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Formulaic Women?:
The Disparity between the 12th Century Reality of Noblewomen in England
and the 12th Century Chronicles' Depiction of English Noblewomen

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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Dedication

To my mother who has been with me throughout the whole journey. Thanks for listening and for being my rock. Love you.

Acknowledgments

I would first like to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. John J. Butt, who agreed to head this thesis. I appreciated your dedication to see this project through. You pushed me to develop my ideas further and to better ground my analysis in the historical period. I also had two readers, Dr. Ann Crabb and Dr. Timothy Fitzgerald, who provided extremely helpful comments. My thesis dramatically improved due to both of your suggestions. Any errors that remain are, of course, my own.

Mom, this work would not have been completed without your support. Thank you for daily listening to me talk about medieval women, reading the whole draft of the thesis, and offering encouragement all the way to the very end. Much love to you and the Bear!

Finally, I would be nothing without my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. You give my life purpose, and I hope that this thesis glorifies You in some way. May I always be a formulaic woman based on the One who created me.

And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:18, NIV)

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to examine the degree to which 12th century chronicles do or do not accurately represent the position of 12th century noblewomen in England. Since the chroniclers partly based their women on what had been written before, the extent to which the 12th century chronicles follow the two borrowed motifs of women as intellectuals and warriors from their sources will also be discussed. The works of Geoffrey of Monmouth, William of Malmesbury, Orderic Vitalis, and William of Newburgh represent the 12th century chronicles. This thesis will also look at the chroniclers' Latin sources, specifically Bede, Virgil, and Ovid. Ultimately, the male authors of the 12th century chronicles both depended on earlier sources and also crafted their women to conform to contemporary ideas of female acceptability. They made them more plausible for their era by altering the two motifs in four main ways: by an emphasis on familial ties, by the inclusion of all noblewomen, by acknowledgement of the current political situation, and by the addition of contemporary details.

Introduction

There appears to be a disparity between English noblewomen's depiction in some 12th century chronicles and the reality of 12th century English noblewomen. In many 12th century texts, noblewomen were portrayed as intelligent individuals who made their own decisions and as courageous women who actively sought their own dreams and wishes. In reality, noblewomen's power was in decline. There was a "change for the worse" regarding women's status.¹ For the most part, noblewomen were subordinate to men in the eyes of the law. A change to primogeniture inheritance theoretically favored men over women, since land was awarded to the eldest son. Women received land when there were no male heirs. Even nuns and widows who possessed greater independence still owed their positions of power not to themselves but to their families: nuns to their noble birth which allowed them access to nunneries and the title of abbess and widows to their deceased husbands who provided them with their wealth.

In order to make sense of the apparent paradox, this thesis will examine the extent to which 12th century chronicles do and do not accurately represent the position of 12th century noblewomen in England, and it will argue that the male authors of these chronicles, though they partly based their women on what had been previously written, also crafted their women to conform to contemporary ideas of female acceptability, that is, to better fit reality. In addition, this thesis will subtly question the use of the female life cycle to explain women's representation in the literature. According to the female

¹ The phrase "change for the worse" is supported by historians to explain how women's status changed during the Middle Ages, because women's access to education and their positions of power in monasteries decreased during the 11th and 12th centuries. See Susan Mosher Stuard, "The Dominion of Gender: Women's Fortunes in the High Middle Ages," in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, ed. Renate Bridenthal, Claudia Koonz, and Susan Stuard, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 153-172 and Jo Ann McNamara, "Women and Power through the Family Revisited," in *Gendering the Master Narrative: Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, ed. Mary C. Erler and Maryann Kowaleski (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 17-30.

life cycle, women's power was linked to their marital status. This thesis hopes to show that one overarching theory cannot explain the complex portrayal of noblewomen, due to the chroniclers' bias and cultural, political, and social contexts.

Compared to Anglo-Saxon women and late medieval women, women of the High Middle Ages (c.1000-1299) have been examined considerably less.² Systematically addressing the place of English noblewomen, Susan M. Johns' *Noblewomen, Aristocracy and Power in the Twelfth-Century Anglo-Norman Realm* drew upon the research of Pauline Stafford and Janet Nelson, two influential medieval women's historians who stressed how female power was a construction based on gender and the female life cycle which consisted of birth, marriage, motherhood, and death. Johns argued that 12th century noblewomen's power was best illustrated as part of the female life cycle.³ Women were expected to act a certain way at particular moments of their life. As a wife, she was to offer advice and be compliant and obedient to her husband; as a widow, she remained chaste. Women's depiction in chronicles similarly followed the female life cycle, offering an explanation for why the image of wife and widow could differ so much. In addition, Johns associated women's fulfillment of administrative duties related to charters like consenting, signing, and witnessing with them performing these duties as members of a family: as mothers, as wives, and as mothers or widows of the heir.

Before the female life cycle became a prominent way historians studied medieval women in the mid-1990s, historians originally focused on individual women and then unmarried women. At first, historians restored women back into the historical narrative by concentrating on women who held formal power and left records, specifically queens,

² Susan M. Johns, *Noblewomen, Aristocracy and Power in the Twelfth-Century Anglo-Norman Realm* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2003), 1.

³ Johns, *Noblewomen, Aristocracy and Power*, 16-17, 53.

abbesses, and other exceptional women.⁴ Then, historians began to study nuns and widows to see if unmarried women had more control over their lives than wives and daughters who answered to their husbands and fathers and acted on behalf of the family.⁵ Eventually, medieval women's historians went from examining single women to looking at women's position within the family. Inheritance and dower, a woman's right to her husband's property, were closely scrutinized. Works on female inheritance have often viewed the noblewoman as a pawn in politically arranged marriages. The land a noblewoman inherited was meant for her son to ensure that property was kept within the same bloodline.⁶ Female inheritance has also been seen as a structured bureaucratic process in which royal officials increasingly partitioned inheritance rather than the families themselves.⁷

Some historians have already studied the portrayal of noblewomen in literature.⁸

Eileen Power, one of the earliest influential historians of medieval women, stressed that

⁴ *Medieval Prosopography*, a journal founded in 1980, is dedicated to collective biography and has published many articles on medieval women. The prosopographical method of analyzing several people's lives is especially helpful when there is a lack of sources about individuals. The biographical approach to understanding medieval women is back, though, as evidenced by a recent edited collection of papers that all utilize biography. See Charlotte Newman Goldy and Amy Livingstone, eds., *Writing Medieval Women's Lives*, New Middle Ages (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

⁵ An excellent example is Sally Thompson, *Women Religious: The Founding of English Nunneries after the Norman Conquest* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

⁶ See J. C. Holt, "Presidential Address: Feudal Society and the Family in Early Medieval England IV. The Heiress and the Alien," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 5th ser., 35 (1985): 1-28; Jane Martindale, "Succession and Politics in the Romance-Speaking World, c.1000-1140," in *England and Her Neighbours, 1066-1453: Essays in Honour of Pierre Chaplais*, ed. Michael Jones and Malcolm Vale (London: Hambledon Press, 1989), 19-41; and Judith A. Green, *The Aristocracy of Norman England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

⁷ See Scott L. Waugh, "Women's Inheritance and the Growth of Bureaucratic Monarchy in Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century England," *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 34 (1990): 71-92.

⁸ Although this thesis will not consider romance writings, this genre focused on women along with younger sons, two groups of people who were excluded from dynastic inheritance. In these writings, the lady controlled the social behavior of members of her household including knights, who were expected to restrain themselves within a wider code of behaviors and manners. R. I. Moore, *The First European Revolution, c.970-1215* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 139-140.

women's theoretical power and their power in reality were contradictory.⁹ In the early Middle Ages, the Church and the aristocracy imposed their view of women on society. On the one hand, women's subjection was linked to their natural inferiority; on the other hand, the counter doctrine of women's superiority was evidenced by the growth of the cult of the Virgin and the cult of chivalry throughout the 12th century.¹⁰

Historian Pauline Stafford, looking at royal English women from the 10th to 12th centuries, warned that royal women tend to be mentioned in literary sources most often when there were problems with succession.¹¹ The depiction of royal women was thus affected by succession politics. This is why Matilda, daughter of King Henry I whose claim to the throne was challenged and taken by her cousin Stephen, was presented favorably in a chronicle by William of Malmesbury and unfavorably in an anonymous author's *Gesta Stephani* (*Deeds of Stephen*). Stafford concluded that William supported Matilda's succession while the writer of *Deeds of Stephen* did not. These authors' political leanings explain why they portrayed Matilda so differently.

While Stafford thought the politics of the chroniclers affected their depiction of royal women, historian Lois L. Huneycutt wondered if 12th century chroniclers, though fine with women as regents, balked at the idea of women exercising sole authority.¹² Huneycutt, like Stafford, used Matilda to study female succession. Huneycutt argued that while most chroniclers acknowledged Matilda's hereditary claim to the throne as more legitimate, they were silent regarding Matilda's gender. This is because Matilda was not

⁹ Eileen Power, "Medieval Ideas about Women," in *Medieval Women: Eileen Power*, ed. M. M. Postan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 34. Eileen Power published works in the 1920s and 1930s. *Medieval Women: Eileen Power* is a collection of some of Power's previously unpublished essays.

¹⁰ Power, "Medieval Ideas about Women," 19.

¹¹ Pauline Stafford, "The Portrayal of Royal Women in England, Mid-Tenth to Mid-Twelfth Centuries," in *Medieval Queenship*, ed. John Carmi Parsons (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 146, 159.

¹² Lois L. Huneycutt, "Female Succession and the Language of Power in the Writings of Twelfth-Century Churchmen," in *Medieval Queenship*, ed. John Carmi Parsons (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 191.

viewed as an individual but as a representative of her family. Matilda was thus seen as a regent who would rule until her son came of age.

Marjorie Chibnall, a well-regarded historian of the Anglo-Norman period, studied the position of noblewomen in one particular 12th century English chronicler, Orderic Vitalis.¹³ She not only edited a multi-volume work by this chronicler, *Ecclesiastical History*, she also examined the life and times of Orderic and his depiction of women.¹⁴ Chibnall, looking at how Orderic classified women, contended that he viewed society as being divided between the clergy and laity. Women were not a separate order; instead, they belonged to the laity even if they became nuns. Chibnall ultimately concluded that Orderic differentiated women in *Ecclesiastical History* according to their marital status, class, and wealth.¹⁵

As for previous scholarship on English historical literature, historian Sir Richard W. Southern, reflecting on medieval historical writing, advocated that historians look beyond using chronicles as just repositories for historical facts and instead study the authors of these chronicles.¹⁶ Works such as the previously mentioned *The World of*

¹³ Another historian, Sharon Farmer, also used the writings of Orderic Vitalis. Farmer argued that even though the status of medieval women was declining between the mid-11th and 13th centuries, works by monastic writers, such as Orderic, show that some churchmen wanted wives to influence their husbands. See Sharon Farmer, "Persuasive Voices: Clerical Images of Medieval Wives," *Speculum* 61, no. 3 (1986): 517-543.

¹⁴ See Marjorie Chibnall, *The World of Orderic Vitalis* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984) and Marjorie Chibnall, "Women in Orderic Vitalis," *Haskins Society Journal* 2 (1990): 105-121.

¹⁵ Chibnall, "Women in Orderic Vitalis," 105-106, 121.

¹⁶ Beginning in 1970, Sir Richard W. Southern published the first of four presidential addresses which were written during his tenure as president of the Royal Historical Society. See R. W. Southern, "Presidential Address: Aspects of the European Tradition of Historical Writing 1. The Classical Tradition from Einhard to Geoffrey of Monmouth," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 5th ser., 20 (1970): 173-196; R. W. Southern, "Presidential Address: Aspects of the European Tradition of Historical Writing 2. Hugh of St Victor and the Idea of Historical Development," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 5th ser., 21 (1971): 159-179; R. W. Southern, "Presidential Address: Aspects of the European Tradition of Historical Writing 3. History as Prophecy," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 5th ser., 22 (1972): 159-180; and R. W. Southern, "Presidential Address: Aspects of the European Tradition of Historical Writing 4. The Sense of the Past," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 5th ser., 23 (1973): 243-263.

Orderic Vitalis by Marjorie Chibnall appeared. Later, scholars would generally agree that medieval chronicles, including the 12th century histories discussed in this thesis, were meant as serious entertainment.¹⁷ Fiction disguised itself as fact and fact with fiction. History was thus seen as a type of literary narrative.¹⁸

None of the 12th century writers analyzed in this thesis fall into the same genre of literature as satire, a category most often associated with the work of Walter Map who presented extreme gendered stereotypes of women.¹⁹ Nevertheless, a writer, like in the case of Geoffrey of Monmouth, did record fictional accounts of women. However, in Geoffrey's eyes or at least how he wished to be seen, he was writing history.²⁰ Other contemporary writers viewed Geoffrey's work as history as well. Even Gerald of Wales, a 12th century chronicler who questioned Geoffrey, still used Geoffrey's *History of the Kings of Britain* as a source.²¹

What set this form of literature apart was that these writers claimed to be presenting the truth, and truth in the Middle Ages was based on accuracy in the account

¹⁷ Nancy F. Partner, *Serious Entertainments: The Writing of History in Twelfth-Century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 4.

¹⁸ Scholar Monika Otter, taking this position a step further, argued that 12th century historians were more aware of their role as the narrator than previously thought. She saw three different types of referential writing employed by the historians: the simple, literal reference in which facts presented in the text corresponded to facts in reality, allegorical reference in which the narrative conveyed higher truth, and metaphoric reference in which the text inched toward fictionalization. See Monika Otter, *Inventiones: Fiction and Referentiality in Twelfth-Century English Historical Writing* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

¹⁹ A. G. Rigg, *A History of Anglo-Latin Literature, 1066-1422* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 88; Johns, *Noblewomen, Aristocracy and Power*, 26n9.

²⁰ Rigg, *History of Anglo-Latin Literature*, 7.

²¹ Partner, *Serious Entertainments*, 62. Laura Keeler studied the influence of Geoffrey's *History* on Anglo-Latin chronicles in the 14th and 15th centuries. She discovered that *History* was used as a credible historical narrative throughout the two centuries. Of the chronicles she read, 2 chronicles exposed the fictitious character of *History*; 6 freely drew upon it without questioning its reliability; 5 freely drew upon it but questioned certain passages; 19 used it for a specific purpose and did not explicitly question its reliability; and 24 did not rely upon it at all. See Laura Keeler, *Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Late Latin Chroniclers, 1300-1500* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1946).

and trustworthiness of the writer.²² Accuracy in the account meant that anything could be considered fact if it was perceived to be plausible based on how well those facts correlated with other comparable truths. Since there were few alternative versions of early British history, even though Geoffrey's work has been found to be largely an invention, his history remained the standard account for over two hundred years. Trustworthiness of the writer was based on the author's status, which explained why the writer was qualified to write a chronicle.

While most medieval historical writings are chronological in nature, the historian chose which events to record. Perhaps he wrote what would please his patrons; perhaps he merely wrote about what interested him. Regardless of why these historians wrote what they did, all of them presented capable women who made their own decisions and faced the consequences of their choices. Moreover, "in subjective source material [such as these 12th century chronicles], women may be berated, ignored, belittled, even idealised, by male writers."²³ In other words, in addition to choosing whose stories to include, 12th century writers also decided themselves how they wanted to portray women.

It must be admitted, though, that not all of the 12th century chronicles presented strong noblewomen. A minority of them, such as the histories written by John of Hexham and Richard of Hexham, still portrayed noblewomen in the most limited way. Noblewomen were depicted in these texts as strictly potential spouses for political gain. However, when the 12th century writers did present women in a flattering light, it was done in two main ways: women as intellectuals and women as warriors. This thesis also

²² Chris Given-Wilson summarized what truth might have meant to medieval historians in his "Telling the Truth" chapter. See Chris Given-Wilson, *Chronicles: The Writing of History in Medieval England* (London: Hambledon and London, 2004), 1-20.

²³ Helen M. Jewell, *Women in Medieval England* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1996), 1.

hopes to evaluate the extent to which the 12th century chroniclers borrowed those two motifs of women from their sources.

Although this thesis asserts that the 12th century historians received and implemented this tradition of active women from reading what had come before, the women in 12th century chronicles are not just exact replicas of the women in their sources. The 12th century chroniclers applied the two motifs of women as intellectuals and warriors to the women in their texts, but the male authors altered them to fit a more contemporary audience. That is, to fit reality, making them not purely formulaic.²⁴ For example, the 12th century writer Orderic Vitalis contrasted the foolishness of Avice's husband to the wisdom of Avice, who persuaded her husband to improve his behavior. Orderic's Avice acted as a wife within the family, which in 12th century England, was an acceptable form of behavior. Orderic also added a religious element to Avice by mentioning her piety. Both Virgil and Ovid, two of Orderic's sources, lived in the pagan Roman Empire. By Orderic's time, Christianity had infiltrated England, so when Avice gave generously to the Church, she was doing her duty as a moral Christian. In another example, Dido in Virgil's *Aeneid* was the queen of Carthage. Although the 12th century historians may not have realized that Dido symbolized the suffering the Romans caused in their quest for their imperial destiny - instead maybe seeing her as a woman who

²⁴ Historian Chris Given-Wilson, looking at histories in the 14th century, suggested that these chronicles were formulaic, since so many of the battles evoked sameness. Given-Wilson was not just commenting on the facts of those encounters, like where the battle took place or how many soldiers fought on each side and died in combat. Instead, he noticed that victorious armies and conquered armies acted in specifically different ways. The soldiers of an ultimately successful army arrived to the battlefield disciplined and orderly, dedicated the fight for the glory of God, and made one last push after a rousing speech by their leader. In contrast, losing armies arrived in confusion having just pillaged the countryside or done other atrocities while their leaders quarreled. Given-Wilson concluded that these formulaic battles were meant to convey universal truths to the readers about how battles ought to be approached and about how soldiers ought to act on the battlefield. Given-Wilson, *Chronicles*, 2-3.

committed suicide over unrequited love - there was no woman representing 'Dido' in the 12th century histories, no queen of a distant land.²⁵

Please note that the original Latin of the histories and the sources will be considered if there is any uncertainty over how a particular passage can be interpreted. In addition, examples of the women were chosen based on the chroniclers' interesting depiction of women and to showcase the variety of ways women were portrayed as intellectuals and warriors.

Chapter 1 presents an overview of the noblewoman's life in 12th century England. It begins with a discussion on how women were viewed as the inferior gender according to humorism - the ancient Greek and Roman theory of how the body works - and physical anatomy, and next shows the conflicting message the Roman Church offered regarding women. Then, the different types of noblewomen are examined in turn - married noblewomen, queens, widows, and nuns - in order to provide the historical context for the women presented in the 12th century chronicles. This chapter will focus on the lived experiences of 12th century noblewomen while the last two will look at the degree to which the women in the chronicles are based on reality.

Chapter 2 focuses on the 12th century historians' sources, Bede, Virgil, and Ovid, to show how the sources depicted women as intelligent and brave individuals. This chapter aims to explain that the 12th century historians based their women to an extent on what had been written previously. Bede, who presented women in a variety of roles in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, was chosen, because these historians held a lot of respect for him. Virgil and Ovid were included due to the resurging interest

²⁵ Maurice Balme and James Morwood, *Oxford Latin Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 140-141.

in the classics during the 12th century, and because their works were widely read at this time. This chapter will focus on the two motifs of women that the 12th century historians used as a model for their women while the next two will look at the degree to which the historians' treatment of the women is formulaic.

Chapter 3 introduces Geoffrey of Monmouth and his most famous work, *History of the Kings of Britain*. *History* was accepted as the standard account of early British history, and its popularity outrivaled all of the histories written during the 12th century. Though his work is most known for introducing the King Arthur legend to English readers, within *History*, Geoffrey presents one strong woman after another. According to his history, four great queens ruled early Britain, and each one was depicted as possessing either bravery or smarts.

Chapter 4 turns to some of Geoffrey's contemporaries, William of Malmesbury, Orderic Vitalis, and William of Newburgh, in order to show that depictions of women as intellectuals and warriors were present in many histories of the 12th century. These historians were chosen for different reasons. The women in Orderic Vitalis' writings have already been subjected to other scholars' analysis in articles and single chapters, the only writer to have warranted such treatment thus far. These analyses offered a model on how to read Orderic and other 12th century histories so as not to misrepresent these writers' depictions of women. Since there are so many examples of noblewomen in Orderic's work, this thesis has, for the most part, chosen different accounts of noblewomen than the other scholars who previously studied Orderic, so content overlap is minimal. William of Malmesbury was a respected historian during his lifetime, and

recently scholars have begun to take more interest in him.²⁶ They have not yet studied his portrayal of women, though. William of Newburgh was chosen precisely because he questioned the truthfulness of Geoffrey of Monmouth's work. In spite of that, William of Newburgh still portrayed women as intellectuals and warriors.

Since the noblewomen depicted in 12th century chronicles were partly formulaic, these chroniclers had to slightly alter their women in order to more accurately depict women whom a 12th century audience would accept. In reality, noblewomen's autonomy was declining, but they could still hold power within the family. In the chronicles, noblewomen were able to make their own decisions and act on their choices, but their influence was inexplicitly linked to their family. Men listened to and followed the advice of noblewomen whose family connections allowed the women the opportunity to be heard; some noblewomen joined the soldiers on the battlefield, albeit with their husbands beside them.

²⁶ William of Malmesbury is the subject of a full-length monograph, and he warrants a full chapter in an encyclopedia of English historical writing, an honor he shares only with Bede. See R. M. Thomson, *William of Malmesbury*, rev. ed. (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2003) and Antonia Gransden, *Historical Writing in England, c.550-c.1307* (London: Routledge, 1996).

– Chapter 1 –
The Reality of Noblewomen in 12th Century England

Within the 12th century chronicles, noblewomen appear as nuns, royals, wives, and widows. In order to better understand the extent to which noblewomen's depiction in the chronicles differed from reality and the extent that it resembled reality, this chapter will examine the world of the English noblewomen in the 12th century, offering a synthesis of the secondary source literature written mainly within the past 25 years. Noblewomen are a constructed category of women whose meaning has changed over time. Nonetheless, noblewomen within the context of this chapter refer to women who was part of an elevated social group and whose ancestors had also been members of the same powerful and wealthy social group. This chapter will first look at the intellectual discourse and how it affected perceptions of women in general and then consider the place of noblewomen, queens, noble widows, and nuns. Developments in theology and in the Roman Church transformed the way women were regarded. Changing views about land, power, and succession resulted in inheritance patterns that favored sons over daughters. Overall, the attitude towards women was declining and their autonomy was narrowing, but women were able to achieve some agency within family roles.

The belief in women's inferiority to men was not invented in the Middle Ages but inherited from the ancients and reinforced by physical anatomy and church teaching. Due to a resurging interest in the classics, Greek and Roman biological theories found a new audience in the Britons. Those theories, though, were reinterpreted in medieval Europe through a misogynistic lens. The Greek doctrine of the humours stated that people's behaviors and temperaments were affected by the four humours: choleric,

melancholic, phlegmatic, and sanguine.¹ Those with a choleric humour were easily angered; melancholic, irritable and naturally predisposed to depression; phlegmatic, calm and unemotional; sanguine, aggressive but controlled and courageous. In the Middle Ages, women were thought to be naturally melancholic, prone to neurotic behavior and high levels of stress. On top of that, a melancholic humour was composed of two qualities, cold and dry. Since death is the coldest and driest state of all, it was believed that women died sooner than men. In contrast to women, men were typically considered to be sanguine, a more healthy type.

Women's anatomy also contributed to why medieval men perceived women as the inferior gender. Women have been physically smaller and less strong than men throughout history. In addition, medical theories about sexual differences in the late 12th and 13th centuries emphasized women as bad and dangerous.² The Galenist theory, an influential school of thought in the Middle Ages that originated from ancient Rome, advanced the idea that while the male seed was precious, the female seed was lethal. Menstruation was a way for women to purge themselves of their seed. This theory would give way to a more misogynistic view. The women's seed - and her menstrual blood - was considered dangerous not only to women but to other people as well. Some people believed that a child who glanced at a woman during her period could become poisoned, because the woman's menstrual blood caused her to send out poisonous vapors through her eyes.

¹ Margaret Wade Labarge, *A Small Sound of the Trumpet: Women in Medieval Life* (1986; repr., London: Hamish Hamilton, 1990), 19-20.

² Henrietta Leyser, *Medieval Women: A Social History of Women in England, 450-1500* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1995), 96-97.

The medieval Roman Church, however, presented a paradox about women. Even while the Church excluded women from ecclesiastical office and perpetuated negative attitudes about women, it also recognized marriage as a sacrament and canonized a number of female saints.³ The Church's gynophobic attitudes, its fear or hatred of women, were partly due to Pope Gregory VII's reforms of the 11th and 12th centuries. In 1074, Gregory forbade clerical marriages, a move which was met with much resentment by married priests.⁴ Although the widespread practice did not immediately disappear and had to be deemed illegal and invalid at an 1139 church council, subsequent popes after Gregory reaffirmed clerical celibacy. Under such pressure, clerics would have willingly - and unwillingly - taken vows of chastity. It can be positioned that forced celibacy would not have encouraged an appreciation for women. Since a proportion of the male population was unable to be with women, these men began to see women as merely seducers and temptresses.

On the other hand, the Church also offered benefits for women. Due to the influence of the Church, the formation of marriages began to be enforced by canon law in the 12th and early 13th centuries.⁵ Marriage was one of the seven sacraments, and the Church was concerned about the personal relationship of a couple. To that end, both parties had to consent to a marriage for it to take place, which provided women with greater freedom to agree to or refuse a marriage. Since the Church preferred marriages to happen publicly in the presence of witnesses, this publicity offered women greater

³ Bradley P. Nystrom and David P. Nystrom, *The History of Christianity: An Introduction* (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2004), 179-180.

⁴ Nystrom and Nystrom, *History of Christianity*, 157-158.

⁵ Jennifer Ward, *Women in England in the Middle Ages* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006), 19.

security that their marriages would last. A public marriage was more likely to meet the approval of both families and to be considered legal than one held secretly.⁶

The paradox of how the Church regarded women might explain why male writers often portrayed women as either sisters of the disobedient and evil Eve, the first person who sinned against God, or as females more like the chaste and pure Virgin Mary. The cult of the Virgin Mary, the adoration and reverence for the mother of Jesus Christ, saw extraordinary growth during the 12th century. The Feast of the Conception, a religious day that celebrated Mary's conception, had actually been introduced in the 11th century, but it was revived in the early 12th century.⁷ The feast and the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, the idea that Mary was conceived free from original sin, were debated throughout the century by various monks, and by 1150, the feast was observed in many Benedictine abbeys in England.

One reason for the growth of the Marian cult by the Church might have been to persuade noblewomen to take the veil and become nuns.⁸ Another reason might have been to promote the status of women who embodied certain aspects of Mary like fidelity and virtue. While theologians acknowledged that the Virgin Mary had redeemed women, they still had to reconcile Mary with the biblical character of Eve. In literature and philosophy, women were characterized as good or evil.⁹ In poetry, good women represented a noble kind of love while evil women represented a lusty type of love. In

⁶ Ward, *Women in England in the Middle Ages*, 20-21.

⁷ Robert Bartlett, *England under the Norman and Angevin Kings, 1075-1225* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 470.

⁸ R. I. Moore, *The First European Revolution, c.970-1215* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 91.

⁹ Marty Newman Williams and Anne Echols, *Between Pit and Pedestal: Women in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1994), 1-7.

religious treatises, women were commonly presented as the reason for a man's downfall or as the source of his salvation.

Noblewomen had to navigate the medieval misogyny evident in the intellectual discourse and the paradox offered by the medieval Church. Despite their subordinate status, noblewomen were able to exercise some authority within their family. A woman could be considered noble if she was born into a noble family or married into one. An overview of a noblewoman's life will be presented first, followed by a discussion on specific types of noblewomen like queens, widows, and nuns.

Noblewomen achieved their status partly through birth but primarily through marriages. The Church might have offered women opportunities for more loving marriages, since a woman's consent was necessary for the marriage to go forward, but marriages were often arranged. This is due to the fact that marriage was still seen as an alliance in the 12th century rather than a religious act controlled by church legislation.¹⁰ Parents pressured their child into a match that was economically and socially advantageous for their family. Since many couples were betrothed in infancy, consent was merely an illusion. In 1103, the one-year old daughter of Count Robert of Meulan was betrothed to the nephew of Count William of Ivreux.¹¹ In addition, the daughter of Henry of Essex was pledged at the age of three to the brother of the earl of Oxford.¹²

Inheritance patterns in the 12th century further affected the formations of marriages. In order to narrow succession and strengthen lineage, inheritance was progressively becoming based on primogeniture with land being awarded along

¹⁰ Labarge, *Small Sound of the Trumpet: Women in Medieval Life*, 30.

¹¹ J. C. Holt, "Presidential Address: Feudal Society and the Family in Early Medieval England IV. The Heiress and the Alien," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 5th ser., 35 (1985): 6.

¹² Judith A. Green, *The Aristocracy of Norman England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 358. Sometime later in 1162 or 1163, the earl himself was betrothed to the girl.

patrilineal descent to the eldest son.¹³ If there was no son but one daughter, she became the sole heiress. If there was no son but more than one daughter, the daughters were treated as co-heiresses by around 1135. Even though two of his three daughters were sent to nunneries and only one married, all three daughters of Robert FitzHaimon received large inheritances.¹⁴ A lack of sons did not necessarily correlate to equal inheritance for the co-heiresses, though. In 1165, the earl of Hereford died, and two of his sisters took land while the third one had to persuade one of her sisters to give her land over the course of three decades.¹⁵ When Alfred FitzJudhael died in the early 12th century, his estate bypassed his two sisters and went to Henry de Tracy because of Henry's marriage to one of Alfred's sisters. A woman was usually given an inheritance as a last resort to preserve lineage. The property she acquired was not meant to stay with her; land was given to her so that it would pass to her husband after her marriage and subsequently to the heirs of her husband. Due to the lack of male heirs, 54 out of 189 (29%) English baronies between 1086 and 1166 passed through women.¹⁶

However, this was a time when inheritance was still somewhat fluid, which allowed the king to intervene in some marriages.¹⁷ The king could be granted the right to wardship of an heir while he was a minor and decide the heir's marriage. The king could offer a particular spouse as a reward for a courtier as well. King Henry I often granted the marriage of an heiress or widow to his courtiers for faithful service. In fact, one courtier, Miles of Gloucester, became a great lord in 1121 through his marriage to a

¹³ Peter Coss, *The Lady in Medieval England, 1000-1500* (Phoenix Mill, UK: Sutton Publishing, 1998), 21-22; Helen M. Jewell, *Women in Medieval England* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1996), 122.

¹⁴ Green, *Aristocracy of Norman England*, 377.

¹⁵ Green, *Aristocracy of Norman England*, 380.

¹⁶ Green, *Aristocracy of Norman England*, 129.

¹⁷ Ward, *Women in England in the Middle Ages*, 25

woman named Sibyl. Even though Sibyl had a brother who would have normally received the inheritance, her brother was passed over in favor of Sibyl so that her inheritance could go to Miles.

While inheritance patterns theoretically favored men over women, descent from women of high standing was sometimes highlighted when a man referenced a female relative in his name.¹⁸ A younger brother of Matilda, King Henry I's wife, called himself David brother of the queen. The brother of the same king's second wife also referred to himself in a similar way. A son of Eustace FitzJohn, a powerful lord who served Henry I and died while on campaign with Henry II, was called William de Vesci after his mother, Beatrice de Vesci, because William inherited his mother's lands.

Within a marriage, noblewomen had some legal rights. The common law regarding dower and female inheritance was refined between 1150 and 1250.¹⁹ During this period, the dower, or a woman's right to her husband's property after he died, expanded to include one-third of all the lands that her husband possessed at any time during their marriage. A married woman was afforded some security in that the law stipulated that a woman's marriage portion, or dowry, which she brought to the marriage, was not to be sold unless she consented, but her dowry was still legally in her husband's possession.²⁰ The size of the dowry varied. In Yorkshire during the Angevin period (1075-1225), the average size amounted to 100 acres or so of land; in 1192, Agnes, who was marrying Earl William of Ferrers, received a dowry of 10 librates of land and 5

¹⁸ Green, *Aristocracy of Norman England*, 345-347.

¹⁹ Mavis E. Mate, *Women in Medieval English Society*, *New Studies in Economic and Social History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 23.

²⁰ Labarge, *Small Sound of the Trumpet: Women in Medieval Life*, 34.

knights' fees.²¹ In addition, all of the woman's personal property including her clothing and jewelry belonged to her husband.²² A married woman was unable to make a will legally without her husband's permission, since she owned nothing in the eyes of the law.

Noblewomen were able to fulfill administrative duties in charters and hold their own seals for the sake of the family. When women acted as alienors and co-alienors (transferring ownership of property), signers, and witnesses to charters, they were also acting as wives, mothers, heiresses, widows, or mothers of the heir.²³ One woman, witnessing eight of her son's charters between 1138 and 1154, was listed as a mother.²⁴ In other charters she witnessed, she was named alongside members of her family. Her power derived from her relationship to her son and her position in her family. Another woman, wife of Earl Robert of Gloucester, played a much larger role in her husband's treaty than just witnessing, since it was her responsibility that her husband kept his word in the agreement.²⁵ Even though she was listed on the treaty because of her familial ties to Robert, her part in the treaty provided her with power. If her husband did not keep his word according to the treaty, she was to see that he did.

Seals also showed noblewomen's power. Married women co-sealed with their husbands, suggesting that women held power alongside their husbands, and the size of a seal of a male heir who was underage was smaller than his mother's seal, indicating the power the mother held while her son was a minor.²⁶ Furthermore, after men's seals

²¹ Bartlett, *England under the Norman and Angevin Kings*, 556.

²² Labarge, *Small Sound of the Trumpet: Women in Medieval Life*, 34-35.

²³ Susan M. Johns, *Noblewomen, Aristocracy and Power in the Twelfth-Century Anglo-Norman Realm* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2003), 53.

²⁴ Johns, *Noblewomen, Aristocracy and Power*, 95-96.

²⁵ Ward, *Women in England in the Middle Ages*, 106.

²⁶ Johns, *Noblewomen, Aristocracy and Power*, 127, 140.

contained heraldry in the 1140s, women's seals followed suit.²⁷ The use of heraldry on a women's seal was due to her participation in the family.

If a noblewoman was in an unhappy marriage, she had a few options. Her marriage could actually be annulled. An annulment was granted under certain circumstances: if there was a prior contract, if the couple was too closely related, if a man proved to be impotent, if one spouse was under the age of seven, if the marriage impeded a crime like adultery or a plot to kill the other spouse, or if one spouse experienced fear such as being physically harmed by the other.²⁸ Even though nobles were able to be pardoned after they married under the conditions listed above, annulments under the same conditions were difficult to achieve, though. There was just one instance of a royal annulment from 1075 to 1225.²⁹ King John had married Isabella in 1189, ten years before he ascended to the throne. Once the king, he wished to marry a woman of higher status, so he declared his current marriage void, since the king and Isabella, sharing a great-grandfather, were too closely related. In addition, women could be granted judicial separation from their husbands based on adultery, heresy, and cruelty, which was the reason for almost all the known separation cases in England during the High Middle Ages.³⁰

Another option for an unhappily married noblewoman was to take a lover and arrange her own kidnapping. It is sometimes difficult to decipher whether a woman was willing or forcefully kidnapped. While about two-thirds of allegedly kidnapped women between 1100 and 1500 were married, kidnappings were classified as a form of

²⁷ Coss, *Lady in Medieval England*, 38-39.

²⁸ Ward, *Women in England in the Middle Ages*, 43.

²⁹ Bartlett, *England under the Norman and Angevin Kings*, 557.

³⁰ Coss, *Lady in Medieval England*, 127.

ravishment by the courts.³¹ Since the law did not make the distinction between a woman who was taken by force and a woman who voluntarily left her marriage because of adultery or domestic violence until around 1275, in the 12th century, ravishment could refer to abduction, sexual assault, and theft like stealing money.³²

Regardless of whether a noblewoman's marriage was a happy affair, she was expected to provide heirs and manage the household while she remained in a marriage. Her children were generally reared in the household by governesses, maids, and tutors until they reached age seven.³³ At this age, boys were either sent to other households like King John, son of King Henry II and the last monarch of the 12th century, who spent part of his youth in the household of his father's chief minister Rannulf de Glanville or to cathedrals, monasteries, or one of the 22 known schools with professional schoolmasters for their education. Girls remained in the care of their mothers, and sometimes mistresses were hired to teach girls about dancing, singing, and proper behavior and dress. Some noble girls were sent to other noble households where they learned needlework, music, and proper behavior and dress. Although these noble girls did not receive a formal academic education, a few did learn how to read. In the mid-12th century, a woman of the lesser nobility paid to have Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* translated from Latin into Anglo-Norman, the language of the aristocracy.³⁴ Other women were able to read Latin. King Henry I's wife and King Stephen's mother both read Latin poetry and prose.³⁵

³¹ Caroline Dunn, *Stolen Women in Medieval England: Rape, Abduction, and Adultery, 1100-1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 1, 120, 154.

³² Dunn, *Stolen Women in Medieval England*, 18-19.

³³ Jewell, *Women in Medieval England*, 138; Richard Mortimer, *Angevin England, 1154-1258* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 195-196.

³⁴ Johns, *Noblewomen, Aristocracy and Power*, 38.

³⁵ Jewell, *Women in Medieval England*, 139.

Running a household was another responsibility of a noble wife, and it could be a complicated task. While outside the 12th century, a model of a 13th century medium-size household in Lincolnshire shows the complexity of households.³⁶ The household staff consisted of a chief buyer, a marshal who oversaw the stable, two men who looked after the horses, two pantrymen and butlers, two cooks, one man in charge of the sauces and another man of the poultry, a baker, a brewer, a laundress, and a porter. There were also a household steward who had two deputies, a chief clerical officer, and a chaplain who oversaw a boy clerk and a few friars. In all, the household employed 25 people excluding the knights or squires there. When her husband is away on business, at court, or fighting in the Crusades, the wife was expected to take charge by making administrative decisions normally reserved for her husband.³⁷ Marshals or stewards would then ensure that her orders were carried out. A noblewoman would also have a small group of women who waited on her. In the mid-12th century, one noblewoman provided an income of four shillings a year to one of her waiting women, and another noblewoman referred to a woman as her “chamberlain”.³⁸

Noblewomen did have time for entertainment, though. Since the main transportation method was by horse, learning to ride had a practical side. Breeding falcons and releasing them during a hunt, playing chess and backgammon, dancing, reciting poetry, and singing, however, were leisurely activities.³⁹ Daughters of the nobility were also encouraged to embroider and weave. At larger and more centrally located castles, women might partake in social gatherings quite frequently, but at smaller

³⁶ Labarge, *Small Sound of the Trumpet: Women in Medieval Life*, 75.

³⁷ Coss, *Lady in Medieval England*, 70; Jewell, *Women in Medieval England*, 142-143.

³⁸ Ward, *Women in England in the Middle Ages*, 103; Johns, *Noblewomen, Aristocracy and Power*, 159.

³⁹ Shulamith Shahar, *The Fourth Estate: A History of Women in the Middle Ages*, trans. Chaya Galai, rev. ed. (1983; repr., London: Routledge, 2003), 152-153.

and more isolated castles, women could expect few visitors. Noblewomen also attended tournaments as spectators and participated in charitable and religious activities.

A particular type of noblewoman was the queen. Even though no woman actually succeeded to the throne in the High and Late Middle Ages, each king of England took a wife who then, if all went according to plan, would give birth to the next king. The queen was symbolically seen as the Virgin Mary, a tradition which extended back to Anglo-Saxon times.⁴⁰ The earthly queen, just like the heavenly queen, was a mother who ensured a future through a son. The Virgin raised Jesus, who guaranteed the salvation of the human race; the queen raised a male heir, who succeeded his father as the next ruler of England.

One woman came quite close to ruling the kingdom in the 12th century, though. It must be noted - and it cannot be overstated - that Matilda was exceptional. As the daughter of King Henry I, the widow of Holy Roman Emperor Henry V, and the mother of a future king of England, unusual circumstances allowed her to vie for the throne.⁴¹ First, her brother, King Henry I's only legitimate son, died in a shipwreck in 1120. Then, Matilda's husband passed away in 1125. King Henry I arranged for Matilda to marry into a powerful family from Anjou (present-day western France), a marriage alliance that would help ensure the king's descendents - and not the heirs of his rival nephew - would remain in control. The king granted succession to Matilda and insisted that the leading barons and church and secular officials took an oath to accept Matilda as his heir. The king probably hoped that Matilda would have a son who would rule when the current king died. Unfortunately, Henry I died in 1135 when Matilda's eldest son was two years

⁴⁰ Ward, *Women in England in the Middle Ages*, 122.

⁴¹ Jim Bradbury, *Stephen and Matilda: The Civil War of 1139-1153* (Phoenix Mill, UK: Alan Sutton Publishing Limited, 1996), 8-13.

old. With Matilda pregnant in France, her cousin Stephen, the Count of Blois, saw an opportunity and was crowned three weeks after Henry I's death. Matilda, however, wanted to claim her inheritance.

The way in which Matilda went about claiming her right to the throne illustrates the limitations of women's authority. Matilda downplayed her position as a married woman with three children. Not only did she leave her sons in France with her husband, she also publicly identified herself as Empress Matilda, the daughter of King Henry I.⁴² In this way, she presented herself as a single woman, the widow of her first husband and the sole remaining legitimate child of the recently deceased king. Since they were dead, she had no men who might restrain her or determine what she did or where she went. Matilda was never officially crowned and went back to France until her son succeeded Stephen as King Henry II in 1154.⁴³ Ultimately, because it was Matilda's son and not she who ruled England, her greatest accomplishment has remained motherhood - and by extension - marriage. In this way, Matilda was very similar to other noblewomen of the 12th century.

However, although royal birth allowed Matilda the opportunity to claim her right to rule, it was Matilda herself who decided that she wanted to be queen. She had to travel from the continent to England. She made strategic decisions like sending troops to Dorset to claim a southern maritime base.⁴⁴ She enacted her own policies like granting

⁴² Charles Beem, " 'Greater by Marriage': The Matrimonial Career of the Empress Matilda," in *Queens and Power in Medieval and Early Modern England*, ed. Carole Levin and Robert Bucholtz (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 8-9.

⁴³ Beem, "The Matrimonial Career of the Empress Matilda," 13.

⁴⁴ Bradbury, *Stephen and Matilda*, 68.

patronage, issuing charters, and minting coins.⁴⁵ In sum, Matilda exercised agency throughout her quest for the throne.

Another type of noblewoman was the widow. Matilda, the almost queen, was herself a widow. Traditionally, widows have been seen as the most independent and wealthy women. They had their own seals and signed charters after the death of their husbands. However, when a widow made a legal agreement, the text included the widow's familial ties.⁴⁶ The name of her deceased husband accompanied the Latin clause *in legia potestate* [in lawful power], a phrase which indicated her status and legitimized her ability to make a charter. A widow received a dower, the source of her wealth, but her right to her deceased husband's land could be a complex and drawn out process.⁴⁷ Once they had control of their dowers, widows decided where their lands went. Clemencia, widow of Earl Ranulf of Chester, gave her marriage portion to her favorite abbey, Savigny, overriding a previous charter made by her husband where her lands went to a different foundation.⁴⁸

While noble widows might have been financially independent, their wealth made them desirable partners, and they could be forced into marriages. In his coronation charter, King Henry I had promised that widows would remarry only if they consented, but the king had no problem receiving money for securing marriages with widows.⁴⁹ Likewise, a widow could pay a large fee in exchange for the right to marry or not to marry, guaranteeing her own widow status. Occasionally, men stole women, more often

⁴⁵ Beem, "The Matrimonial Career of the Empress Matilda," 9.

⁴⁶ Johns, *Noblewomen, Aristocracy and Power*, 72.

⁴⁷ Ward, *Women in England in the Middle Ages*, 65.

⁴⁸ Johns, *Noblewomen, Aristocracy and Power*, 67.

⁴⁹ Mate, *Women in Medieval English Society*, 23.

widows than maidens, in the hope of raising their social status with an advantageous marriage.⁵⁰

Widows were able to gain *feme sole* [woman alone] status if they remained unmarried. This gave women their own legal identity. They were able to own land, sell and bequeath their property, plead in courts, and generally make their own decisions.⁵¹ In contrast, a married woman was a *feme covert* [covered woman] and was only able to perform these actions alongside her husband. Sometimes widows were able to bargain how long they remained unmarried. In 1130, the recently widowed Countess Lucy made an agreement that prevented her from remarrying for up to five years.⁵² Some noble widows did not take another husband and maintained their *feme sole* status. A few examples are the aforementioned Countess Lucy, Margaret the wife of Earl Henry I of Warwick, and Gundrada the wife of Nigel d'Aubigny.⁵³ For the period 1069-1230, out of 58 dowager countesses, 25 married once, 26 twice, 7 three times, and 1 four times.⁵⁴

Lastly, noblewomen could decide to take the veil and become nuns. Early nunneries had been founded by kings or nobles for their own sisters, aunts, and even mothers.⁵⁵ The position of abbess was given to someone of high social standing. Cecilia, daughter of William the Conqueror, was the superior at the abbey that had been founded by her mother, and a Benedictine nunnery was governed by Mary, daughter of King

⁵⁰ Dunn, *Stolen Women in Medieval England*, 6n18, 82, 83n7, 87. Dunn focused primarily on abduction cases in the 13th and 14th centuries, because scanty legal records meant that few cases before 1200 were found. However, she deemed 61 out of 556 abductions from 1100 to 1500 as bride-theft, men kidnapping women and forcing them into marriage.

⁵¹ Cordelia Beattie, *Medieval Single Women: The Politics of Social Classification in Late Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 25.

⁵² Green, *Aristocracy of Norman England*, 370.

⁵³ Green, *Aristocracy of Norman England*, 371.

⁵⁴ Ward, *Women in England in the Middle Ages*, 73.

⁵⁵ Labarge, *Small Sound of the Trumpet: Women in Medieval Life*, 98.

Stephen, between 1155 and 1160.⁵⁶ Abbesses wielded authority in holy houses, making sure that rules were followed and doling out appropriate punishments when they were not. Nuns were expected to be chaste and devout, praying and attending church services throughout the day.⁵⁷

Some abbesses even oversaw men in double monasteries.⁵⁸ These houses were shared by both monks and nuns who occupied separate spaces. After the Gregorian reforms, the number of double monasteries sharply diminished. The enforcement of clerical celibacy had increased, and all women, including those who had taken vows of chastity, were viewed as constant dangers to men.⁵⁹ The idea was that being around women might cause a man dedicated to celibacy to falter and sin, so it was better to put even more distance between monks and nuns.

Certain monastic orders were more likely to take women than others. The Cistercians rarely accepted female recruits while the Arrouaisians and Premonstratensians took in nuns until the late 12th century.⁶⁰ The Premonstratensian order founded three convents for women in double monasteries in England.⁶¹ Around 1140, the abbots decided that their monasteries should no longer include women. Jacques de Vitry, a late 12th-early 13th century French theologian, even warned about the moral dangers that exist in Premonstratensian houses after windows were widened into doors and the inhabitants' original religious passion had lessened. Temptation was more

⁵⁶ Labarge, *Small Sound of the Trumpet: Women in Medieval Life*, 98; Bartlett, *England under the Norman and Angevin Kings*, 437.

⁵⁷ Ward, *Women in England in the Middle Ages*, 158.

⁵⁸ Shahar, *Fourth Estate*, 31.

⁵⁹ Nystrom and Nystrom, *History of Christianity*, 179.

⁶⁰ Green, *Aristocracy of Norman England*, 389, 406; Janet Burton, *Monastic and Religious Orders in Britain, 1000-1300* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 100.

⁶¹ Sally Thompson, *Women Religious: The Founding of English Nunneries after the Norman Conquest* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 133-135.

easily accessible, so women were moved to female-only houses geographically removed from the monasteries. Arrouaisian double monasteries faced the same issues as the Premonstratensian ones, and the number of women in them was gradually reduced throughout the 12th century.⁶²

In the 12th century, separate monastic houses for women increased. In 1066, there were 9 or 10 houses for women and 20 by 1130.⁶³ After 1130, about 120 new nunneries were added throughout England. The layout of female houses differed from male houses and reflected the doctrine of humours.⁶⁴ Women were thought to have a melancholic humour and thus a cold and dry nature. A nunnery's cloister, an outside rectangular-shaped space with covered walkways along each side, was usually positioned to the north side of the church. Since the north was associated with cold and the south with heat, a nunnery's cloister was to the north of the church and the monastery's cloister was to the south of the church.

Though separate from monasteries, nunneries were not self-sufficient, since they still required a male cleric to perform mass.⁶⁵ The order of Fontevrault, started in the early 12th century in France by Robert of Arbrisse, was originally a double monastery where men and women were separated but was considered jurisdictionally as one.⁶⁶ After Robert's death, the widow Petronilla became the first abbess there, followed by another woman of high birth. When the order was brought to England around 1154 by Earl Robert of Leicester and his wife, it was revised slightly to incorporate a male element within the order's formal organization. One house of the order was founded at

⁶² Thompson, *Women Religious*, 149.

⁶³ Jewell, *Women in Medieval England*, 156.

⁶⁴ Ward, *Women in England in the Middle Ages*, 151.

⁶⁵ Bartlett, *England under the Norman and Angevin Kings*, 435.

⁶⁶ Burton, *Monastic and Religious Orders in Britain*, 96-97.

Amesbury in Wiltshire in 1177, but instead of the monastery housing nuns and monks, Amesbury was a place just for women. A house solely for men was established nearby so as to provide a chaplain within close proximity to the female house.

In conclusion, more often than not, the intellectual discourse about women affected a woman's reality. Everything about a woman from her physicality to her menstrual cycle was deemed inferior and dangerous. Due to concerns about churchmen's celibacy, women were eventually separated from men in religious houses. The position of abbesses declined, since an abbess could no longer oversee both monks and nuns.

Noblewomen in 12th century England did have some power. Most times, it was linked to her family and her role as a wife and mother. If a noblewoman was granted full reign of the household, it was because her husband was away from the house. If a woman was awarded an inheritance, it usually meant she was the last living descendent, and the land was to be passed along to her son. Even widows with their *feme sole* status who were able to make legal transactions by themselves still owed the majority of their wealth to their deceased husbands. It was, after all, the deceased husband's property, the dower, which provided the widow with land to own and items to sell and bequeath. At the same time, noblewomen had room for individual initiative within those family roles. They had to make decisions on behalf of the whole household when their husbands left, they could leave an unhappy marriage by arranging their own abductions, and they decided where and how much of their dowry went to their descendents or to certain foundations.

– Chapter 2 –
Ad Fontes: Back to the Sources
Bede, Virgil, and Ovid

In the prologue to his *Historia Rerum Anglicarum (History of English Affairs)*, before the 12th century chronicler William of Newburgh pointed out the inaccuracies in Geoffrey of Monmouth's historical work, William praised Bede, that *venerabilis presbyter et monachus* [venerable priest and monk].¹ William also mentioned that there was an historian before Bede who wrote just as truthfully as Bede named Gildas.² William recognized the importance of knowing an historian's sources. This is just one of the reasons why William has been called the 'father of historical criticism.'³

So that this chapter does not fail to meet William of Newburgh's standards, it will examine the sources of Geoffrey of Monmouth, William of Malmesbury, Orderic Vitalis, and William of Newburgh, the chroniclers discussed in the next two chapters, in order to show that these 12th century historical writers borrowed the two motifs of women as intellectuals and women as warriors from their sources. The historians based their women to a degree on what had been written previously, that is, their sources, which helps explain why the women in 12th century English chronicles are represented somewhat differently from the noblewoman's reality, which was the subject of the previous chapter.

It is widely accepted that Geoffrey of Monmouth relied upon, among others, Virgil, Gildas, Bede, Nennius, various saints' lives, Welsh genealogies, and the Bible to

¹ William of Newburgh, *The History of English Affairs: Book 1*, ed. and trans. by P. G. Walsh and M. J. Kennedy (Warminster, UK: Aris & Phillips, 1988), 28. All translations are my own.

² Gildas was a 6th century British cleric who wrote *On the Ruin and Conquest of Britain*. Antonia Gransden, *Historical Writing in England, c.550-c.1307* (London: Routledge, 1996), 1.

³ P. G. Walsh and M. J. Kennedy, introduction to *The History of English Affairs: Book 1*, by William of Newburgh, ed. and trans. by P. G. Walsh and M. J. Kennedy (Warminster, UK: Aris & Phillips, 1988), 1.

complete *Historia Regum Britanniae* (*History of the Kings of Britain*).⁴ Scholars have even deconstructed *History* to the point where they have identified the origins of the names Geoffrey used.⁵ Although Geoffrey of Monmouth has been studied the most out of all the 12th century historians, much has also been written about the other historians' sources. In fact, preceding nearly every edited collection of a particular writer's work is an introduction explaining which sources the writer used. Generally, scholars today no longer argue about which texts influenced the historians. Even though Geoffrey of Monmouth, William of Malmesbury, Orderic Vitalis, and William of Newburgh utilized a variety of different sources, all of them were indebted to Bede, Virgil, and Ovid.⁶

Bede was born in either 672 or 673 in the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Northumbria in northern England, and he died in 735.⁷ Nothing is known about his parents. At the age of seven, he began his education at Northumbria's Wearmouth Abbey. He would later transfer to Jarrow, a monastery about five miles away from Wearmouth, where he remained for the rest of his life. He was made deacon at age 19 and ordained as a priest in 702 or 703.⁸ Bede was a pious man, who wrote commentaries on the Bible. He also recorded the life of St. Cuthbert in prose and in verse, the history of Wearmouth and

⁴ Michael J. Curley, *Geoffrey of Monmouth* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994), 11.

⁵ See the chapter "Personages and Their Names" for a discussion on where Geoffrey came across names and why he might have chosen them. J. S. P. Tatlock, *The Legendary History of Britain: Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regum Britanniae and its Early Vernacular Versions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1950), 116-170.

⁶ For an excellent summary of what William of Malmesbury read, see R. M. Thomson, *William of Malmesbury*, rev. ed. (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2003), 40-75. For an equal treatment on Orderic Vitalis, see Marjorie Chibnall, introduction to *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, by Orderic Vitalis, vol. 1, ed. Marjorie Chibnall, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 48-77. For a shorter discussion on William of Newburgh's sources, see Nancy F. Partner, *Serious Entertainments: The Writing of History in Twelfth-Century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 60-62.

⁷ Gransden, *Historical Writing in England*, 13-16. Bede also gave the simple facts of his life at the end of *Ecclesiastical History*.

⁸ Canon law required men to be 25 years or older to be made deacons. Bede must have been outstanding in his holiness and his studies to be granted such an exception. C. E. Whiting, "The Life of the Venerable Bede," in *Bede: His Life, Times, and Writings: Essays in Commemoration of the Twelfth Centenary of His Death*, ed. A. Hamilton Thompson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935), 10.

Jarrow, the history of the world in two parts, and a history of the English people. It is this last work that Bede is most remembered by today.

The *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (*Ecclesiastical History of the English People*) was completed in 731. In five books, it provides a chronological history of the Anglo-Saxon Church, beginning with a geographical survey of Britain, a brief account of the Roman occupation, and the story of how Christianity came to England. Saints' lives occasionally break up the narrative. Northumbria factors heavily into the account, but *Ecclesiastical History* was read by people throughout England and in Europe. There are over 150 extant manuscripts of *Ecclesiastical History*, and almost half of known medieval copies can be found in libraries outside of England.⁹

Bede's legacy continued into the 12th century. Twelfth century historians not only read Bede's work and used him as a source for their own writings, they also regarded Bede as the standard to which their own work was measured. Geoffrey of Monmouth, William of Malmesbury, Orderic Vitalis, and William of Newburgh all cited Bede as an inspiration. Due to Bede's prominent influence on 12th century writers, how Bede presented women in his *Ecclesiastical History* will be considered at length.

Although *Ecclesiastical History* was a history of the English Church, it was also a history of the English men and women who helped establish the Roman Church in England. Men as bishops and as members of the clergy built monastic houses, administered sacraments, and maintained the unity of the Church. Women, though, were granted many different roles in helping the Church achieve lasting success. Some were abbesses and nuns, others were involved in miracles, and a few were noblewomen who influenced their husbands.

⁹ Gransden, *Historical Writing in England*, 16-17.

Nuns appear most often in book four of *Ecclesiastical History*. One of the reasons why they might not be seen earlier is because, according to Bede, there were few religious houses in England at this time, so women left England for Frankish or Gallic convents.¹⁰ As Bede is describing the history of the Church in England, women who went abroad to pursue a monastic life would not have factored into his narrative unless they were women of distinction. This is why Bede mentioned, in book three, that the daughter of the King of Kent and step-daughter of King Anna of East Anglia became nuns and were later abbesses.¹¹ Therefore, the exclusion of holy women until halfway through a work on the history of the Church was not an oversight or a commentary on how Bede considered women in the Church. On the contrary, all the holy women in *Ecclesiastical History* were described as women of great virtue.

One holy woman in particular was treated extensively in *Ecclesiastical History*.¹² Hilda was the daughter of King Edwin's nephew who, at age 33, decided to enter the convent. She would eventually become the abbess of Hartlepool Abbey in Northumbria, then the abbess of Streanaeshalch where she remained for the rest of her life until her death in 680 at the age of 66.

Bede records two prominent examples of Hilda's intelligence and wisdom. In the first, Hilda was still the abbess of Hartlepool. She was regularly visited by religious men like Bishop Aidan who offered her guidance on how to properly rule the abbey. Bede goes one step further, though, and suggests that the knowledge transfer was not just one way. Bede writes that these men knew that *pro insita ei sapientia et amore divini*

¹⁰ Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, trans. Leo Sherley-Price, ed. R. E. Latham, rev. ed., Penguin Classics (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1968), 153-154.

¹¹ Bede, *History of the English Church and People*, 153-154.

¹² Book IV, Chapter 23 presents the life and death of Abbess Hilda.

famulatus, sedulo eam visitare, obnixè amare, diligenter erudire solebant [for innate in her was wisdom and love of divine service, they used to earnestly visit her, to love resolutely, to instruct diligently].¹³ The way in which Bede writes the sentence indicates that these men might have visited her so often precisely because she was wise and devout. It could also mean that the men admired these two qualities in Hilda. In either case, Hilda comes across as an intelligent woman whom men respected. Later on at Streanaeshalch, common folk and even royalty were said to have asked for her advice.

In the second example, Hilda's aptitude is not just hinted at but expressively demonstrated. As the abbess of Streanaeshalch, she oversaw both men and women. Interestingly enough, Bede only mentions men - and not women - whom Hilda supervised. In the statement *facillime viderentur ibidem qui ecclesiasticum gradum, hoc est, altaris officium apte subirent, plurimi posse reperiri* [it appeared that many can be easily found in that very place who were rightly entering the position of ecclesiastic, that is, the service of the altar],¹⁴ the word *plurimi* most likely means men.¹⁵ In the following sentence, the names of five men are given. The five men were *ex eodem monasterio* [from the same monastery] and later became bishops. Furthermore, a monk who died before he could be made bishop was *de eiusdem abbatissae monasterio* [from the monastery of the same abbess].¹⁶ This last quote makes it clear that Hilda's monastery was a place where men were educated well enough that they could become bishops. As

¹³ Bede, *Opera Historica*, vol. 2, trans. J. E. King, Loeb Classical Library (1930; repr., Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 128.

¹⁴ Bede, *Opera Historica*, vol. 2, 130.

¹⁵ Scholar J. M. Wallace-Hadrill also agreed that Bede was referring to men only in that sentence. See J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People: A Historical Commentary* (1988; repr., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 164.

¹⁶ Bede, *Opera Historica*, vol. 2, 132.

the head of a monastery which produced a number of bishops, Hilda is presented as a competent woman who was considered capable of teaching men.

Holy women, though, appeared most often as nuns who experienced miracles in *Ecclesiastical History*. The bodies of two abbesses, Earcongota, daughter of the King of Kent, and Ethelberga, aunt of Earcongota, were uncorrupted after death.¹⁷ Three days after Earcongota's body was put in the ground, it was dug up so that her body could be buried even deeper. As this was taking place, a sweet-smelling fragrance emanated from below. Ethelberga had been buried within a church in her monastery, but it was decided that her bones were to be transferred to another church. When her tomb was uncovered, her body was found untouched by decay. The nuns of Barking saw visions from God.¹⁸ At this time, there was a plague affecting the men's part of the monastery. The sisters knew it was only a matter of time before the plague reached them, but no one would say where she wanted to be buried. One night the sisters were praying over the graves of their brothers when a light from the sky shown down, indicating the burial site for the nuns. Later, a nun sick with the plague was visited by a monk who had died earlier that year. He told her she would die at dawn, and so she did.

Moreover, miracles affected secular women. In one case, the owner of an inn had a niece who suffered from paralysis.¹⁹ There was a male guest at the inn whose horse had been near death when it recovered. The man told the niece's family where his horse had been cured. The girl was brought to the place on a cart and laid down there. After taking a short nap, she awoke and was able to walk back to the inn. This place where the horse and girl were cured was the site of the death of Oswald, called the most Christian king of

¹⁷ Bede, *History of the English Church and People*, 155.

¹⁸ Bede, *History of the English Church and People*, 218-220.

¹⁹ Bede, *History of the English Church and People*, 155-157.

the Northumbrians by Bede. In another case, the wife of a nobleman had been sick for 40 days.²⁰ Bishop John of Beverly was in town dedicating a church. The wife was given the holy water that had been blessed by John. After she drank the water and applied it to the part of her body which hurt the most, the wife was immediately healed.

A variety of women was involved in Bede's miracle stories from religious to common to aristocratic women, as the examples above have demonstrated. Considering that men in *Ecclesiastical History* were also participants in such stories, Bede was probably not commenting on women's godliness or their susceptibility to visions and the like.²¹ According to scholar Bertram Colgrave, these stories are apparently imitations of miracles found in classical sources and in the scriptures.²² Colgrave further argued that Bede might have added these stories "to exalt his heroes, to teach his lessons, and perhaps also for the sake of adding picturesque incident."²³ For the two abbesses, the fragrance from Earcongota's corpse and Ethelberga's preserved body might have been due to embalming techniques or natural causes, but Bede would have attributed their uncorrupt bodies to their past pious lives. In this case, he might have been preaching to his readers how a holy life could lead to a holy death. As for the nuns of Barking Abbey, Bede says that the abbess of Barking was a devout woman and good leader *ut etiam caelestia indicio fuere miracula* [as there were even heavenly miracles for proof].²⁴ Since Bede credits the miracles to the current abbess' godly example and includes a number of miracles in detail, he might have considered her, in the words of Colgrave, one

²⁰ Bede, *History of the English Church and People*, 274-275.

²¹ See the story of a monk healed by a wooden cross in Book III, Chapter 2 and a servant boy healed by drinking wine that had been blessed by Bishop John of Beverly in Book V, Chapter 5.

²² Bertram Colgrave, "Bede's Miracle Stories," in *Bede: His Life, Times, and Writings: Essays in Commemoration of the Twelfth Centenary of His Death*, ed. A. Hamilton Thompson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935), 210.

²³ Colgrave, "Bede's Miracle Stories," 229.

²⁴ Bede, *Opera Historica*, vol. 2, 44.

of ‘his heroes.’²⁵ Even if stories such as the two abbesses’ bodies, the Barking nuns, the niece suffering from paralysis, and the sick noblewomen were there to merely add entertainment to *Ecclesiastical History*, Bede could have made disapproving remarks about these women, or he could have presented miracle stories where the women were evil sinners. Instead, in the case of the holy women, the nuns are depicted as righteous women and in the case of the secular women, there is nothing said to indicate that these women were immoral or wanton. The women in these miracle stories also acted as agents for the Church, since a primary theme in *Ecclesiastical History* was that miracles had a role in establishing the English Church. Bede believed that miracles helped bring people to Christ.²⁶ Miracles confirmed the truth of His teachings to unbelievers. Bede used women just like he used men to show God’s greatness and goodness through miracles. In this respect, Bede was an advocator of gender equality.

Finally, Bede presents queens as religious ambassadors to their husbands. Tata, wife of Edwin, indirectly and directly influenced her husband.²⁷ Edwin was the king of Northumbria, a pagan realm. He wanted to marry Tata, daughter of King Ethelbert, who ruled over Kent. Tata, though, was a Christian; she would only marry a man who shared her beliefs. When Edwin learned this, he sent a message saying that he would allow Tata to openly practice her faith and that he would be willing to accept Christianity as well if his advisors deemed it better than his current religion. The two were married in 625.²⁸

²⁵ In addition, Bede only names monasteries when he wants to highlight the sanctity of a founder or a member. In the case of Barking, it was probably both. A bishop helped build Barking and that bishop’s sister was the esteemed first abbess of Barking. Wallace-Hadrill, *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History: Historical Commentary*, 146.

²⁶ William D. McCready, *Miracles and the Venerable Bede* (Toronto, ON: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1994), 105-106, 113.

²⁷ For the story of Edwin and Tata, see Book II, Chapter 9.

²⁸ Scholars have concluded that Edwin’s marriage happened in 618-619. Wallace-Hadrill, *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History: Historical Commentary*, 65.

The following year on Easter, Edwin survived an assassination attempt and witnessed the birth of his baby girl. He promised to convert to Christianity if God granted him victory over the king who had sent the assassin. As a pledge that he would keep his word, his newborn and 12 others in his household were baptized.

Although Edwin would defeat the king who has sent the assassin, he would not convert to Christianity until after he received a vision from God. However, Tata's influence on the king would have helped contribute to Edwin's conversion. Bede is silent on why Edwin married Tata. Perhaps it was a marriage meant to align Northumbria with Kent; perhaps he had heard of her wondrous beauty. Regardless of the reason, Edwin was surrounded by a Christian wife, the bishop she brought with her, and her companions of whom at least 12 were baptized due to their royal marriage. He probably would have become familiar with Christian tenets and traditions. At the least, he respected his wife's bishop and her religion. After the birth of his daughter, Edwin was thanking his gods, and the bishop *cuius verbis delectatus rex* [by whose words the king was delighted]²⁹ was thanking Christ. It was then that Edwin made his promise to convert. Edwin was beginning to put aside his loyalty to his old religion. By making that promise, he was admitting that Christ might have had a hand in delivering his baby safely and in keeping his wife well through the delivery.

Later, Bede hints that Tata more directly influenced her husband's conversion. Bede records the contents of the letters the current Pope sent to Edwin and Tata. The letter to Edwin encouraged him to accept the Christian faith; the one to Tata urged her to convince her husband to convert. Each letter follows the same format starting with

²⁹ Bede, *Historical Works*, vol. 1, trans. J. E. King, Loeb Classical Library (1930; repr., Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 250.

introductory clauses and ending with a list of gifts that accompanied the letter. Both also utilized scripture. In the letter addressed to Tata, the emphasis was on Tata as a wife converting her husband, so the first part of 1 Corinthians 7:14 was quoted: “For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife.”³⁰ The Pope believed that Tata in her role as Edwin’s wife could convert Edwin; the Pope also mentions Tata’s Christianity in his letter to Edwin. One scholar even wonders if the Pope thought Tata converting Edwin - and thus the Northumbrians - was the fruition of Paul’s testimony in 1 Corinthians 7:14.³¹

Tata’s responsibility and her role were clear in the Pope’s letter regarding her husband’s conversion. She was to *duritiā cordis ipsius...mollire* [soften the hardness of his heart] and to *frigiditatem cordis ipsius...succende* [set on fire the coldness of his heart].³² Tata prepared Edwin to receive Christ. No man or woman could take full responsibility for Edwin’s conversion. Instead, Bede presents his conversion as a multi-step process, and Tata was there each step of the way. She comes across as an intelligent, strong woman who persisted in her faith even while her husband and his subjects followed paganism.

Not all of Bede’s queens were depicted to be as persuasive as Tata. Bertha was Ethelbert’s wife, who influenced her husband to a lesser extent.³³ In 597, Augustine was sent by Pope Gregory the Great to convert the English people. When Augustine and his companions reached an island to the east of Kent, they sent messengers to Ethelbert, the king of Kent, saying that they were from Rome and that they wished to introduce

³⁰ 1 Cor. 7:14 (English Standard Version). The verse goes on to say, “...and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.”

³¹ Wallace-Hadrill, *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History: Historical Commentary*, 70.

³² Bede, *Historical Works*, vol. 1, 266.

³³ The story of Bertha and Ethelbert can be found in Book I, Chapter 25.

Christianity to the royal household. Ethelbert was wary in receiving these churchmen, but he finally met them, allowing them free rein to preach to anyone and giving them supplies to take care of their basic needs. Bede adds that Bertha was a Frankish woman who had been allowed to practice her Christian faith even after marrying a pagan king. Since his wife was a Christian, Ethelbert was somewhat familiar with Christianity. Though the text does not say this was why Ethelbert ultimately saw Augustine after Ethelbert received the message, the sequence of events indicates that if Ethelbert's wife had not been a Christian, then Ethelbert would not have initially met with Augustine. Just like Tata, Bertha prepared Ethelbert's heart for Christianity, starting with toleration, then conversion, and finally baptism.

Historian Helen M. Jewell observed that the reputations of Anglo-Saxon queens were "much in the hands of contemporary churchmen, who might present them as conventional, pious, saintly innocents, or as cunning, ruthless, and immoral Jezebels."³⁴ In the case of Bede, though, Jewell believed that "Bede allowed queens considerable influence."³⁵ She brings up how Raedwald's queen convinced him not to betray his friend and sacrifice his own honor for the sake of money.

Bede, though the most influential to the 12th century historians, was not their only source. The 12th century saw a resurging fondness for the Roman classics. Publius Vergilius Maro (70 BC-19 BC) is widely considered the greatest of all the Roman

³⁴ Helen M. Jewell, *Women in Medieval England* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1996), 39.

³⁵ Jewell, *Women in Medieval England*, 37. Although Jewell does provide some examples of queens from *Ecclesiastical History*, her discussion is brief and more informational than explanatory. The queens talked about at length in this paper are not the same ones she mentions. See Jewell, *Women in Medieval England*, 37-39.

poets.³⁶ He was born on 15 October 70 BC in northern Italy into a family of modest means, but his father made sure he was educated well at Cremona, then at Milan, and finally at Rome. Virgil lived during a time of civil strife, and his own farm was confiscated. He records this period of his life in the ten poems of *Eclogues*. Another poem, *Georgics*, was a treatise on agriculture. His most famous work was the epic poem *Aeneid*. Virgil actually died before he had finished revising *Aeneid*, and he wanted it to be burned. Emperor Augustus, however, ordered the publication of *Aeneid*.

The *Aeneid* tells the tale of how the legendary Aeneas travelled from the ruins of Troy to Italy and established the colony which would lead to Rome. It should be noted that the most popular 12th century history, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*, continues Aeneas' legacy. According to Geoffrey's historical account, the founder of Britain was Brutus, Aeneas' great-grandson.

Along his journey, Aeneas encounters a number of women. Some of them, like Queen Amata, are portrayed in an unflattering way. Amata is able to provoke other women to convince their male kin to start a war, but she impulsively commits suicide because she thinks her husband has died. However, fighting in the war on Queen Amata's side is Camilla, a warrior queen.³⁷ She is the last of the warriors introduced, a position of honor, since *hos super advenit Volsca de gente Camilla, agmen agens equitum et florentis aere catervas, bellatrix* [above them comes Camilla of the Volscan race, a warrior queen, leading a troop of horsemen and soldiers abounding with brass].³⁸

³⁶ H. Rushton Fairclough, introduction to *Eclogues, Georgics, Aeneid I-VI*, by Virgil, vol. 1, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough, rev. ed., Loeb Classical Library (London: William Heinemann, 1940), ix-xi; Maurice Balme and James Morwood, *Oxford Latin Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 140-141.

³⁷ Camilla is introduced at the very end of Book VII and her story continues in Book XI.

³⁸ Virgil, *Aeneid VII-XII, The Minor Poems*, vol. 2, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough, rev. ed., Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 58.

Super with an accusative, a direct object, can specify place, situation, or even position. Virgil was probably not saying that Camilla was literally standing on a spot higher than the other troops. More likely, *hos super* was meant to indicate hierarchy of prowess on the battlefield. This interpretation is further reinforced by the fact that Camilla was the leader of cavalry and foot soldiers.

Virgil also casts Camilla as a female warrior with a mind for strategy. She suggests a plan of attack to Turnus, Aeneas' antagonist and the king of the Rutulians, which would have her and her troops riding out to meet Aeneas' cavalry while Turnus guards the town. Turnus accepts her offer of help, calling her a *decus Italiae virgo* [a maiden, the pride of Italy], and proposes an alternative version of Camilla's plan, asking that she *mecum partire laborem* [share with me the work].³⁹ He then tells her that she will lead and command three squadrons from his own forces: *ducis et tu concipe curam* [you lead and take charge].⁴⁰ This is significant for a variety of reasons. First, it shows that Turnus had no problem working together with Camilla. He respected her fighting abilities, her leadership qualities, and her intelligence. Turnus had first considered Camilla's plan and then made slight adjustments to it. Her idea was certainly not ridiculed by him or anyone else. Second, no one in the three squadrons questioned that Camilla instead of Turnus would be commanding them. Though the text only shows Turnus embracing Camilla's help, she was not unwelcome to the others. Third, Turnus acknowledged Camilla's gender; he refers to her as a *virgo*, a maiden. While Camilla certainly had masculine traits that set her apart from other women, like leading soldiers into battle and fighting with a spear, Virgil makes sure that she is not overtly masculine

³⁹ Virgil, *Aeneid VII-XII, The Minor Poems*, vol. 2, 268.

⁴⁰ Virgil, *Aeneid VII-XII, The Minor Poems*, vol. 2, 268.

to the point that she loses her femininity. She is referred to as a *regina* [queen], a *dominam* [lady], and as a potential wife whom many mothers longed for their sons to marry.⁴¹ When she dies in battle, she departs this world a hero as her death is described the exact same way as Turnus' death. However, her blood that was shed was virginal blood.⁴² Camilla died as both a warrior and a woman.

As the 12th and 13th centuries have even been referred to as the 'Age of Ovid,' a discussion on Publius Ovidius Naso (43 BC-17 AD) is in order.⁴³ Much is known about Ovid.⁴⁴ In fact, he recorded the main events of his life in an autobiographical poem, *Tristia* (*Sorrows*). He was born on 20 March 43 BC in Sulmo, which was located about 90 miles east of Rome. He had a brother who was exactly one year older. Their father sent Ovid and his brother to Rome to be educated. Ovid could have pursued a career as a senator, but he chose to be a poet instead. In 8 AD, he was banished from Rome. The emperor was trying to curb sexual permissiveness, and Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* (*Art of Love*) offended Augustus. Ovid died while still in exile.

Ovid wrote about subjects as diverse as love and mythology. Women factor heavily into his works. *Amores* (*Loves*) was a series of short poems that describes an imaginary relationship between Ovid and a woman called Corinna while *Heroides* (*Heroines*) was a collection of poetic letters with the first 15 written by legendary women such as Dido and Penelope to absent husbands or lovers. The infamous *Art of Love* was a manual for catching and keeping a lover; the first two books are addressed to men and the third book to women. It even produced a sequel, *Remedia Amoris* (*Cure for Love*). He

⁴¹ Virgil, *Aeneid VII-XII, The Minor Poems*, vol. 2, 268, 288, 274.

⁴² Virgil, *Aeneid VII-XII, The Minor Poems*, vol. 2, 288.

⁴³ Classical scholar Ludwig Traube coined the phrase. Kathryn L. McKinley, *Reading the Ovidian Heroine: "Metamorphoses" Commentaries, 1100-1618* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2001), xii.

⁴⁴ Balme and Morwood, *Oxford Latin Reader*, 190-192.

also wrote *Medicamina Faciei Feminea* (*Cosmetics for the Female Face*), but only 100 lines have survived.

Out of all of his poems, *Metamorphoses* (*Transformations*) is probably his most famous, and it was also the work that received the most interest in the Middle Ages.⁴⁵ In 15 books, it is a collection of legendary and mythological stories in poem format. All together, about 250 stories are told chronologically, beginning with the creation of the world and ending with the deification of Julius Caesar. Through books 6-10, Ovid presented a multitude of heroines and the dilemmas these women faced. These women were complex characters, and Ovid emphasized their psyches.

Scholar Kathryn L. McKinley has investigated Ovid's representation of women in books 7 and 10 and how medieval and Renaissance commentators, editors, and translators might have read the heroines. Medieval Latin commentaries on classical texts were used in schools as a way for students to learn Latin and to become familiar with a particular poet's style.⁴⁶ To accomplish these purposes, lines were read individually and literally. Each commentary would have marginal and interlinear comments, and McKinley discovered that the two most widely used commentaries, the 'Vulgate' edition and the one by Raphael Regius, recognized Ovid's development of the heroine's psychological mindset.⁴⁷ Male students would have been copying from the commentaries or at least hearing from a teacher how an Ovidian female character was not simply good or bad but complex.

⁴⁵ McKinley, *Reading the Ovidian Heroine*, xix.

⁴⁶ McKinley, *Reading the Ovidian Heroine*, 56-57.

⁴⁷ McKinley, *Reading the Ovidian Heroine*, 54.

If medieval students were learning about Ovid's heroines, then they would have encountered the woman warrior Atalanta.⁴⁸ She took part in the hunt for the Calydonian boar with many other exalted heroes, like the father of Ulysses, the son of Iphiclus who helped Hercules destroy the Hydra, and Nestor the king of Pylos. Even with so many accomplished fighters, the hunt was not an immediate success. A spear intended for the boar hit a tree, another spear was overthrown; one man barely escaped death, another man tripped over a root. Finally, Atalanta was able to wound the boar with an arrow, and eventually Meleager dealt the final blow. Meleager offered her the honor of the hunt, since she was the first one to draw blood, which greatly angered the other men.

Comparisons can be made between Atalanta and Camilla from Virgil's *Aeneid*. Just like Camilla, Atalanta is the last of the warriors introduced. She is also referred to as *decus Tegeaea Lycaei* [a Tegean, the pride of Lycea],⁴⁹ which is similar to how Camilla is addressed by Turnus as the pride of Italy. Atalanta is also shown as possessing fighting abilities. Besides Meleager, she is the only one in the hunting party to show some skill. It is, after all, her arrow that wounded the boar. Her talent is all the more apparent, because after she hit the boar, the other men are portrayed as inept warriors. They all throw their weapons, and they all promptly miss. Others try again with one hitting a tree, another one a dog. One man boasts that he will kill the boar with a manly weapon, and lifting his axe, he is killed by the boar in a particularly gruesome way.

Ovid's portrayal of Atalanta, though, is more complicated than Virgil's depiction of Camilla. While Virgil emphasizes Camilla's femininity alongside her masculinity, Ovid suggests that Camilla is a fusion of the two: *erat...facies, quam dicere vere*

⁴⁸ The story of Atalanta is from Greek mythology and is told in Book VIII.

⁴⁹ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, book VIII, ed. A. S. Hollis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 12.

virgineam in puero, puerilem in virgine possis [her face you might say truly was that of a virgin in a boy, that of a boy in a virgin].⁵⁰ Yet, her weapon is identified as a woman's weapon by one man and she is called a *femina* [woman] by two of the warriors when they voice their disapproval of Atalanta's receiving the honor of the hunt. Perhaps Ovid did not see gender as the foundation of how one should act. Just because Atalanta was a woman did not necessarily mean that her choice of weapon was inferior, or that she should not be given an honor she earned. Ovid himself did not say those anti-feministic statements. Instead, they came from the mouths of men present at the hunt. Note the punishments of the men who were openly misogynistic. The man who boasted about his superior manly weapon was impaled by the tusks of the boar, and the two men who verbally disapproved of the honor of the hunt going to Atalanta were killed by Meleager.

To sum up, Bede, Virgil, and Ovid all portrayed women in flattering ways. Overall, Bede was the most generous in his depiction of women. He presented an abbess who oversaw both men and women, miracles involving religious and secular women, and noblewomen who influenced their husbands. Virgil and Ovid included representations of women as warriors in their works. Virgil highlighted how competent Camilla was both on and off the battlefield, and Ovid emphasized Atalanta's skill over the other men. Each classical author had the difficult task of deciding how to portray women warriors, and each depicted them as women with their femininity intact. The next two chapters will examine how the two motifs of women changed in the 12th century chronicles.

⁵⁰ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, book VIII, 12.

– Chapter 3 –
**Portrayal of the Four Fictional Queens in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s
*History of the Kings of Britain***

After the death of Conwenna’s husband the king, her two sons, Belinus and Brennius, fought with each other over who should rule the kingdom.¹ Each had assembled his troops on the battlefield and was about to commence fighting when their mother ran out and convinced them to reconcile.² However, although the consequences of her action would have prevented many men from being killed in battle, it was her bravery and her ability to persuade her sons from fighting that was emphasized in the text. Running out between two armies highlighted her bravery while her long speech to her sons, which convinced them to stop fighting, showed off her intelligence.

The story of Conwenna is just one of many in *Historia Regum Britanniae* (*History of the Kings of Britain*) that depicts clever and courageous women. In the previous chapter, the motifs of women as intellectuals and warriors from the 12th century historians’ sources were introduced. This chapter will examine the depiction of noblewomen in one of the most popular works of the 12th century, Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain*, to see to what extent his women followed the women in his sources and to what extent his women were plausible to a 12th century audience.

The influence of *History* can be seen in today’s medieval concepts of chivalry, romance, and knights gathered around a round table.³ Geoffrey, bishop of St. Asaph, is

¹ The story of Conwenna and her quarrelling sons can be found in Book III, Chapter 7.

² Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. Sebastian Evans, ed. Charles W. Dunn, rev. ed. (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1958), 52-53.

³ Geoffrey’s original Latin version did not actually include the part about the round table. The French translator of Geoffrey’s *History of the Kings of Britain* added it. J. S. P. Tatlock, *The Legendary History of Britain: Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Historia Regum Britanniae and its Early Vernacular Versions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1950), 471.

widely considered the father of Arthurian literature, who introduced King Arthur, Merlin, Guinevere, and Mordred to English audiences. Scholars who have studied Geoffrey's most famous work, the aforementioned *History of the Kings of Britain*, have even concluded that William Shakespeare would not have been able to write *King Lear* without *History*.⁴

Not much is known about Geoffrey's personal life, though.⁵ Geoffrey was probably born around 1100. Since he referred to himself as Galfridus Monemutensis in *History* and Gaufridus de Monumeta in the poem "Vita Merlini" ("Life of Merlin"), it has been inferred that Geoffrey was from Monmouth in southeast Wales, though it is unclear if Monmouth was his birthplace, his childhood home, or an area that was familiar to him and was thus how he identified himself. Nevertheless, much more can be said with certainty about his career.⁶ There are seven surviving Oxford charters and deeds dating from 1129 to 1150 where a witness signed himself "Geoffrey Arthur." It is commonly accepted that "Geoffrey Arthur" was indeed Geoffrey of Monmouth, although scholars have debated whether Arthur was the name of Geoffrey's father or a show of Geoffrey's affinity for the Arthurian stories. Geoffrey had probably left Monmouth for Oxford during the 1120s, and in a January 1139 deed, Geoffrey Arthur's signature appeared with *magister* [teacher], indicating that he taught at an Oxford clerical school. While he was at Oxford, he wrote *History of the Kings of Britain*. Geoffrey was elected to the bishopric of Saint Asaph and consecrated in 1152. He died three years later.

⁴ Michael J. Curley, *Geoffrey of Monmouth* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994), ix; Tatlock, *Legendary History of Britain*, 3.

⁵ Tatlock, *Legendary History of Britain*, 439-440.

⁶ Curley, *Geoffrey of Monmouth*, 2-5.

History of the Kings of Britain was an instant bestseller after it was published (ca. 1138-1139), and it remained relevant into the 17th and 18th centuries.⁷ Elizabethan England had even used the text for its own nationalist agenda to reunite the country after religious strife had divided the Catholics and the Protestants.⁸ Yet some contemporary historians spurned Geoffrey's book, perhaps because they were jealous of Geoffrey's success.⁹ Maybe those 12th century scholars also realized what later historians set out to prove: Geoffrey of Monmouth's masterpiece was largely a work of fiction. Historians began to ask why Geoffrey would write a fabricated history, and the overwhelming answer was that Geoffrey was enthusiastically following a trend. Historical writers of the 12th century were becoming increasingly nationalistic, filling their histories with pride for England.¹⁰ In that vein, Geoffrey provided Britons with an epic origin story, national heroes, and a cherished past at the expense of the truth.

Divided into 12 books, *History of the Kings of Britain* chronicles Britain from its founding to the Anglo-Saxon conquest around the 7th century. The Trojan Brutus, the great-grandson of Aeneas, received a prophecy that told him to go to an island beyond Gaul. Brutus went as instructed, defeated the giants living there, and called the place Britain after himself. He established his capital, *Troia Nova* [New Troy], on the banks of the Thames River. His three sons divided the country between themselves after Brutus died; one gaining control of Albany (present-day Scotland), another of Cambria (Wales), and the third of Loegria (England). The rest of *History* follows the descendants of the

⁷ Tatlock, *Legendary History of Britain*, 3.

⁸ Helen Cooper, *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 24.

⁹ Lucy Allen Paton, introduction to *History of the Kings of Britain*, by Geoffrey of Monmouth, trans. Sebastian Evans, ed. Charles W. Dunn, rev. ed. (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1958), xix.

¹⁰ Doris Mary Stenton, *English Society in the Early Middle Ages, 1066-1307*, 4th ed. (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1967), 272-273.

son who ruled Loegria. Altogether, over 100 kings are discussed. Geoffrey did not detail the lives of each, instead preferring to highlight only a few. In fact, between the settlement of Britain by the Trojans and the arrival of Julius Caesar, Geoffrey dedicated half of the text to King Leir and his daughters and to the brothers Belinus and Brennius.

Continuing the narrative in *History*, the Britons after Caesar's invasion were under Roman rule for quite some time, and this period saw the first Christian king of Britain. However, the Romans eventually left Britain, and in book seven, Merlin made his debut. Merlin prophesied, among others, the battle between the Red Dragon (the British) and the White Dragon (the Saxons), in which the British would be victorious against the Saxons under King Arthur, but the Saxons would return upon Arthur's death. Merlin's prophecies guided the remainder of *History*. Arthur became a great king whose conquests in northern Europe brought peace to the Britons. While he was fighting the Romans in Gaul, Arthur's nephew, Mordred, married Guinevere and seized the throne. Arthur returned to Britain and killed Mordred but was mortally wounded in the process. With the death of Arthur, the Saxons retook Britain, just as Merlin had predicted, and *History* comes to an end.

Women were portrayed as strong individuals who controlled their own destinies in Geoffrey's history. Since *History* has been proven to be mainly a fictionalized account of Britain up to the 7th century, it was Geoffrey who depicted women as having agency, able to make their own choices. It was also he who chose four of the British monarchs to be women. Scholars tend to focus more on the Arthurian legend and where Geoffrey's narrative diverged from fact to fiction than on the active roles women played in *History*. When scholars do study the women in *History*, they are more concerned with how the

12th century audience would have understood the work. One scholar suggested that English writers and their audiences would not be interested in the idealization of women.¹¹ Another scholar, continuing that line of thought, argued that *History* was successful because it entertained its readers and served as an historical source.¹² However, someone else wondered if Geoffrey's portrayal of women contributed to his female readership.¹³ This chapter will consider Geoffrey's portrayal of women by focusing on the four queens of Britain - Gwendolen, Cordelia, Marcia, Helen - and will conclude that Geoffrey saw women rulers in two particular ways: the queen as the warrior and the queen as the intellectual. Geoffrey borrowed these motifs from his sources, but in order to make his account credible to a 12th century audience, he added contemporary commentary. Each queen will be first introduced by a brief summary of her story as seen in *History*.

Gwendolen was the first legendary queen of Britain in *History* and the third overall monarch after Brutus and Lochrine.¹⁴ She was the daughter of Corineus, the man who had helped Brutus settle Britain by defeating the giants. She was engaged to Lochrine, Brutus' son who ruled Loegria (England). Eventually the two married, but Lochrine was secretly in love with another woman, Estrilidis, whom he kept hidden away. Soon both gave birth to a child; Gwendolen had a boy and Estrilidis a girl. Corineus doted on his grandson. However, when Corineus died, Lochrine set aside Gwendolen and elevated Estrilidis as queen. Gwendolen went into Cornwall, the section of Loegria that

¹¹ Peter S. Noble, "Romance in England and Normandy in the Twelfth Century," in *England and Normandy in the Middle Ages*, ed. David Bates and Anne Curry (London: Hambledon Press, 1994), 76.

¹² Julie C. Crick, *Dissemination and Reception in the Later Middle Ages*, *The Historia Regum Britannie* of Geoffrey of Monmouth 4 (Cambridge: Brewer, 1991), 224.

¹³ A woman of the lesser nobility acquired a copy of Geoffrey's *History* and commissioned for it to be translated from Latin into Anglo-Norman. Susan M. Johns, *Noblewomen, Aristocracy and Power in the Twelfth-Century Anglo-Norman Realm* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2003), 37-38, 42.

¹⁴ Gwendolen's story is told in Book II, Chapters 4-6.

had been allotted to her father, and raised up an army. While Gwendolen's and Lochrine's forces fought against each other, Lochrine was shot by an arrow and died. Gwendolen seized the kingdom and ordered that Estrilidis and her daughter be thrown into a river. Gwendolen then reigned as queen for 15 years, and when her son came of age, she passed the crown to him and retired to Cornwall for the rest of her life.¹⁵

Throughout the course of the account, Gwendolen changed from a passive woman to someone with concrete power. Originally, she had little say over her life. Her betrothal was forced upon her; she could not prevent her husband from seeing another woman. It was only when Lochrine negated his wedding vow and took Estrilidis as his queen did Gwendolen act. She took an active role in her conquest of the throne. It was she, not a male relative or another knight, who built up an army in Cornwall and led raids into Lochrine's territory. Gwendolen had been transformed from a meek, dutiful daughter and wife into a warrior.

Not only was Gwendolen able to take back her title as queen, but she also ruled Britain five years longer than her dead, disgraced ex-husband. While the length of a monarch's rule did not necessarily correspond to its success level or to the integrity of the ruler, as there are certainly leaders who accomplished much in a short time and others who lived amorally and ruled for several decades, Geoffrey meant to compare the length of Gwendolen's reign to Lochrine's. The author could easily have stated how long Lochrine's reign was when he died, yet he decided to speak of their reigns together. In doing this, Geoffrey prompted his readers to contrast Gwendolen's 15 years as queen (and subsequently her son's 40 years) against the sole decade of Lochrine's power, and Gwendolen came across as the more competent sovereign.

¹⁵ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*, 30-32.

It should be noted that while the English translation by Acton Griscom and Robert Ellis Jones says both ruled twelve years, the Latin from which they were translating from shows Roman numerals xv (Gwendolen's reign) and x (Lochrine) with notes of *quindecim* [15] and *decem* [10], respectively.¹⁶ Furthermore, a variant version of *History* reads, *Regnavit deinde Gwendolena quindecim annis, cum Lochrinus | | antea secum decem regnasset annis* [Gwendolen reigned for the next 15 years while Lochrine had ruled for ten years before with her].¹⁷

However, Gwendolen ruled as queen regent only, as do two other queens, representing her son until he came of age. Perhaps after her 15-year reign, she tired of the job, hence her retirement to Cornwall. Perhaps she was forced out by her son who was anxious to rule or by standard convention which would not allow a woman to rule if there was a legitimate male heir, that is, her age-appropriate son. Geoffrey is silent on the manner of her dismissal, though he does present the transfer of rule from Gwendolen to her son as a peaceful succession. Gwendolen appears to willingly accept her son's rule, an action which portrays her as a devoted mother, a familiar type of noblewomen to 12th century readers.

The next fictional queen was Cordelia, who was also the twelfth overall monarch of Britain.¹⁸ She was one of three daughters of Leir, the eleventh British king who had ruled for 60 years. Leir had no sons, so when he was nearing old age, he asked his daughters how much they loved him, in order to decide who loved him the most and who

¹⁶ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The Historia Regum Britanniae of Geoffrey of Monmouth with Contributions to the Study of its Place in Early British History*, ed. Acton Griscom, trans. Robert Ellis Jones (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1929), 257.

¹⁷ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Britanniae: A Variant Version Edited from Manuscripts*, ed. Jacob Hammer (Cambridge, MA: Mediaeval Academy of America, 1951), 43. All the translations are my own.

¹⁸ Cordelia's story is presented in Book II, Chapters 11-15.

should receive the most territory upon his death. Two of the daughters excessively praised their father, and both married dukes. Those same daughters were also given a third of the country and promised the other one-third when Leir died. Cordelia did not feel that her father needed reassurance of her love, so she was given no land and was married off unceremoniously to a non-British man, the king of the Franks. The dukes who had married the other sisters rebelled against Leir, seeking control of the whole country before Leir died. Leir fled to Gaul to Cordelia, whose husband agreed to help Leir gain back his throne. Cordelia and her husband and father led the attack on the usurpers, they defeated them, and Leir reclaimed his crown. Leir ruled for three more years until his death, at which time, Cordelia, whose husband had died, returned to Britain and was made queen. She reigned for five years. Then her sisters' sons came of age, and they fought Cordelia for the throne, because they thought a woman was unfit to lead. Cordelia was eventually captured, and she committed suicide.¹⁹

The trajectory of Cordelia's story was somewhat similar to Gwendolen's narrative. Cordelia was first presented as a person with agency. She chose not to flatter her father, unlike her sisters, and was thus left with no inheritance. While her choice made Cordelia come across as the most loving of all the daughters when compared to the flattery of her sisters, Cordelia received nothing in return. The Frankish king who became Cordelia's husband had heard of her beauty, and it was for this reason alone that he married her, since Leir would give neither his blessing nor a dowry. Just like Gwendolen, her betrothal was not of her choosing. Furthermore, what had motivated the Frankish king to wed her was not her own doing but instead based solely on her good looks.

¹⁹ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*, 36-42.

Cordelia, though, would eventually take on a more active role while she helped Leir reclaim his throne. When Leir arrived at Gaul with one knight and no clothing or food, Cordelia provided him with clothing, food, and 40 knights. It was in this manner, as a well-fed, well-clothed, and well-protected man, that Leir was able to present himself before the Frankish king and other elite men, who all agreed to help Leir. Had Leir appeared before them in a ragged state and with only one knight, he might not have been as well received by the leaders. Regardless, Cordelia helped him achieve a respectable appearance.

Like Gwendolen, Cordelia too became a warrior. Alongside her husband and father, she fought against the dukes. Though Cordelia decided to end her life rather than to live as a prisoner, her final act was of her own doing. Her suicide could be seen as a cowardly way out of an unfortunate situation, but it could also be viewed as the action of a woman who did not want to lose control over her life. Cordelia might have chosen self death, but it was her choice.

Scholars have concluded that the majority of the story of King Leir and his three daughters was probably the work of Geoffrey's imagination.²⁰ While various motifs in the story appeared all over Europe, few would have been known to the Celts at this time and thus to Geoffrey, aside from, perhaps, Cordelia's tragic ending.²¹ Since the story has been deemed fiction, what were Geoffrey's motives for writing about a foolish king and his devoted daughter who had lost her right to rule but then gained it back by force? Maybe the story was a commentary on the current political situation.²² At the time of *History's* publication, there was talk about whether or not a woman could rule. King

²⁰ Curley, *Geoffrey of Monmouth*, 21.

²¹ Tatlock, *Legendary History of Britain*, 381-382.

²² Curley, *Geoffrey of Monmouth*, 23.

Henry I's only legitimate son had died in a shipwreck, so he officially proclaimed his daughter Matilda his heir. However, after his death on 1 December 1135, Matilda's cousin, Stephen of Blois, was crowned king by the archbishop of Canterbury. Robert of Gloucester, Matilda's illegitimate half brother, supported Matilda's claim to the throne. Robert was also Geoffrey's patron and a dedicatee of *History*. Geoffrey relied on Robert for financial support, and so it might be no coincidence that Geoffrey's political beliefs aligned with Robert's, especially since Cordelia resembled Matilda.

Cordelia and Matilda's lives shared many of the same aspects and obstacles: both were married to Franks, both had male relatives also vying for the crown, and both sought to defeat their male relatives.²³ The women were similar enough that contemporary readers would have recognized Cordelia's situation in current affairs. Cordelia's end, however, was very different from Matilda's, whose son would become King Henry II. This can be attributed to the fact that when *History* was published c.1138-1139, Stephen still sat on the throne and Matilda had not yet gained enough support to even challenge her cousin for the throne. It appeared as though Matilda had lost her kingdom. Therefore, Matilda's fictional counterpart also experienced defeat at the hands of her male relatives.

The question of succession at the time Geoffrey was writing *History* might also explain why the woman as a warrior motif took on a political edge. Unlike Virgil's Camilla and Ovid's Atalanta, Gwendolen and Cordelia were fighting for the sake of the throne not only on behalf of themselves but also for their families. In Gwendolen's case, her descendants would rule rather than the children begotten by Gwendolen's husband and his lover. For Cordelia, she fought for her father's claim to the throne.

²³ Curley, *Geoffrey of Monmouth*, 23.

Compared to the stories of Gwendolen and Cordelia, the third and fourth legendary queens lived peaceful lives. There were no mistresses, no scheming male relatives, and no battles to be fought by them. Because Marcia and Helen did not have to earn their crowns through force, they were not warriors and thus could be viewed as not taking as active a role in shaping their futures as Gwendolen and Cordelia. However, Geoffrey still presented Marcia and Helen as capable women with more subtle strengths. They were both intellectuals and had lasting legacies.

Marcia was the third fictional queen and 26th overall monarch.²⁴ She was the wife of the 25th king and was very wise, having devised a law called differently by the Britons (Marciana law) and the Saxons (Mercian law). When her husband died, Marcia ruled as queen-regent until her son, who was then seven, came of age.²⁵

Out of all the stories about the queens, Marcia's was by far the briefest. Where Geoffrey is silent, it can only be assumed that nothing happened that he thought was worth mentioning. Therefore, since there is no reason to think differently, the transitions from Marcia's husband to Marcia to her son proceeded smoothly. There were no men objecting to the rule of a woman. In fact, precisely because of Geoffrey's scant description of Marcia's story, her reign was presented as a straightforward, albeit boring, succession similar to the transfer of power from Gwendolen to her son.

Her rule might have lacked intrigues and battle, but Marcia was the queen whose influence would greatly affect men and women outside her family. Marcia was so proficient in the liberal arts that she created her own law, the Marciana law. Only two other monarchs had created their own law codes, so Marcia was in privileged company.

²⁴ Book III, Chapters 13-14 tells the story of Marcia.

²⁵ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*, 58-59.

Also, a current English law was the Mercian law.²⁶ The kingdom of Mercia, which covered much of central England, was one of three provinces that followed its own law code. Mercian law differed from the other two laws in regard to set compensations and fines, but the three laws were more similar than not overall. In the Saxon tongue, Marciana translated into Mercian.²⁷ Geoffrey had probably even derived Marcia's name from the Mercian law. Having Marcia's name be very similar to the current law allowed Geoffrey to take an imaginary law and make it believable that a woman was able to construct a law which really went into effect.

The fourth and final fictional queen was Helen, whose reign followed that of her father, the 85th monarch.²⁸ She was considered one of the prettiest women in Britain and was talented in playing music. Her father, Coel, had groomed Helen to succeed him on the throne when he died, since he was without a male heir. His death came suddenly. He contracted an illness and died eight days later. It happened that the Roman senator Constantius was in Britain at the time, and after the current king's death, he raised himself up as sovereign and married Helen. The two soon had a son, Constantine, who inherited the throne and eventually became the Roman Emperor.²⁹

The focus of Helen's time as queen, like Marcia's had been, was on the queen's intelligence and legacy. Helen's father had no male heirs, so he had educated her himself and had high hopes for his daughter. Coel obviously had no qualms about a woman ruling Britain. Since he took the time to teach Helen how to be a ruler, he did not expect anyone else to oppose his daughter as queen. Helen's story might have been Geoffrey's

²⁶ Tatlock, *Legendary History of Britain*, 283; James Campbell, *The Anglo-Saxon State* (London: Hambledon and London, 2000), 36.

²⁷ Tatlock, *Legendary History of Britain*, 283.

²⁸ Helen's story is found in Book V, Chapter 6.

²⁹ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*, 94-95.

commentary once again on the political situation surrounding Matilda's succession. With Cordelia, Geoffrey had illustrated how a woman could try to take the throne by force.

With Helen, he proposed another way: education.

Helen's heritage, interestingly enough, would be the same as Matilda's legacy, even though *History* was written before the end of the civil war. In each case, it was her son. Helen's son, Constantine the Great, is considered the first Christian Roman emperor, who famously converted to Christianity en route to Rome with an estimated 40,000 troops to battle Maxentius for the empire when he saw a lighted cross over the sun with the words "victory through this" written underneath.³⁰ This vision coupled with a dream in which Christ urged Constantine to adopt the cross as his emblem is believed to be responsible for Constantine's conversion to Christianity, which would have lasting impressions on the Roman Empire and on Britain.

In the story, Helen's impact on Constantine was slight, but it was still there. Constantine left Britain for Rome to fight Maxentius with three of Helen's uncles, whom he made senators. While Constantine was away, a duke in Britain killed the Roman proconsuls who ruled in Constantine's stead and seized power for himself. Constantine sent one of Helen's uncles who had been made a senator back to Britain to regain the throne for Rome. In both cases, the text clearly used Helen's name, for example *ducens secum tres Helenae avunculos* [taking with him three uncles of Helen].³¹ Geoffrey was writing a history of Britain, so he might have wanted to highlight that three British men became Roman senators, so the use of the men's relationship to Helen was just to illustrate their nationality. On the other hand, Geoffrey could have shown the nationality

³⁰ Bill Leadbetter, "From Constantine to Theodosius (and beyond)," in *The Early Christian World*, ed. Philip Francis Esler (New York: Routledge, 2000), 264.

³¹ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *A Variant Version Edited from Manuscripts*, 91.

of the men whom Constantine took with him to Rome in a number of ways. He decided, however, to refer to them by their relationship to Helen, a choice which caused Helen to be mentioned in the text again after the reader assumed her story was over.

Whether Helen was actually queen or not is debatable. While two scholars regard Helen as one of the four queens, Stephen Evans' English translation of *History* first situated Constantius becoming king and then him taking Helen as his queen.³² In Evans' version, Helen was queen as a result of being married to Constantius. She did not reign by herself like Gwendolen, Cordelia, and Marcia. The distinction between whether Helen ruled as a queen alone or as the wife of a king is important, since the scope of her queenly power is completely different in each interpretation. Turning to the Latin, below are two examples from the text concerning Helen's preparation by her father to be queen, her marriage to Constantius, and the birth of their child. The first passage is from a Welsh manuscript; the second from a variant version:

*Quo defuncto insigniuit se constantius regni diademate. duxitque filiam coel. cui nomen erat helena...Caruerat pater alia sobole que solio regni potiretur. unde eam ita docere laborauerat. ut regimen patrie post obitum suum facilius tractare quiuisset. Cum igitur illam in societatem thori recepisset constantius. generauit ex ea filium uocauitque constantinum.*³³

Upon [Coel's] death, Constantius adorned himself with the royal crown and led/considered the daughter of Coel, whose name was Helen...Her father lacked another offspring who could obtain the royal throne thus he worked to teach her in such a way that she might more easily manage the government of the country after his death. So after Constantius received her in the company of his bed, she bore a son from her and called him Constantine.

³² Curley, *Geoffrey of Monmouth*, 23; Tatlock, *Legendary History of Britain*, 286; Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*, 94-95.

³³ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Contributions to the Study of its Place in Early British History*, 338-339.

*Unde ita patri cara exstiterat, ut artibus omnibus imbui eam faceret, quo facilius et sapientius regnum post illum regere nosset. Cum igitur illam in tori societatem recepisset Constantius, genuit ex ea filium vocavitque eum Constantinum.*³⁴

Thus in such a way his beloved [daughter] had arisen to her father, so that he might cause her to be instructed in all skills, who more easily and wiser would know how to rule the kingdom after him. So after Constantius received her in the company of his bed, she bore a son from her and called him Constantine.

The Latin is still somewhat vague. With the first passage, Geoffrey's usage of *duxit* could have multiple meanings. In most cases, *duxit* is translated into English as *to lead*. However, the word can also be translated as *to think, consider, regard*. Each translation changes the meaning of the passage. If *led* is used, this creates more doubt about whether Helen ruled as queen or was queen in title only, because *led* implies that Constantius was in control of Helen and the one who actually wielded the power. If *considered* is used, this implies a variety of meanings, but it does not suggest that Constantius was the sole ruler of Britain. Instead, *considered* could refer to Constantius considering Helen in a romantic way, or it could refer to Constantius considering whether Helen would be as good a ruler as her father expected. The second passage does not even reference Constantius taking control of the kingdom once Helen's father died.

One scholar who counted Helen as a queen offered a way to understand the passage. Primarily relying on the Welsh version of *History*, which was the first Latin example, J. S. P. Tatlock pointed to the historical Mary II who was joint ruler of England, Ireland, and Scotland with her husband William III in the late 17th century as proof that women could be considered sovereigns independent of their husbands. Helen, therefore,

³⁴ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *A Variant Version Edited from Manuscripts*, 90.

“seemingly reigned for years *iure hereditario* [by hereditary right] with her husband and afterwards in behalf of her young son.”³⁵

In regard to Helen ruling after her husband died and before her son came of age, the Latin is much more forthcoming. The Latin reveals that Constantine was probably 11 years old or younger when Constantius died, since the birth of Constantine immediately preceded this:

*Exinde cum .xi anni preterissent ipse apud eboracum morti subiacuit. regnumque filio donavit. Qui ut solio regni potitus est cepit infra paucos annos probitatem maximam habere. leoninam feritatem ostendere. iusticiam inter populos tenere.*³⁶

Thereafter, when 11 years had passed, he lay near to death at York and granted the kingdom to his son. Who when he [Constantine] acquired the royal throne within a few years, he resolved to have the greatest integrity, to show the fierceness of a lion, to hold the justice among the people.

Constantine could have actually been younger than 11, depending on how long Constantius and Helen had been married before they conceived him, but Constantine would not have been older. In medieval society, the age at which a boy entered adulthood was defined by the Church as 14, at which time he could marry with the approval of the Church or make a confession, but an 1181 English law set 15 as the age in which males were expected to serve in the militia. Inheritance of property was also granted at age 15.³⁷ For the historical Henry III (r.1214-1272), his father, King John, had died when Henry was nine, and his mother, who was French, had returned to her home country. Though Henry was knighted and crowned at nine and crowned again at 16, control of Britain was actually in the hands of the pope and a council of regents. There had been provisions to end the regency when Henry was 14, but only the pope withdrew

³⁵ Tatlock, *Legendary History of Britain*, 286.

³⁶ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Contributions to the Study of its Place in Early British History*, 339.

³⁷ Jeffrey L. Singman, *Daily Life in Medieval Europe* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 27.

with the regency never officially losing power.³⁸ Though the English law and Henry III came after the publication of *History* around 1138-1139, both examples show that boys were considered men between the ages of 14 and 16. Since Constantine was 11 or younger when his father died and the text did not mention other men who might have ruled Britain until Constantine came of age, there is good reason to believe that Helen ruled as queen independently of her husband after he died and before her son was of age, which is why it took Constantine *paucos annos* [a few years] before he was crowned king.

In conclusion, while *History of the Kings of Britain* was, as its title suggests, focused on British kings from the first one soon after the fall of Troy up until the 7th century, women were portrayed in a positive light. Particularly, the four fictional queens of Britain were strong-willed individuals. Gwendolen and Cordelia were portrayed as playing active roles in their lives. Both of them encountered men, a husband and nephews respectively, who threatened their right to rule. Instead of accepting defeat, they gathered supporters and met the men in battle, Cordelia doing this twice. Even though Cordelia's second foray into battle did not end in victory for her, she and Gwendolen were still presented as women warriors.

Marcia and Helen were fictional queens who relied on their wits and were ultimately remembered for the legacies their intelligence warranted. Marcia invented and implemented her law code, and Helen, whose father groomed her to rule after his death, fulfilled his dreams. She not only ruled alongside her husband and before her son came

³⁸ Virginia A. Cole, "Ritual, Religion, and the Royal Teenager: The Case of Edward II of England," in *The Premodern Teenager: Youth in Society, 1150-1650*, ed. Konrad Eisenbichler (Toronto, ON: Centre for the Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2002), 97.

of age, but she also raised a son who would become one of the most iconic and influential Roman emperors.

Geoffrey did not just simply apply the intellectual motif and the warrior motif that he inherited from his sources. Compared to the female intellectuals in Bede, Geoffrey's smart women, Marcia and Helen, influenced men outside their families indirectly, Marcia with her law code and Helen through her son. Compared to Virgil and Ovid's women warriors, the queens who fought in *History* did so for both themselves and their families. In addition, of the three of the four queens who ruled, they reigned as queen-regents. By making these changes to the two motifs, Geoffrey presented four queens with strong familial ties. Since the major source of a noblewoman's power in the 12th century came from the family, the four fictional queens could represent factual noblewomen. The next chapter will look at how three other 12th century chroniclers implemented the motifs to fit a 12th century reality.

– Chapter 4 –
Noblewomen in Other 12th Century Writers’ Histories
William of Malmesbury, Orderic Vitalis, and William of Newburgh

The 12th century saw a proliferation of English historical writing.¹ This was due in part to the Norman Conquest of 1066. These Norman conquerors had no ties to English saints and saintly kings, so history-writing was a way to preserve English memories and traditions. It also offered the English a sense of unity; a shared past.²

Scholars have generally concluded that 12th century histories were meant as serious entertainment.³ There was an often ambiguous line between fact and fiction. History enjoyed the freedoms offered by fiction, and fiction disguised itself as fact. Deciding exactly what was truth and what was exaggerated has captured the attention of modern historians. In the 12th century, though, there was at least one writer who strove for accuracy by questioning texts. William of Newburgh has been called the ‘father of historical criticism’ by E.A. Freeman in 1878 and declared by the author of William’s entry in *The Dictionary of National Biography* as ‘the finest historical work left to us by an Englishmen of the twelfth century.’⁴

The most popular of these historians - and the one who had the most influence and posterity - was far and away Geoffrey of Monmouth, who wrote the *Historia Regum Britanniae* (*History of the Kings of Britain*), *Prophetiae Merlini* (*Prophecies of Merlin*), and “Vita Merlini” (“Life of Merlin”). In the previous chapter, Geoffrey of Monmouth’s

¹ Antonia Gransden’s *Historical Writing in England* is an encyclopedic two-volume set that surveys most of the chronicles and histories written in England from the middle of the 6th century to the Reformation. Even over one thousand pages of text do not cover every historian. In the introduction to the first volume, Gransden admits that she omitted Florence of Worcester and Henry of Huntingdon, among others. See Antonia Gransden, *Historical Writing in England, c.550-c.1307* (London: Routledge, 1996).

² R. I. Moore, *The First European Revolution, c.970-1215* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 137.

³ Nancy F. Partner, *Serious Entertainments: The Writing of History in Twelfth-Century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 4.

⁴ P. G. Walsh and M. J. Kennedy, introduction to *The History of English Affairs: Book 1*, by William of Newburgh, ed. and trans. by P. G. Walsh and M. J. Kennedy (Warminster, UK: Aris & Phillips, 1988), 1.

glowing treatment of the four fictional queens in his *History* was discussed. However, Geoffrey was not the only historian writing in the 12th century who portrayed women in a positive light. This chapter will examine the works of Geoffrey's contemporaries - William of Malmesbury, Orderic Vitalis, and William of Newburgh - in order to show that other male authors besides Geoffrey, some even unaware of the other historians, still presented women as intellectuals and warriors. Just like Geoffrey, they altered the motifs so that they could depict women more in alignment with 12th century society.

William of Malmesbury was born sometime between 1085 and 1096 near Malmesbury in south-west England and died around 1142.⁵ He was of English and Norman parentage, and at an early age, he entered the Malmesbury Abbey. He would remain there as a monk for the rest of his life, holding the position of librarian. Very little can be said about William the man, though; he rarely revealed much of himself in his writings, and there is little else about him in other sources.⁶ In fact, the first fixed date regarding William is the completion of the first edition of his *Gesta Regum Anglorum* (*Deeds of the English Kings*) in February 1126. William also wrote the *Historia Novella*, *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum* (*Deeds of the English Bishops*), lives of several saints, a history of Glastonbury Abbey, and a collection of the miracles of the Virgin Mary.⁷

In his *Deeds of the English Kings*, William covered the secular history of England from the time of Bede (672-735) to the reign of King Henry I, continuing the narrative in

⁵ In the prologue to his *Commentary on Lamentations*, William says he was born in 1096, but in A. G. Rigg's *A History of Anglo-Latin Literature, 1066-1422*, William is said to have been born about 1090-1096, and in R. M. Thomson's *William of Malmesbury*, it is suggested that William was born about 1085-1090. A. G. Rigg, *A History of Anglo-Latin Literature, 1066-1422* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 34; R. M. Thomson, *William of Malmesbury*, rev. ed. (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2003), 4, 199-201.

⁶ Thomson, *William of Malmesbury*, ix.

⁷ Rigg, *History of Anglo-Latin Literature*, 34-35; Thomson, *William of Malmesbury*, 6-8.

Historia Novella with the civil war between Henry's daughter, Matilda, and her cousin, Stephen, over succession up to the year 1142. *Historia* was chosen to be highlighted above his other works, because William dedicated it to his patron, Earl Robert of Gloucester, who was also Matilda's half-brother. Robert had an active role in *Historia*, and at times, he was blatantly praised by William. If one of William's intents for writing this work was to honor Robert, then it would stand to reason that William would emphasize Robert's accomplishments. William, however, also portrayed Matilda in a positive light, even one time at the expense of her half-brother.

Prior to his death, King Henry I held a council in London with the purpose of proclaiming his daughter as his heir and having the abbots, bishops, and nobles swear an oath to her.⁸ Matilda was to succeed her father only if he died without a son being born to him. William of Malmesbury recorded these events in his *Historia Novella*. In K. R. Potter's translation of this passage, the king "said first what a disaster it had been for the country that fortune deprived him of his son William, the rightful heir to the throne."⁹ A more literal translation of the Latin is below:

...si ipse sine herede masculo decederet, Matildam filiam suam quondam imperatricem incunctanter et sine ulla retractatione dominam susciperent: prefatus quanto incommodo patrie fortuna Willelmum filium sibi surripuisset, cui iure regnum competeret: nunc superesse filiam, cui soli legitima debeatur successio...¹⁰

...if he himself died without a male heir, they [the abbots, bishops, and nobles] would immediately and without hesitation acknowledge Matilda his own daughter formerly empress as their lady: having mentioned beforehand how great the damage to the country that fortune had stolen from him his son William, to whom he was entitled the kingdom by law: now the surviving daughter, to whom alone legal succession she was deserving...

⁸ The proceedings of the council are told in Book 1, § 451.

⁹ William of Malmesbury, *The Historia Novella*, ed. and trans. K. R. Potter (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1955), 3.

¹⁰ William of Malmesbury, *Historia Novella*, 3. All translations are my own.

According to William of Malmesbury, the king's deceased son was not referred to as the rightful heir to the throne but instead as someone who was legally entitled to rule. There is a distinct difference between the two. The key is the translator's use of the term, *rightful*. Normally, the word means ownership and is accompanied by nouns such as owner and property. However, there is another definition of the word *rightful*, indicating that someone or something is just or proper. In this other definition, a hierarchy is suggested. If the king's son was the rightful heir to the throne, then the king's daughter was a less deserving, less suitable ruler than her brother. While there may be many problems associated with translations, Potter's translation offers a possibility of what William of Malmesbury could have recorded in *Historia*. Since William was not quoting the king, William could have provided his own commentary about how he felt about female rulers, but he did not.¹¹ William allowed Matilda to come across as a legitimate heir instead of someone who was only given the opportunity to rule because the other heir had died.

At the end of *Historia*, William again portrayed Matilda in a flattering way. William had just completed the third and final book of *Historia*. He attached a note promising to write a fourth book that would contain further details on Matilda's escape from the besieged castle at Oxford.¹² Then he provided a brief account of her escape. Some of Stephen's guards who were charged with besieging the castle had left or were considering leaving their posts, because Earl Robert of Gloucester, Matilda's half-brother, and Robert's army were on their way to rescue her. Leaving undetected through

¹¹ In other parts of *Historia Novella*, William used *ita dicendo* [thus saying] and *inquit* [he or she says]. Whenever those words or their derivatives are written, they are also accompanied with quotations. See William of Malmesbury, *Historia Novella*, 14, 53, 58.

¹² The note can be found in § 524 after the end of Book III.

a back door with four knights, Matilda walked to Abingdon and then rode a horse to Wallingford.

The inclusion of Matilda's escape is interesting for a number of reasons. First, since William planned on recording the events in a future book, he did not need to include them here. It is also odd that William wrote the brief account after he ended the third book. Second, as previously mentioned, it can be argued that William's purpose for writing *Historia* was to deliver high praise to Robert the earl of Gloucester. Not only did William dedicate *Historia* to him and send him a copy, William also included a section about how it might seem like he was flattering Robert when all William was doing was just honestly writing *sola ueritas historie* [the truth of history alone].¹³ It was no secret that Robert was the patron of William.¹⁴ However, if William had wanted to put his patron's actions in the most favorable light, it would have helped his cause more if William had not included the note. Then, the official end of book three would have been the depiction of Robert and his army ready to rescue Matilda. Even though it is stated within book three that Matilda was no longer in the besieged castle, it did not say the manner in which she escaped but instead merely said that she had left the castle - *egressam* [having went out, departing]. In other words, the focus was on Robert's heroic rescue - that was ultimately not necessary - and not Matilda's brave escape. Adding the note, though, emphasized Matilda's actions. Finally, William, when describing Matilda's escape, did not masculinize her or mention that she was able to escape despite being a woman.

¹³ William of Malmesbury, *Historia Novella*, 64-65.

¹⁴ Thomson, *William of Malmesbury*, 180; William of Malmesbury, *Historia Novella*, xiv.

In two separate places in *Historia*, William actually referred to her as a *virago*, a female warrior.¹⁵ There has been some debate over whether certain terms, like *virago*, held negative connotations when applied to women. Historian Peter Coss asserted that *virago* came to describe active females, or as he also calls them, pseudo-men, because the Church was concerned about effeminate male behavior and creating gender definitions.¹⁶ Coss goes on to say that 12th century writers portrayed strong Anglo-Saxon women of the past differently than older English sources. The older sources accorded powerful women with great respect, but to these 12th century historians, they were just *viragos*. For Coss, *virago* was an insult. However, *virago* is the feminine equivalent to *vir*, which can mean man, husband, soldier, or hero, so feminine hero is a more appropriate translation than Coss' own pseudo-man. Within the medieval Church, a nun who practiced celibacy and maintained strict religious devotion was able to reach the status of *virago* and become the equal to monks.¹⁷ William's familiarity with the word could stem from the fact that he was a monk all his life, and this might explain why he called her a *virago* and not a *bellatrix*, which is how Virgil described Camilla as a warrior woman. To him, perhaps *virago* was one of the greatest compliments a nun could be given. Calling Matilda a *virago* might have been meant as praise and not an insult. Conversely, the term *dux femina* [female leader] has been shown to have negative connotations since Roman times.

¹⁵ William of Malmesbury, *Historia Novella*, 24, 56.

¹⁶ Peter Coss, *The Lady in Medieval England, 1000-1500* (Phoenix Mill, UK: Sutton Publishing, 1998), 30-31.

¹⁷ Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist*, *Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 5. Newman also stated that a godly woman could actually become superior to religious men as a "womanChrist," who embodied Christ in a uniquely feminine way.

A woman in charge was seen as an indicator of women wrongfully seizing power from men.¹⁸

So far, the discussion of *Historia* has revolved around Matilda and William's depiction of her. Matilda was not the only woman he presented in a flattering way. The wife of Stephen, Matilda of Boulogne, comes across as an intelligent, persuasive woman.¹⁹ In the early years of the civil war between Matilda and Stephen, both sides sent representatives to a meeting in the hope of ending the fighting by signing a peace treaty.²⁰ On Matilda's side, Robert and her advisors were sent; for Stephen, the archbishop, the legate, and the queen. As she was the only woman present, Stephen obviously trusted his wife's wisdom to barter on his behalf.²¹ Although her marriage to Stephen was the main reason why men outside her family listened to her and followed her orders, she acted with agency within her role as a wife. Stephen's confidence in his queen was not earned just because of their wedding vows; he entrusted her with these public responsibilities, because he knew she was a smart woman. After Robert was captured, the queen advised no one to chain Robert, and at least while she was there, her request was followed.²²

Since *Historia* was deliberate in its praise of Robert, Stephen's wife might have been used by William in order to make Robert appear better. When he is discussing Robert's imprisonment, William says that the queen never allowed Robert to be fettered or anything done to him that would have dishonored his rank. When she was not there,

¹⁸ Francesca Santoro L'Hoir, "Tacitus and Women's Usurpation of Power," *The Classical World* 88, no. 1 (September-October 1994): 8.

¹⁹ Matilda of Boulogne appears in Book II, § 486 and in Book III, § 506.

²⁰ William of Malmesbury, *Historia Novella*, 44.

²¹ In the *Chronicle of Florence of Worcester*, now generally accepted to be written by John of Worcester, the queen was shown as negotiating her husband's release. *The Chronicle of Florence of Worcester*, trans. Thomas Forester, Bohn's Antiquarian Library (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1854), 282.

²² William of Malmesbury, *Historia Novella*, 66.

though, and Robert was in chains, he remained composed and even bought a horse that served him well in the future. Whether not chained or chained, Robert can be perceived as a highly regarded man. Even if William used the queen to further his praise of Robert, the queen still came across as a capable woman. She was respected enough that Robert, even though he chained her husband when Stephen had been captured earlier, remained unchained in her presence.

Orderic Vitalis was another 12th century historian who portrayed women with agency. Born near Shrewsbury in the West Midlands region of England on 16 February 1075, when he was five years old, his father sent Orderic to study in the church at Shrewsbury.²³ At ten, Orderic was sent to the abbey of St. Évroul in Normandy, where he became a monk. He would visit England in about 1115, but he remained in Normandy until his death 56 years after he arrived there. Though Orderic lived out the majority of his life in Normandy, he retained his love of England and had a strong interest in English affairs.²⁴ This can be best illustrated through his most famous work, *Historia Ecclesiastica (Ecclesiastical History)*, where Orderic is sympathetic to the English while writing about the Norman Conquest.²⁵

Ecclesiastical History was written between 1114 or 1115 and 1141 and is divided into 13 books.²⁶ The first two books provide a brief sketch of the leaders in the Church and state from the birth of Jesus Christ and the lives of the apostles to the succession of popes and lay rulers. Books III-VI give the history of Normandy to 1083 with a

²³ Marjorie Chibnall, introduction to *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, by Orderic Vitalis, vol. 1, ed. Marjorie Chibnall, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 2-6; Gransden, *Historical Writing in England*, 151-152.

²⁴ For more on Orderic Vitalis and the Anglo-Norman society in which he lived, see Marjorie Chibnall, *The World of Orderic Vitalis* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

²⁵ See Book IV, Chapters 3, 8, 14, 15 of *Ecclesiastical History*.

²⁶ Gransden, *Historical Writing in England*, 152; Chibnall, introduction to *Ecclesiastical History*, 34.

particular emphasis on the history of Orderic's abbey, St. Évroul. The final six books are a contemporary history beginning after 1083. In Book XII, Orderic actually includes the prophecies of Merlin, which indicates that he had probably read Geoffrey of Monmouth.²⁷ Just like Geoffrey of Monmouth, Orderic also portrayed women as intellectuals and warriors.

Orderic praises Avice, wife of Walter of Heugleville, for her advice and wise counsel, her charity of the sick, widows, and other unfortunate people, and her beauty.²⁸ She was well-spoken and full of wisdom. Her husband, who attacked the clergy and squandered his inheritance, is described as having little sense. Avice was a good influence on Walter in that *cuius consilio et sagaci conatu a pristina pravitate aliquatenus retrahi coepit* [through her counsel and keen effort he began to be pulled back somewhat from former depravity].²⁹ Historian Susan M. Johns argued that Orderic tended to show the most approval to women who gave generously to the Church.³⁰ It is possible that this was true, because Orderic was a monk whose livelihood depended on the generosity of donors. In Avice's epitaph, which Orderic included, her piety is mentioned as is her monetary generosity to the monks and priests. The woman as an intellectual motif Orderic borrowed from Bede was modified to include all noblewomen, not just queens, as religious ambassadors to their husbands. Avice was a good Christian woman, and her godliness made her not only a role model of womanhood for a 12th century audience but also the ideal person to positively influence her husband.

²⁷ J. S. P. Tatlock, *The Legendary History of Britain: Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regum Britanniae and its Early Vernacular Versions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1950), 418-421.

²⁸ Avice's story can be seen in Book VI, Chapter 8.

²⁹ Orderici Vitalis, *Historiae Ecclesiasticae Libri Tredecem*, vol. 3, ed. Augustus Le Prevost (Paris: Société de l'Histoire de France, 1845), 45.

³⁰ Susan M. Johns, *Noblewomen, Aristocracy and Power in the Twelfth-Century Anglo-Norman Realm* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2003), 16.

Orderic also portrays women who were not patrons of the Church in a favorable light. In one such account, Orderic tells the feud between Helewise, wife of Count William of Evreux, and Isabel of Conches, wife of Ralph of Tosny.³¹ Isabel taunted the Countess Helewise who took such offense that she convinced her husband, William, along with his barons to take up arms against Isabel's family. Both women were characterized by Orderic as being *loquaces et animosae ac forma elegantes* [talkative and spirited and also had handsome appearances].³² However, Helewise is described by Orderic as clever and persuasive but also cruel and avaricious while Isabel is presented as a generous and enterprising spirit whom everyone loved. Furthermore, Isabel bravely rides out onto the battlefield armed as a knight (*ut miles equitabat armata*, she was riding just like an armed soldier), and Orderic compares her courage to that of other legendary women in history, whom Trogus Pompeius and Virgil wrote about, like the virgin Camilla of Italy, Marseppa, and the warrior queens of the Amazons.³³

Helewise and Isabel were portrayed as active participants in their lives. According to Orderic, it was Isabel who originally started the quarrel between the two women. Although the Latin is unclear over how the feud began, saying *pro quibusdam contumeliosis verbis irata est* - translated as she [Helewise] was enraged on behalf of some insulting words - what is certain is that Orderic told the story in such a way that the women themselves were the instigators. They were not reacting to the actions of other men, but instead it was their decisions that led directly to the husbands fighting one another. Isabel decided to say whatever she said; Helewise chose to take offense and influence her husband to battle Isabel's family. In return, Isabel opted to be *in*

³¹ The two feuding women are found in Book VIII, Chapter 14.

³² Orderici Vitalis, *Historiae Ecclesiasticae Libri Tredecem*, 345.

³³ Orderici Vitalis, *Historiae Ecclesiasticae Libri Tredecem*, 345.

expeditione inter milites [in the campaign amongst the soldiers].³⁴ By comparing Isabel to past warrior women, Orderic was implying that women had participated in military campaigns before. He attempted to present Isabel as a woman who was merely following that tradition. Furthermore, Isabel's involvement on the battlefield stemmed from her relationship to her husband. Although it took ingenuity on her behalf to convince her husband to take up arms and the determination to want to fight, it was her husband agreeing to send his men into battle that allowed Isabel the opportunity to fight in the first place. Her familial ties and those of Helewise made these two women capable of igniting a feud that escalated into a battle.

In another example, Orderic presents Juliana, daughter of King Henry I by a concubine, as a mother who is transformed into a warrior due to unfortunate circumstances.³⁵ Though her husband, Eustace of Breteuil, supported King Henry, Eustace wanted to regain control of a castle his family once owned. In order to keep Eustace's loyalty, the king had Eustace and Ralph Harenc, a knight and the warden of the castle, exchange prisoners. Eustace of Breteuil was given Ralph's son, and Ralph received Eustace and Juliana's two daughters. Following bad advice, Eustace blinded the son and sent the boy back to his father. Ralph was outraged, and the king handed over Eustace and Juliana's daughters to Ralph to avenge his son. The daughters were blinded as well, and the tips of their noses cut off. Eustace and Juliana rebelled, and Juliana was sent by her husband to defend their castle in Breteuil. The king arrived and laid siege to the castle where Juliana was staying. Juliana asked to speak with her father, and when he

³⁴ Orderici Vitalis, *Historiae Ecclesiasticae Libri Tredecem*, 345.

³⁵ The story of Juliana is told in Book XII, Chapter 10.

came to the meeting, she shot at him with a cross-bow. She missed, though, and eventually the castle was surrendered to the king.

Although historians believe that Juliana's attempt to commit patricide was Orderic's acknowledgement of her anger and pain over her daughters' mutilation, they still regard his treatment of Juliana as demeaning and humiliating.³⁶ They point to how Orderic called her an *infausta bellatrix* [an unlucky warrior], how Orderic related how Juliana fell from a wall into a moat with bare buttocks showing, and how Orderic quoted Solomon in Ecclesiasticus: There is nothing so bad as a bad woman.

What historians tend to overlook is how Juliana is introduced in the text. She first enters the story as a mother upset with her husband about their daughters. Then, when Eustace sends her to Breteuil to fortify his castle, she is acting as a wife. It is only when Juliana is in Breteuil acting outside the authority of her husband and outside her role as a mother that Orderic refers to her by name. At the castle, she is not able to follow her husband's instructions, because he is not there. Juliana has to decide what to do. She tries to kill her father, not out of vengeance for her daughters, but because *pro certo cognoscens patrem suum sibi nimis iratum illuc aduenisse, et obsidionem circa castellum positam sine tropheo non dimissurum fore* [knowing for certain that her father, excessively angry with her, had arrived there, and that the siege positioned around the castle would not be dismissed without a triumph].³⁷ Juliana did what she did to achieve victory. She is an unlikely warrior but still a warrior. Orderic might not have portrayed her in the most flattering way, but it was certainly not a negative depiction.

³⁶ Johns, *Noblewomen, Aristocracy and Power*, 18.

³⁷ *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, vol. 6, ed. and trans. Marjorie Chibnall, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 212.

The third and final historian, William of Newburgh, was born in either December 1135 or December 1136 about nine miles north-west of Bridlington in northern England and probably died in 1198, the same year his chronicle ends.³⁸ He was also known as William Petit or Parvus. Like Orderic before him, William spent most of his life in the Church. He was educated at Newburgh Priory in Yorkshire and later became a priest there. Among his works, which included three sermons and a commentary on the Song of Songs in relation to the Virgin Mary, *Historia Rerum Anglicarum* (*History of English Affairs*) was his most famous.³⁹

William was one of a handful of contemporary historians who criticized Geoffrey of Monmouth's popular *History of the Kings of Britain*.⁴⁰ In fact, his prologue to *Historia* actually attacks the validity of Geoffrey's *History*. Scholars are unsure why William chose to discredit Geoffrey as an historian, especially since William wrote on events that happened after Geoffrey's *History* ended. Nancy F. Partner suggested that since Gerald of Wales - the only other historian who questioned Geoffrey - still used Geoffrey's *History* as a source, William utilized *Historia* as a forum to express his thoughts about Geoffrey.⁴¹ Interestingly, William's own historical work is littered with true tales and fables, such as his ghost stories about zombies.⁴²

Divided into five books, *Historia* was started in or around 1196 and is a rather straightforward account of ecclesiastical and political events in England from 1066 to 1198, although William did write occasionally about events outside of Europe like the

³⁸ Gransden, *Historical Writing in England*, 263; Walsh and Kennedy, introduction to *History of English Affairs*, 2.

³⁹ Walsh and Kennedy, introduction to *History of English Affairs*, 3.

⁴⁰ Walsh and Kennedy, introduction to *History of English Affairs*, 6. Comparatively, another 12th century historian, Henry of Huntingdon, was in awe of *History* after it was first shown to him by Robert of Torigni, a monk and fellow lover of history.

⁴¹ Partner, *Serious Entertainments*, 62.

⁴² Gransden, *Historical Writing in England*, 268.

First and Second Crusades.⁴³ Book I covers the years between 1066 and 1135, spending the majority of the book on the reign of Stephen, Books II and III focuses on Henry II, and Books III and IV on Richard I.

There are several instances in *Historia* where William adds details that are not found in other historians' accounts of the same event. In one such example, William provides more information about a fight, suggesting that a woman participated in her husband's military campaign.⁴⁴ The earl of Leicester had rebelled against the king of England during the war between the English and the Scots in 1173-1174. The earl landed with his army on the coast of East Anglia and proceeded to plunder Norwich. After an attempt to take Dunwich failed, the earl's army headed for the county of Leicester. Along the way, nobles with their military forces were able to defeat the earl.

Within the story, William mentions twice that the earl's wife was there. When the earl's army left East Anglia for Leicester, *constanter cum uxore...totisque copiis iter arripuit* [he resolutely set out on the journey with his wife...and with all his troops].⁴⁵ Later on, when the earl's army is defeated, *captusque est comes cum conjuge, virilis animae femina* [and the earl was captured with his wife, a woman of masculine spirit].⁴⁶ A number of William's contemporaries, including Gervase of Canterbury and Roger of Howden, only mention in their chronicles that the earl's wife was captured with the earl. By stating that the wife was with the earl when they left East Anglia, William was making it clearer that she had been with the earl's army when it took Norwich and tried to take Dunwich. Thus the wife accompanied her husband on his earlier exploits and was

⁴³ Partner, *Serious Entertainments*, 58-60.

⁴⁴ The story involving the earl of Leicester's wife is told in Book II, Chapter 30.

⁴⁵ Willelmi Parvi de Newburgh, *Historia Rerum Anglicarum*, vol. 1, ed. Hans Claude Hamilton (London: Sumptibus Societatis, 1856), 173.

⁴⁶ Willelmi Parvi de Newburgh, *Historia Rerum Anglicarum*, 174.

therefore his accomplice. On the other hand, William calls the wife a woman of masculine spirit. Since he describes her in male-gendered terms, this could have been a sign of William's misogyny, or it could have been praise for a wife who William considered superior to most of her gender. However, even if William personally did not think highly of women, he still presented her as an active participant in her husband's military conquest. While this wife was not described in the same way Orderic depicted Isabel, William's use of masculine spirit still underlines that the actions of the earl's wife were more suited to a man. The wife was unusual, according to William, with regard to her gender, but she was still worth mentioning, and she even comes across as a rarity, a woman with a manly soul. The fact that he chose to provide additional details about her, even if they were not particularly flattering, also only highlights the wife's presence over the other historians' accounts who barely mentioned her at all.

To sum up, 12th century historians besides Geoffrey of Monmouth also portrayed women in a positive light, depicting women as intellectuals and warriors. Though it sometimes came at the expense of the narrative's purpose, like William of Malmesbury and his own glowing treatment of Robert, these three historians had strong women throughout their writings despite, in the case of William of Newburgh, their actual feelings about women. Moreover, the historians were able to present women who went beyond just supporting their husbands the traditional way through offspring; they were able to influence others and actively participate on battlefields.

All the historians presented their women as members of the family. They were daughters, wives, and mothers. Their familial ties provided them with the opportunity to act as intellectuals and warriors, which made these women plausible to a 12th century

audience. Readers would have recognized that Isabel and the wife of the earl of Leicester were involved in combat because of their husbands. They would have acknowledged that Juliana lashed out at her father because of her love for her daughters. Behavior that was uncommon if not unprecedented for a 12th century noblewomen was made acceptable through family roles.

Conclusion

This thesis began with a paradox. The reality of 12th century English noblewomen did not seem in alignment with the depiction of English noblewomen in 12th century chronicles. Men viewed themselves as the superior gender in everything. They were anatomical superior; biologically superior; physically superior. Noblewomen were under the control of their fathers and - after marriage - their husbands. Even if her husband died before her, a noblewoman was sometimes obligated by the king to marry a man whom the king had chosen himself. If she remained a widow, a noblewoman was able to achieve a degree of autonomy. The shift to primogeniture inheritance increased the importance of elder sons. Female succession did occur if, for example, there was a lack of male heirs, but the priority of male descent theoretically downgraded the position of daughters. Within the Church, certain men in ecclesiastical positions were told by the Church to honor celibacy and refrain from women. Women, even those who had also taken a vow of everlasting virginity, were considered dangerous. A clerical man might sin because of a woman. Religious tracts took on a misogynistic tone. However, the Church also propagated a positive view of women. Marriage was a sacrament and therefore an important rite in the Church. Noblewomen achieved some sense of security after the Church enforced public marriages and made consent a requirement. Ideally, women would be able to have a say about their spouse. In reality, the 12th century still saw plenty of arranged marriages. As for nuns, there was an increase in religious houses that opened specifically for women, but these nunneries were poorly endowed.

Within some 12th century chronicles, noblewomen were presented as courageous and smart, women who influenced men outside their families and made their own

decisions. The women were included in the chronicles because of their actions. Two motifs - woman as the intellectual and woman as the warrior - can be seen throughout all of the four chronicles discussed in this thesis. The discrepancy between the actual reality of the noblewomen and their representation in the literature is evidenced by the fact that the women in these chronicles were partly formulaic, based on the women that appeared in the chronicles' sources, the works of Bede, Virgil, and Ovid. In Bede, there was an abbess who was well-respected by both men and women; in Virgil, a female warrior who also had a mind for strategy; in Ovid, a talented female archer.

However, even though noblewomen's depiction in the literature appears to be at odds with the declining power of noblewomen, the chroniclers crafted women who were plausible to a 12th century audience by tweaking the motifs. First, every woman in the 12th century chronicles was part of a family. Although all the women were able to show individual initiative, it was their familial ties that gave them the opportunities to influence men outside their families and to engage in combat on the battlefield. Second, the intellectual as a motif expanded to include all noblewomen. In the 12th century sources, men listened to the advice of nuns, queens, and women warriors. Orderic Vitalis' noblewomen were not nuns, queens, and women warriors, but they still offered advice and wisdom to their men folk. Third, the woman as a warrior motif was altered to fit the current political situation. Geoffrey of Monmouth's women fought for succession as did William of Malmesbury's Matilda. Orderic Vitalis' Juliana acted as a result of an arrangement that was meant to provide loyalty to the king. William of Newburgh's wife of an earl joined her husband's campaign after he rebelled against the king. Finally, contemporary details were added to the accounts. One of Geoffrey of Monmouth's

queens invented a law code, a highly unlikely achievement for a woman in the 12th century. In order to make it more likely that a woman actually did this, he fashioned the name of the law after a real law, the Mercian law, and called the queen, Marcia. In addition, while Bede's women experienced miracles, Orderic Vitalis' Avice came across as a good Christian woman because of her own actions like monetary donations to monks and helping the sick. Avice was similar to the virtuous Virgin Mary, one of the ways the 12th century Church regarded women.

The thesis has argued that some 12th century writers, though they based their women on what had come before, had adjusted their women to meet contemporary ideas of female acceptability at a time when theoretical developments and changing views about land, power, and succession transformed how noblewomen were regarded and how they negotiated their lives as daughters, nuns, widows, and wives. Hopefully, this thesis offers a more nuanced approach to studying the apparent disparity between the 12th century reality of noblewomen in England and the 12th century chronicles' depiction of English noblewomen.

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