of gender differentiation and their positions in medieval society. This is subject to further research.

[8] A recent debate (2001) on the *soc.genealogy.medieval* newsgroup can be viewed at http://groups.google.com/groups?selm=5cf47a19.0111141110.3134c995%40posting.google.com

[9] *Obiit domina Johanna domina Walliae, uxor Lewelini, filia Regis Johannis et reginae Clemenciae* (Luard, 1864). Sheppard (1959) focused on the theory that "Queen Clemencia" could have been John's cousin and first wife, Isabel of Gloucester. He refuted the argument by stating that neither Joan nor her descendants ever inherited or made claim to the Gloucester estates; also Joan was never known as the Countess of Gloucester. The most salient argument against this theory is the fact that Joan *did* seek papal dispensation to be legitimised, an unnecessary request if Isabel was actually her mother. Furthermore, there is no real evidence to suggest that Isabel even had any children with John. It has also historically been suggested that Joan's mother was Agatha de Ferrers, a daughter of Robert, Lord Ferrers, Earl of Derby. However, Norgate (1949) states that this assumption is based on Powell (1584) and has yet to be proven as the comment was made without reference to preceding sources.

conceived in an adulterous union were never to be legitimised, there is the possibility that the papacy was eager to initiate change in Wales. There was a fervent desire to rid the Welsh of their 'detestable custom' where the line between legitimate and illegitimate children was virtually indistinct[10]. Bastards in Wales were often recognised by their parents and males were allowed claims to inheritance. By legitimising Joan and, consequently her heirs, the Church could have used this powerful family as a moral example for others. The politics of Joan's request for legitimacy appear, however, to play a larger role.

With the rise of primogeniture as the dominant form of inheritance rights there was an increased need to make a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate children. In 1222, Llywelyn petitioned to have Joan's son, Dafydd, recognized as his only heir and it was speedily confirmed. This request established a precedent in Wales, and by the end of the thirteenth century Welsh laws concerning illegitimacy were akin to those in England. It is likely that that Joan's legitimisation was a subsequent response to these changes.

The idea that the men who married Joan and Llywelyn's daughters required that they were related to the English royal family seems to be very likely. Sheppard (1959, p.30) states that there was a strong willingness of the greater Norman and Welsh March aristocracy, like the Braose, Clifford, Nevill, and Mortimer families, to marry members of Joan's immediate and extended family. Each of the Marcher lords married to her daughters profited from the alliances. Because of these high-ranking marriages many in the English aristocracy were able to trace their ancestry back to Joan.

I believe there is enough evidence to suggest that she may have had twofold reasons for requesting legitimisation. Firstly, legitimisation formally confirmed her accepted status as King John's daughter and Henry III's (1207-1272) sister and this may have strengthened familial ties and secured her family's position in royal society, especially since the dispensation states that her parents were emphatically married at the time of her birth. Secondly, and more important to the historian and genealogist, because she was formally recognized as a child of royal blood, it meant her descendants, and those of the house of Gwynedd, would be directly linked to the greater Angevin dynasty that was spread throughout Europe. If Joan was considered to be the legitimate daughter of King John, then her children by the prince of North Wales were direct descendants of Henry II (1133-1189) and Eleanor of Aquitaine (c.1122-1204). This may have provided her entire family with access to power and authority that would otherwise have been withheld. It strengthened the inheritance rights of the heirs of Gwynedd, the largest and most powerful princedom in Wales. A case can be made to say that legitimisation secured the prestige of her bloodline that would be advantageous for future descendants, even though, under the terms of Joan's legitimisation, she and her heirs were barred from inheriting the English crown[11].

Conclusion

As has been discussed in two previous articles on female illegitimacy, the favourable status of a few royal illegitimate daughters was secured through the profitable

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[10] The 1222 confirmation of Dafydd as the rightful heir of both Llywelyn and Joan states that "*the son of the hand-maid should be heir with the son of the free, putting legitimate and illegitimate sons on the same footing.*" (Bliss, 1893, Vol.1, p.87).

[11] *Dispensation to Joan, wife of Leuwelin, prince of North Wales, daughter of king John, declaring her legitimate, but without prejudice to the king or realm of England* (Bliss, 1893, Vol.1, p.109).

marriages that were arranged for them. I believe that Joan's acceptance into royal society was a combination of relaxed attitudes that society still held towards female bastards and the political circumstances into which she was thrust. Looking at the *parentela*, or immediate and extended family influences, helps to clarify the reasons for Joan's political and social advancement. I think the fact that both King John and Llywelyn recognised her political worth certainly offered her many more opportunities for social advancement. This is evident through the authority that both men conferred on her during her lifetime.

Throughout her life, it appears that Joan's reputation as the king's daughter was far more important than her identity as an illegitimate child. The establishment of a social hierarchical structure, based on class, ultimately defined and often controlled the roles that individuals were to play. In Joan's case, it seems that her very public role was acceptable because she was a recognised daughter of royal blood. The social expectations and even obligations of her status as an aristocratic woman required her to fulfil her duties as a daughter and a wife. Her public life and role as an international diplomat suggests that she suffered little from the social stigmas that the label 'bastard' may have incurred.

Like many of her contemporaries, Joan of England found herself having to negotiate her loyalty between her husband and her father. She stands out amongst other women in her position because she had to assert her allegiances publicly. Ellis (1995) has called Joan "*a lady who became queen of Wales and one of the most interesting and influential women in the country*" yet the role she played as emissary has never fully been analysed. She is a significant historical character whose marginalized role should be seriously considered within the context of thirteenth-century Anglo-Welsh relations. In this light, I think that it is important to continue to explore the significant roles that women played and appreciate how paradigms based on family and kinship influenced the politics of the time.

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