

Four Queens: The Provençal Sisters Who Ruled Europe

by Nancy Goldstone



About the Book

Four accomplished sisters who rose from near obscurity to become the most powerful women in Europe

Set against the backdrop of the turbulent thirteenth century, a time of chivalry and crusades, poetry, knights, and monarchs comes the story of the four beautiful daughters of the count of Provence whose brilliant marriages made them the queens of France, England, Germany, and Sicily.

From a cultured childhood in Provence, each sister was propelled into a world marked by shifting alliances, intrigue, and subterfuge. Marguerite, the eldest, whose resolution and spirit would be tested by the cold splendor of the Palais du Roi in Paris; Eleanor, whose soaring political aspirations would provoke her kingdom to civil war; Sanchia, the neglected wife of the richest man in England who bought himself the crown of Germany; and Beatrice, whose desire for sovereignty was so acute that she risked her life to earn her place at the royal table.

A compulsively readable narrative, **Four Queens** shatters the myth that women were helpless pawns in a society that celebrated physical prowess and masculine intellect. A riveting historical saga for fans of Alison Weir and Antonia Fraser.

Discussion Guide

1. No other family in the thirteenth century, royal or otherwise, could boast of having four daughters who were all queens. What do you think accounts for the Provençal sisters' extraordinary success?
2. In her first years of marriage, Marguerite of Provence's actions and influence within the French government were severely curtailed by the tactics of her harshly autocratic mother-in-law, Blanche of Castile, an experienced ruler.

Marguerite's sister Eleanor, whose mother-in-law lived abroad, faced no such constraints, but lacked a sophisticated role model for governance. Which sister do you think was better off in the long run? If Marguerite ultimately benefited from exposure to the White Queen's methods, do you think this justified Blanche of Castile's behavior toward her son's wife?

3. It has been suggested that women, even queens, did not truly exercise power in the Middle Ages. Does this seem to be the case with the four queens?

4. Which sister do you think was most influential in her lifetime? How much of her success can be attributed to the assistance and/or advice provided by her mother, other sisters, and uncles? What role did her husband play, consciously or unconsciously, in furthering his wife's career?

5. The story of the four queens was famous in the later Middle Ages; Dante Alighieri referred to it in his monumental work, *The Divine Comedy*. Yet today these women are unknown. Why do you think their story has been ignored until now?

6. What do you think of Eleanor's overall performance as queen of England? Do you think she should be judged mostly for her role in precipitating the civil war? What do you think of her son Edward's decision to exclude her from his government after the death of Henry III?

7. By leaving all of Provence to his youngest daughter Beatrice at his death, Raymond Berenger V, count of Provence, provoked serious dissension among the sisters. What do you think of his decision to ignore his older daughters' claims, particularly Marguerite's? What do you think he was trying to accomplish with this bequest? Did he succeed? Do you think what he did was best in the long run for Provence?

8. Do you see any parallels between the crusade of Louis IX and our present military involvement in Iraq? Is there anything to be learned from the experience of King Louis' crusade which might help us to understand, or put into perspective, our current position in the Middle East?

9. There are four kings and four queens in this book. Which king or queen did you admire the most, and why? Which did you think was the least successful or sympathetic? Was any ruler, male or female, truly outstanding?

10. Which king benefited the most from having married one of these sisters? Which the least?

11. Currently, questions have been raised about just how much influence first ladies and the wives of the presidential candidates exert over their husbands and their husbands' governments. Do you see parallels between the four queens' behavior and that of present-day political spouses? How much of the sisters' experience is relevant today?

Author Bio

Nancy Goldstone is the author of *THE REBEL EMPRESSES, IN THE SHADOW OF THE EMPRESS, DAUGHTERS OF THE WINTER QUEEN, THE RIVAL QUEENS, THE MAID AND THE QUEEN, FOUR QUEENS* and *THE LADY QUEEN*. She also has coauthored six books with her husband, Lawrence Goldstone. She lives in Del Mar,

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