Late medieval queens have not been well-served by the academic world in terms of biographies. While exhaustive studies of Eleanor of Provence and Eleanor of Castile have appeared in the last decade, nothing comparable has been forthcoming on Margaret of Anjou or Elizabeth Woodville, whose standard biographies are fifty or so years old. David Baldwin’s book is the first major study of Edward IV’s queen since David MacGibbon’s biography of 1938, and there has been much scholarly work in the area since then, but he has chosen to write a biography for the general reader rather than scholars, a decision signalled in the sub-title of the book. It is slightly odd therefore that he quotes entire documents without modernising the English and then refers to one of them in a curiously old-fashioned way as a ‘quaintly written missive’.

Ricardians will be familiar with the main events of Elizabeth’s life and their previous interpretations. Baldwin handles the questions over Edward IV’s rash secret marriage to a Lancastrian widow four years older than himself and with two young sons sensibly. He rightly points out that all noble families in the Middle Ages were ambitious in the matches they made for their children and that having married Elizabeth, the king could not afford to have his own status diminished by their inferior position of his wife’s relatives. But he fails to emphasise sufficiently the scale of the problem. The Lancastrian Woodville family was both prolific and young. Elizabeth was the eldest of thirteen children, eleven of whom were unmarried. With all her siblings to be provided for, the aristocratic marriage market was severely distorted for a number of years. Baldwin judges that Elizabeth acquitted herself well as queen. In areas where she has been criticised, such as her role in the fate of the earl of Desmond and the issue of queen’s gold and the Thomas Cook affair, he argues that either the criticism was unfounded or that her position was one dictated by custom, but he does not spare either her family or that of the king from charges of greed and misappropriation. Elizabeth ran her household efficiently and more economically than her predecessor and took a competent interest in the running of her estates, continued Margaret of Anjou’s patronage of Queen’s College Cambridge and probably saved Eton from extinction. She was intelligent, provided a cultured environment at court, gave the king a healthy family of children and apparently never interfered politically. It is difficult to argue with this judgement, whatever reservations there may be about the role of her family, but his attempts to judge what her feelings were on various occasions is surely a mistake.

The death of Edward IV changed everything and the ruthless actions of his brother Gloucester caught everyone by surprise. Baldwin views Gloucester, whatever his fears for a Woodville-dominated minority, as more threatening than threatened in the early summer of 1483. The queen’s brothers, Rivers, and lord Hastings, experienced politicians as they were, both walked blindly into his traps and paid for their misjudgements with their lives. Only the queen seems to have perceived the danger and as a woman there was little she could do except flee to sanctuary. While presumably lacking proof of her sons’ fate, but fearing the worst, it is hardly surprising that the queen accepted the idea of the proposal put to her at the time of Buckingham’s rebellion by Lady Margaret Beaufort that Princess Elizabeth, should marry her exiled son, Henry of Richmond. The failure of the rebellion meant that the queen really had no alternative but to leave sanctuary and accept Richard’s terms, which provided her with a not ungenerous income but stripped her of her royal position on the grounds that her marriage to the king was invalid because of his pre-contracted marriage to Eleanor Butler. The summer of 1485 brought yet another change in her fortunes; her daughter married to the new king, her position as queen-dowager restored, and soon the grandmother of the heir to the throne. In spite of this, Baldwin views her as the power behind the Lambert Simnel rebellion because she resented that her influence and that of the queen was eclipsed by that of Margaret Beaufort. There is no record that she had any connection with the plot, and to support the removal of her daughter’s husband and son, for the possible future benefits of a match between Elizabeth and her younger cousin, Edward of Warwick, seems completely out of character for the intelligent queen. She had never played any political role during her husband’s lifetime or given the appearance of wishing to, why should she do so in 1486? Even if all was not as she might have wished, her sons were dead and she had done much better than she could have hoped for. The argument is based on her retirement to Bermondsey Abbey and the fact that, recorded only by Polydore Vergil, ‘she was deprived by decree of the council of all her possessions’. The answers can never be provided with any certainty. Such retirement was a common enough practice among ageing widows, even dowager queens,
and the implication that Elizabeth’s health was failing is supported by her death two years later. It is possible to argue that the formal surrender of her lands, which were immediately granted to her daughter, would be a matter for the council to handle anyway. The arguments for and against will be for readers to weigh and decide, but Baldwin finds himself in difficulty in trying to reconcile his view of Elizabeth before 1483 as a well-nigh perfect queen and after as an intriguing plotter determined on political influence. His attempt at the rehabilitation of her reputation is largely successful as far as the first part of her life is concerned, but at its end he fails to make her behaviour credible.

The book concludes with a series of appendices of varying relevance and quality, one of which is the question of Elizabeth’s ‘diary’. This purports to be a journal kept by her before her marriage, first reported on in the mid-nineteenth century and no longer to be found. Baldwin thinks some of it may be authentic. His is surely wrong. As far as is known, there are no journals written by English women prior to the seventeenth century. Fifteenth century gentlewomen, who were all taught to write, rarely did so, utilising clerks and secretaries, and even dictating love letters. For an unmarried girl to record the trivial doings of her daily life in writing in the 1450s is inconceivable.

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