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queen  (kwēn)

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n.

1.

a. The wife or widow of a king.

b. A female sovereign.

2.

a. A woman considered preeminent in a particular field: *the reigning queen of hip-hop*.

b. A woman chosen as the winner of a contest or the honorary head of an event: *a beauty queen; the queen of the prom*.

3. Something having eminence or supremacy in a given domain and personified as a woman: *Paris is regarded as the queen of cities*.

4. *Abbr. Q Games*

a. The most powerful chess piece, able to move in any direction over any number of empty squares in a straight line.

b. A playing card bearing the figure of a queen, ranking above the jack and below the king.

5.

a. The sole reproductive female, or one of several such females, in a colony of eusocial insects, such as bees, wasps, ants, or termites.

b. The reproductive female in a colony of naked mole rats.

6. A mature female cat, especially one kept for breeding purposes.

7. *Offensive Slang* Used as a disparaging term for a gay man.

8. A queen-size bed.

v. **queened, queen·ing, queens**

v.tr.

1. To make (a woman) a queen.

2. *Games* To raise (a pawn) to queen in chess.

v.intr.

Games

To become a queen in chess.

adj.

Of or relating to a queen-size bed: *queen sheets; a queen bed skirt*.

Idiom:

queen it

To act like a queen; domineer: *queens it over the whole family*.

[Middle English *quene*, from Old English *cwēn*; see **g^wen-** in the Appendix of Indo-European roots.]

Word History: On paper, a *queen* and a *quean* are easily distinguished. In speech, however, it is easy to imagine how the complete homophony of the two words, both referring to female persons, could lead to embarrassing double-entendres—a fact which has probably contributed to a decline in use of the word *quean* in modern times. How did this troubling homophony come about? *Queen* comes from Old English *cwēn*, pronounced (kwān) and meaning "queen, wife of a king." The Old English word descends from Germanic **kwēn-iz*, "woman, wife, queen," a derivative of the Germanic root **kwen-*, "woman." Modern English *quean*, on the other hand, descends from another Old English word, *cwene*, pronounced (kwēn ə) and meaning "woman, female, female serf." The Germanic source of *cwene* is **kwen-ōn-*, "woman, wife." This Germanic word is a derivative of the same root **kwen-*, "woman, wife," that is the source of Modern English *queen*. From the eleventh century onward, *qwen*, the Middle English descendant of Old

English *cwene*, "woman, female serf," and ancestor of Modern English *quean*, was also used to mean "prostitute." Once established, this pejorative sense of *quean* drove out its neutral senses, and especially in the 16th and 17th centuries, the word was used almost solely to refer to prostitutes. Around the same time, in many English dialects the pronunciation of *queen* and *quean* became identical, leading to the obsolescence of the latter term outside of a few regions. The Germanic root **kwen-*, "woman," comes by Grimm's Law from the Indo-European root **g^wen-*, "woman," which appears in at least two other English words borrowed from elsewhere in the Indo-European family. One is *gynecology*, from Greek *gunē*, "woman." Another, less obvious, one is *banshee*, "woman of the fairies," the wailing female spirit attendant on a death, from Old Irish *ben*, "woman."

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Thousands of entries in the dictionary include etymologies that trace their origins back to reconstructed proto-languages. You can obtain more information about these forms in our online appendices:

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The Indo-European appendix covers nearly half of the Indo-European roots that have left their mark on English words. A more complete treatment of Indo-European roots and the English words derived from them is available in our [Dictionary of Indo-European Roots](#).

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