

MEDIEVAL MONARCHS, FEMALE ILLEGITIMACY AND MODERN GENEALOGICAL MATTERS: PART III: JOAN BEAUFORT, COUNTESS OF WESTMORLAND

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ABSTRACT

Aristocratic diplomacies in medieval England were frequently dominated by the need to generate and maintain strong marital alliances, the core constituents to preserving a family's heritage, inheritance, birth-rights and claims to power. In some cases, illegitimate daughters provided an alternative path to creating political affiliations and influential familial connections. Their acceptance amongst their kin and peers was integral to the continuation and promulgation of their own descendents. By the later Middle Ages, their recognised legitimacy was fundamental to securing their own family's prestige and access to power. Joan Beaufort (c.1370-1440), daughter of John, duke of Lancaster (1340-1399) and Catherine Swynford (c.1350-1403), is an excellent example of a woman of illegitimate birth who not only maintained a powerful position in English society because of her own royal lineage and prosperous marital alliances, but whose subsequent legitimisation safeguarded the reputation and position of her own progeny. The reason for her legitimisation, by both the papacy and the English monarchy, clearly illustrates the invariable power that claims of royal lineage exacted in medieval England and the influence it wielded for ensuing generations. The article concludes with a summation of the status and importance of illegitimate daughters in the royal families based on the evidence presented in this series of commentaries.

Foundations (2007) 2 (4): 235-240

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Politics and Legitimation in the late-Fourteenth Century

The incentives behind John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster's desire to secure legitimisation for his Beaufort offspring are complex. In the wider political context there were rumours of dispossession—supplanting his nephew, Richard II (1367-1400), so that either he himself or his first-born son, Henry Bolingbroke (1367-1413), could become king. In many ways, Bolingbroke was as much a liability to Lancaster's causes as he was the rightful heir to his father's inheritance.² By succeeding in having Joan and her brothers legitimised, Gaunt was able to strengthen additional family bonds which he perceived to be necessary in order to sustain his family's political stamina in the face of much received ridicule and unpopularity. Legitimation had the potential not only to secure the spiritual salvation and royal status of the Beaufort progeny, but more importantly, it supplied Lancaster with other avenues in which to cement dependable alliances centred on blood ties and kinship; coalitions that could be depended upon.

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² In 1387-88 Bolingbroke became one of Richard's most troublesome adversaries as he was an active and willing participant in the appellant rising. He was a constant reminder to Richard that the Lancasters were a real threat to his power, a consequence of which left his own family endangered.

As Gaunt faced a decline in influence, he began to focus much of his attention on endorsing and safe-guarding the interests of his children and the wider Lancaster legacy. These interests included legitimising and protecting the children he had with his long-term mistress, Catherine Swynford. To this end, the marital union between Lancaster and Catherine helped to alleviate some of the compounded problems that threatened his dynastic ambitions toward the end of his life and political career. Though evidence obtained from papal letters demonstrates the lengths that the couple went to, to have their union formally accepted (fighting impediments drawn against the marriage including the canonical bar based on the bonds of compaternity and the sins of adultery³), politically, it was more important for Lancaster to ensure that their bastard children were legitimised and formally accepted by the papacy. Potentially, legitimisation of the Beauforts presented him with further recourse to increase support for his familial ambitions and he openly sought to remove the social stain or 'disability' of their conventional illegitimate status. In September 1396, Pope Boniface IX (1356-1404) issued a bull that confirmed, recognised and declared all the Beaufort offspring 'past and present' to be wholly legitimate.

Harris (1998, pp.3-4) asserts that Gaunt's marriage to Catherine Swynford (and, I argue, the Beaufort's subsequent legitimisation) helped to make suitable provisions for the Beauforts without threatening the inheritance rights of Lancaster's legitimate children, namely Henry. It is true that their marriage resulted in a change in the Beauforts' positions in society and greatly enhanced their prospects. But, it seems that Lancaster had the foresight to consider the longer-term social ramifications and political recompense to having the Beauforts' legitimacy legally and *publicly* recognised by the Crown.

In February 1397, whilst in parliament, both the *curia Regis* and King Richard II granted the Beaufort clan letters patent declaring their legitimacy (CPR, Richard II, 4: 86). Parliamentary blessings were conferred and favour was shown upon the Beauforts by ways of rescinding their 'defect of birth' and acknowledging them as children of royal stock⁴. Though the king's declaration implies that he chose to legitimate the Beauforts because of his affection for them and largely because family duty required it, Richard's reasons for granting his cousins legitimacy may have been multifarious.

Politically, it was important for the king to legitimise the Beauforts. It is most likely that he garnered a desire to placate Lancaster who was an undeniable force both within the royal family itself, but more importantly, within party politics and the on-going struggle for power and balance. Seeing that the church was not only willing to satisfy Lancaster's wishes, but actually elevate one son to the rank of Lord Spiritual, as well as confirm that Gaunt and his male heirs were to hold powers as Constable and Steward of the Royal Palatinate of Chester *imperpetuum*, as king, Richard had to

³ Lancaster was godfather to one of Catherine's daughters by her first husband, Hugh Swynford (d.c.1371). Catherine, in turn, was foster-mother to his daughters by his first wife, Blanche (1345-1369). The couple's adultery was well-publicised and numerous contemporary sources provide detailed narratives espousing their scandalous relationship and subsequent marriage. The couple openly bore four children out of wedlock: Joan, John (c.1371-1410), Henry (c.1376-1447) and Thomas (1366-1432). The focus of this article is specifically on the importance of Joan's legitimisation and, therefore, issues surrounding the three other children are not discussed here.

⁴ "...*recipere, retinere, gerere, et exercere, provide, liere, et liceter, c si de legitimo thereo nati existeretis. . .nic habemus pro totaliter expressis, nequaquam obstantibus; de plenitudine narre Regalis Potestatis, et de assensu Parlamenti narri, tenre presentium dispensamus. . .et vestrumquemlibet Natalibus restituumus Natalibus restituumus and legitimamus*". (Strachey, 1777).

be seen to take action in order to oblige and reward a loyal supporter of the Crown.⁵ Legitimising the Beaufort children was one way of appeasing a man whom Richard did not trust, but who was too powerful and influential to ignore or to do away with. Ultimately, through the letters patent, Lancaster met his goals; he secured legal recognition of the familial ties that linked the wider Lancastrian affinities to their claims to power as the avowal of legitimisation, by both king and parliament, placed without reservation the Beaufort males in line of succession should the senior line fail or be disinherited.

In 1407, after assuming the throne, Henry IV reconfirmed his step-brothers' and sister's legitimacy⁶, only his endorsement came with limitations under his official seal as king: *excepta dignitate regali* (CPR, Henry IV, 3: 284). Though on the surface this appears to either reduce or control the powers that the Beaufort affinity could attain, evidence shows that for Joan, and for her second family with Ralph Neville (1364-1425), this restrictive provision did not have much affect on her social status or standing, especially considering that Joan's descendants did, in fact, become English monarchs. Whatever the reasons behind the interpolation of this clause, whether personal or political, it is obvious that during a period of such instability and discontent, Henry IV made it tacitly clear that the Crown could not afford to deal with (half) sibling rivalry. Neither could he allow the rights of his own heirs to be jeopardised. However, by recognising the Beauforts as legitimate he innately guaranteed their place within the *familia Regis*, which still allowed them to receive all the dignities of royal children.

Legitimacy and Lineage

The importance of legitimacy and the preservation of lineage are concurrent with the genealogical issues at hand. For the most part, it is understandable that in order for Lancaster to extend his authority and power, Joan, as a matter of course, was a vital participant. But, Joan's interests were also attended to. Her father diligently pursued her interests and sought to promote her 'career' first through securing her legitimisation and second, through promising a very profitable (second) marriage. Through her, he was able to endorse the family name and various bloodlines and further extend his family's power by securing as potent an ally as Joan's second husband, Ralph Neville, sixth Baron Neville of Raby⁷.

⁵ In 1398 royal favour was further granted through the creation of John Beaufort as the earl of Somerset and the placement of Henry Beaufort within the see of Lincoln.

⁶ This was carried out upon the request of John Beaufort, earl of Somerset.

⁷ There is an on-going discussion (Weir, 1999; Perry, 2003) regarding other illegitimate children that Lancaster may have had. One such child goes by the name of Blanche (b.c.1366/7) whose mother, the chronicler Froissart claims, was Marie de St Hilarie, one of Queen Philippa's Hainaulter ladies-in-waiting. There are also arguments for her mother being Catherine Swynford and her father perhaps being Hugh Swynford, Catherine's first husband. (See Perry, 2003, for a recent discussion concerning Blanche's heritage). Regardless of Blanche's parentage, what is known is that Lancaster made respectable provisions for her and fashioned a beneficial marriage agreement with Sir Thomas Morieux (b.c.1355) in March 1381. This was a marriage that was almost similar in status, though slightly lower, than Joan's first marriage to an important and loyal knight of the Lancaster affinity, a man by the name of Robert Ferrers (c.1370-1396), 3rd Baron Ferrers of Wemme. Unlike Blanche, whose history has for all intents and purposes become quite obscure, Joan's legitimisation increased her marital worth, which ultimately provided her with more power and allowed her to have a bigger impact on events that directly effected her.

The couple were married within weeks of the papal decretal and it is possible and even highly probable that Joan would have been paired with Neville with or without her formal legitimisation; that her status and political importance as a royal daughter, regardless of to what degree or legality, far outweighed the stigma of her illegitimacy. However, the explicit implications of her legitimisation on her natal and marital families are clear. Because it was of extreme importance for powerful men such as Lancaster and Neville to maintain and preserve the patrimonial identity of their families and descendants, it was to their greatest advantage to have Joan legitimised for her legally recognised status (by both church and state) as a “pure and true” member of the royal family served to further protect both their long-range ambitions by legitimising designated heirs.

For the earl of Westmorland, his connection with Joan was highly profitable. In the same year of their marriage, the couple was made the first earl and countess of Westmorland by Richard II. Neville eventually joined Henry Bolingbroke’s campaign to become king of England and was justly rewarded as both a loyal supporter and as a brother-in-law. Henry IV subsequently made Neville Earl Marshal of England. Without doubt, Joan’s legitimate status helped to facilitate a greater acceptance amongst their peers regarding these promotions. More significantly, the subsequent marriages of the Beaufort-Neville children served to help integrate Neville’s patrimony further into the wider circles of the English nobility and royalty. By the mid-fifteenth century, in fact, many of the leading families of the English peerage were closely related to the Beaufort-Neville line, which tied them to the royal family. The Beaufort-Neville descendants gained a great deal of popularity and power during the War of the Roses and the alliances of Joan’s children with the greater families of late medieval England were later to produce future monarchs.⁸ The upshot? Both Lancaster’s and Neville’s long-ranging ambitions were accomplished.

The tactical importance of Joan’s status as a *legitimate* child of royal blood is clear: through a highly lucrative second marriage, Joan was able to fashion bigger and better partnerships/alliances that were of great value to the extended Lancastrian and Neville families, as her primary asset was her royal lineage. Joan’s legitimisation confirmed and secured her position as a member of the English royal family and was crucial to the resulting advancements that were proffered upon her and her own family later in life. She most certainly benefited from the rights and entitlements assigned to her gendered status as a daughter of royal blood, regardless of her base-born beginnings. Contrary to the social, legal and canonical laws regarding bastardy, she is yet another example of a woman who clearly led a very public and active life as a member of the royal family.⁹ Her father’s powerful position, her own pedigree and her legitimate status were important and defining factors in the advancement of her identity as a woman of royal blood. As wife of a key-player in aristocratic circles in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, she was a woman to contend with in her own right. During a time of enormous political instability, Joan’s legitimisation secured the rights of her family and descendants through direct kinship with the monarchy.

⁸ Through their daughter Cicely, Joan and Neville were the grandparents of Edward IV and Richard III and through their son John, they were the great-great grandparents of Henry VII.

⁹ Later in life, Joan appears to have been a very strong woman, who used her position not only as a genuine member of royalty, but as a powerful woman in her own right, to petition for land grants and arrange marital alliances for her children once she became a widow.

Conclusions: The Recognition and Acceptance of Female Royal Bastards in the Middle Ages¹⁰

Though in theory many medieval laws seemed to penalise bastards, the reality was that a number of illegitimate royal children were socially accepted and integrated into the aristocracy, acknowledged as daughters and sons of their respective fathers. Many moralists believed that it was a father's responsibility to provide for all his children, legitimate and illegitimate alike - any child left unprovided for was a sign of failure. Canon law, of course, confirmed this conviction. Certainly, the reasons that some bastards were well provided for could have been simply because they were loved and cherished.¹¹ Henry I, King John and John, duke of Lancaster all demonstrated a degree of concern and took responsibility for many of their bastard children, accepting them into the *familia Regis*.

In their book on royal bastards, Given-Wilson & Curteis (1984) conclude that over time, personality began to play a more important role and that royal bastards saw a gradual deprivation in their automatic status as the king's children, leaving them eventually to depend on their own merits and abilities in order to achieve political prominence. As the Middle Ages wore on, it seems that illegitimate children, especially males, were expected to prove their own loyalties to their fathers in order to receive any sort of patronage from them. For women, however, there appears to have been little difference, little variation in their positions as daughters of royal blood. Evidence based on the three case studies concerning Sybilla, Queen of Scotland (c.1090-1122), Joan of England (c.1190-1236/7) and Joan Beaufort suggests that their gendered identity as royal daughters, regardless of their illegitimacy, allowed them to fulfil the roles that medieval society expected from women of their social status. However, the subsequent legitimisations of Joan of England and Joan Beaufort further enhanced their positions and, more importantly, secured the legal status of their children and heirs.

As has been argued in this series of articles, the political and personal motivations behind public acknowledgment of some illegitimate daughters of royal blood prevailed over any sense of moral duties that fatherhood was burdened with in the Middle Ages. Notable men such as Henry I, King John and John, duke of Lancaster openly recognised and accepted some of their illegitimate daughters in order to garner additional political support from worthy allies or to stave off opponents who presented great threats to their ruling ambitions.

Various leaders, such as those mentioned above, strengthened their relations with powerful allies, and in some cases adversaries, as a form of peace through the marriage of their illegitimate offspring. These unions were affairs in which political and financial benefits were of fundamental concern. They were often advantageous for both the family who married their daughters off and for the bridegrooms themselves who received the women's dowries, and more importantly, the prestige of their lineages. Bonds of 'friendship by blood' were important qualities for a sovereign to rely on; the greater number of 'kin' that acknowledged these familial ties, the greater the support. Through the marriages of Sybilla, Joan of England and Joan

¹⁰ This section draws together some overall conclusions from the three articles in this series by the author (see also *Foundations* 1(2):99-103; 1(4):294-298).

¹¹ This is certainly not a reality to be dismissed or marginalized, aspects of which have been discussed at length by Turner (1990) in his article on Anglo-Norman attitudes to child rearing. Froissart, himself, mentions in detail in his *Chronicles of England* that the duke of Lancaster had great affection for the children of himself and Catherine (Dunster, 1847).

Beaufort, their fathers sought to establish a more widespread sense of familial loyalty, and thereby greater promises of security and allegiances, if and when needed.

It is obvious that the importance of blood-ties helped secure the places of these three women in higher society because their fathers accepted them as their own and often integrated them within their families. Their financial well-being was also guaranteed by the fact that each woman was given away in marriage to elite members of the English, Scottish or Welsh nobility. As this study has shown, marriages were highly advantageous for illegitimate daughters as they were recognised as useful, reliable and valuable members of royalty.

Would these men have discouraged their daughters' 'informal' participation in the marriage market, and in some cases in the formal political arena itself, if the stain of bastardy overshadowed their gendered roles and duties? It could have been a possibility, however it is clearly evident that at least three royal illegitimate daughters enjoyed very favourable roles in aristocratic society. The social status of an illegitimate woman's father often secured her position in the socially superior classes. The greater the status of her father, the greater the opportunities a woman had to marry into powerful families. If, indeed, there were certain limitations created by the label of 'bastard', these three women seemed to have overcome them, which can especially be seen in the cases of Joan of England and Joan Beaufort who were subsequently legitimised.

The acceptance of these women may be indicative of the pragmatic attitudes towards royal bastard women as a whole. However, at this point in time, there is little information available that allows us to compare them with other illegitimate women. Nonetheless, the issue of gender, based on the ideals of the elite social classes, as well as the differences in attitudes towards royal family and male bastards, may be relevant tools to help understand why these women held the positions they did. For these three women at least, illegitimacy was far from being a disability. They were secured their status in the upper echelons of society, because of their acknowledged royal identity, their ability to conform to the societal expectations of their rank and gender, and because the bonds of kinship, regardless of their degrees of legitimacy, were often recognised as being integral to political solidarity and power.

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