

**DAUGHTERS, WIVES, AND WIDOWS:
A STUDY OF ANGLO-SAXON AND ANGLO-NORMAN NOBLE WOMEN**

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Abstract

Traditional medieval histories have tended to downplay the role of noble women in early medieval England. However, increasingly popular gender studies in the last twenty years have prompted a renewed interest by scholars eager to make up for lost time and assign women a more significant role. In light of these efforts, research now indicates Anglo-Saxon women not only had considerable independence regarding land ownership, but they could also dispose of property at will. By contrast, noble women of the Anglo-Norman period appeared, at first glance, not to have fared as well as their Anglo-Saxon predecessors. A closer study, however, reveals that these later women not only held their own honor courts, supervised households and educated their children, but, when the need arose, helped defend their homes. In the military-based society of Anglo-Norman England, noble women were also needed to produce legitimate heirs. Wives, daughters, and widows in the Anglo-Saxon and Norman English world were not on the fringes of society.

Introduction

Scholars interested in gender studies have made great progress over the last twenty years researching and writing about medieval English women. Traditional histories had, until recently, slighted noble women and their contributions to early Anglo-Saxon society with claims that they played only a nominal role. Historians now conclude that, to the contrary, Anglo-Saxon noble women were relatively independent through their land-holding rights while, by contrast, later Anglo-Norman noble women lost some independence when land ownership became closely associated with the new military-based society that followed the Norman Conquest in 1066. Anglo-Norman women, however, overcame their losses by finding ways to work within the restrictions of their noble class, thus making a substantial contribution to the growth of aristocratic society. It will be the purpose of this paper to contrast the evolution of both Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman noble women's roles, and to illustrate how Norman women in particular were able to overcome their restrictions and achieve a new status, especially as they became channels of inheritance in a society which demanded legitimate heirs.

Anglo-Saxon Marriage Customs

An understanding of Anglo-Norman women and their legal status cannot be undertaken without first studying the marriage customs and inheritance laws of Anglo-Saxon England. This is, at best, difficult, because Anglo-Saxon records, while available, were more sporadic than those left by the literate and diligent record-keeping Normans. This leaves scholars royal laws, wills made by a few women, and the frequently biased views of contemporary ecclesiastical

chroniclers. There is also the temptation to use literary sources and their references to women in early medieval society, but too often these sources prove unreliable. Historian Kathleen Casey conjectures that Amedieval art forms and the developed clichés of literature... are virtually incapable of rendering a truthful profile of women.^[11] Conversely, Stephanie Hollis disagrees and suggests that Athe literature is broadly indicative of the position of women generally.^[12] Scholarly disagreement on the issue of contemporary literary validity is convincing. Literary sources therefore will not be used as a basis for illustrating the status of early English medieval noble women.

The laws of Anglo-Saxon England went through enormous changes from 500 to 1066, especially after the introduction of Christianity in 597 and the subsequent growth of monasteries. It is difficult to apply these laws to people in all areas in England, since during much of the Anglo-Saxon period, England was not one united country, but a series of states within a state, each having a king and its own laws. There were also areas completely controlled by the Danes. In fact, the Danes controlled much of England during the time of Swein of Denmark (988-1014) and his son Cnut (1016-1035). Accordingly, as England went through these many changes, there were also changes in the lives of noblewomen. Most of the information about women is contained in the laws of Kent, Wessex, and the laws of Cnut. The laws of Edmund (942) and Edgar (962) do not mention women at all, and there is no record of the laws for Northumbria and Mercia. The written laws pertained primarily to military duties and taxes due from subjects, as well as prescribed punishments for certain crimes. Historian Anne Klinck reminds us that these codes Aare not intended as a complete statement of the law, but rather as a reference to and modifications of customs already known.^[13] Certainly these codes were not immune to necessary changes made by the king, and since kings during this time frequently reigned only a year or two, victims of either battle or assassins, the laws subsequently were changed often. General laws regarding crime, however, changed very little.

In the laws of Ethelbert of Kent (602-603), a maiden was to be bought with a bride price, and if she bore a child, she retained half her husband's property if he died first.^[14] She was also given the right to leave the marriage and take the children if she desired. This presumably gave women the right to leave the marriage, although the word Adivorce@ is not used. In the early Anglo-Saxon period, marriage Akept the form of a sale,^[15] and the future husband paid a bride price to her father or guardian. Historian Florence Buckstaff asserts that the Aprice which the groom paid to the wife's father was paid for the transfer of his *mundium* or guardianship over his daughter, and not for her person.^[16] If the marriage did not take place, Kentish law required that the bridal price be returned to the man, and some compensation paid to him.^[17] It appears from this tradition that marriage was indeed a transaction much like the sale of chattel. While Doris Stenton in particular argued that Anglo-Saxon women were treated as independent women, this certainly discredits her argument. Although some historians may argue that women were not treated as property, Anne Klinck credibly argues that Athere is no hint in these earliest laws themselves that what looks like purchase and ownership is actually something different.^[18]

An Anglo-Saxon man gave a morning gift to his wife on the morning after the wedding night, and this was the wife's property during her marriage and after her husband's death. The morning gift could be some form of property or money; there is no evidence that in every case it was land and not some other form of property such as chattels or animals. The ability to have sole

ownership of this morning gift has led to conclusions that women had complete control over their lives. However, Pauline Stafford warns that the freedoms of morning gift in the 10th and 11th centuries are easily exaggerated by a readiness to seek signs of women's high status.^[19] Married Anglo-Saxon women certainly had property during their marriage and the power to dispose of it at will. However, the husband could not alienate the wife's property without her consent.^[10] If the property was valuable or comprised of land, the husband might not want to part with it unless it was mutually beneficial. Thus, any worth to the property or items produced on it were also a benefit to the husband.

The most common provisions in the inheritance laws were for widows. The Anglo-Saxon widow was entitled to half of her husband's estate, as well as her own property, which included the morning gift.^[11] The husband's designated heir received the balance of the property. Widows, the most independent of all Anglo-Saxon women, often were beneficiaries of large estates, especially those widowed more than once. According to the laws of Aethelred (1000) and Cnut (1020), those widows who led a respectable life would enjoy the special protection of God and the king.^[12] Unlike the laws of previous Anglo-Saxon kings, Cnut's law stated that a widow could not be forced to remarry against her will.^[13] Widows could choose either to marry or to remain widows, and they could choose their own husbands. A widow was barred from marriage for a year, or she would forfeit everything she had inherited from her husband, except her own property.^[14] This practice was established simply because a widow was responsible for paying a heriot to the king upon the death of her husband. A heriot was a payment due to the lord upon the death of his vassal, normally expected within a year of the vassal's death. If a woman married too soon, this would prevent the king's receiving the heriot, resulting in a substantial loss. Each man had a value according to his social position. The required heriot for an earl was eight horses, four saddled and four unsaddled, four helmets, four coats of mail, eight spears, eight shields, four swords, and two hundred mancuses of gold.^[15] This was often a financial hardship for the widow of a small landowner. If she chose to marry again, a widow could select her new husband. Obviously her family might still try to influence her to marry someone with whom new alliances could be forged, for it was important to build great family power circles since there was no establishment of hereditary succession, and the succession to the throne was at times in doubt due to war and frequent invasion. However, if a woman had no children, she could not inherit from her husband. This leads historian Theodore Rivers to conclude that the paternal inheritance destined for widows was more a provision for the children than for the widows.^[16] Such an argument is credible, since it is assumed that the property would fall to the children upon the death of their mother.

Clearly, widows had the most independence of any group of women, but this does not support the idea that widows or any other group of women were in any way equals with men, which historian Sheila Dietrich implies,^[17] although she admits that the law codes present neither a completely clear nor a consistent picture of women's legal status.^[18] A woman was still under a man's authority her entire life whether she was daughter or wife, unless she remained a widow. The Church also became the guardian of women and helped change their legal position, while widows nevertheless retained basic control of their lives.^[19] The reason for this was the absence of direct male control,^[20] which also applied to widows under the Norman rule.

Women needed the protection of the king and the Church, for widows and unmarried women

were sometimes abducted and forced to marry, both before and after the Conquest. Elizabeth de Burgh, for example, a widow and daughter of Gilbert de Clare, earl of Gloucester, was abducted from Bristol castle in 1316 by Theobald de Verdun. She remained with him until his death two years later.^[211] In these cases there were fines payable to the guardian of the woman, since the guardian was deprived of something of great value. As historian Henrietta Leyser pointed out, "The laws [were] not concerned with moral norms, but with the provision of a tariff of compensations...."^[221] Premarital casual sexual encounters were also priced, although not condemned, depending on the social status of the woman and the *wergeld*^[231] of her father. Clearly, a woman achieved her social position from her father and then her husband, much the same as women did after the Conquest.

Marriage in the Anglo-Saxon age was viewed as a means to cement alliances with families or to make peace with an enemy, much as was the case in Norman England. Marriages were arranged by the parents or guardian. Daughters often were not consulted in the matter. While Cnut's laws demanded that women consent to their marriages, earlier laws did not. The king might also be involved in the marriage negotiations, occasionally using marriage between children of noble families to settle disputes between warring families. Even in the 9th century, kings were intervening in marriages of nobles, since succession disputes were becoming more frequent.^[241] For example, marriages involving earl Godwine's family created a powerful network which involved itself in the succession to the throne, as well as other political matters.

The purpose of marriage was to create heirs. It is not known how many women were unable to bear children in the Anglo-Saxon age as much as later in the Norman period, although there are no recorded instances of marriages being annulled because the woman was barren, since primogeniture, the inheritance by the eldest son, had not yet taken effect.^[251] However, Pauline Stafford argues that repudiation of wives by their husbands remained common in the 9th and 10th centuries in spite of ecclesiastical opposition.^[261] This repudiation was sometimes caused by circumstances in which the political reasons for the marriage were no longer in effect. Further, concubinage was commonly practiced among the nobility, and children from these unions could inherit if the father recognized them, but concubines were not legally protected and could not inherit.^[271] Children of concubines were ranked according to the status of the mother.^[281] This was contrary to the experience of children of a recognized marriage, who derived their status from their father. Ironically, the practice of concubinage was later condemned by the Church, even though clerics themselves often continued to have concubines throughout the Middle Ages.

Royal wives had more perilous lives, for they had little protection. They could be discarded with relative ease,[@] thus preventing them from creating power circles of their own at court. A wife whose family was very influential might not be as easily discarded, but there was no guarantee. Women were consequently involved in politics of the court, where powerful families had tremendous influence on the king and the succession. Anglo-Saxon kings chose their wives according to the political situation at hand;^[291] however, royal women in Wessex were limited in their power. In fact, 9th century queens in Wessex were not given the title of queen, but were only referred to as "the king's wife."[@] The first anointed queen in Wessex was Judith, wife of Aethelwulf, who after her husband's death in 858 married his son and successor Aethelbald, who died two years later.^[301] The status of royal women went through changes in the 8th and 9th

centuries, and they had less political recognition. In the 10th century, more opportunities arose for royal women to be involved directly in political circles; for example, Aethelflaed of Mercia not only ruled in her own right after the death of her husband Ethelred in 911 but led an army against the Danes.^[31]

Historian Florence Buckstaff asserts that while Anglo-Saxon women were equal partners in marriage,^[32] they nevertheless could be severely punished for adultery. Conversely, men could and did have mistresses or concubines, which lends doubt to ideas of equal treatment. The punishment for female adultery was mutilation, which consisted of cutting off the nose and ears.^[33] This was not brought by Christianity to England,^[34] for many of the codes were based on ancient customs and pagan traditions.

Although the Anglo-Saxon inheritance laws appear to have provided more independence to women with regard to land ownership, it must be realized that the Old English legislation reflects an ideal situation which is unlikely to have represented the true state of affairs, particularly in respect of young women in their first marriage.^[35] Women were still very much under the control of their husbands, and were expected to defer to his will. It is possible that wives were able to influence their husbands in matters of property and daily life. How much influence they had is not known, for there is a scarcity of information available on which to base conclusions on daily lives and the quality of Anglo-Saxon women's relationships with their husbands. Some women likely had loving relationships with their husbands.

Although married women were allowed to make wills to bequeath their property, they could not do this during their husband's lifetime without his consent.^[36] While some of these women did dispose of property by wills, widows had the most freedom in this area. A few of these wills involve only disposition of a woman's chattels and personal property, such as clothing and tapestries. There are only about fifty surviving wills of Anglo-Saxons, with only about ten written by women.^[37] The paucity of evidence thus makes it difficult to claim that women enjoyed a great deal of independence. Women might be involved in litigation regarding their property, as was the case with Asa in the Domesday Chronicle.^[38] Asa was a landholder whose lands were disputed in 1086. She appeared in court where it was noted that she held her land separate and free from the lordship and power of Björnulf her husband, even when they were together, so that he could neither give it, sell it, or forfeit it.^[39] Another instance of an inheritance quarrel regarding land took place in Herefordshire in the 11th century, in which a man named Edwin sued his mother Wynflaed for an unspecified piece of land. His mother was so angry with her son that she made a land grant to her cousin Leoflaed in which she gave her the land and everything she owned.^[40] This was reported to the shire court where Wynflaed appeared before witnesses to prevent her son from receiving the property.

Since women were ideally able to inherit and control property at will, it would seem that there would be a substantial amount of land in the hands of women. The only record we have of English landholders is the Domesday Survey, a document which records the status of all the lands of England in 1066 and 1086. However, in 1066, no more than five percent of the total hidage in land recorded was in the hands of women.[@] Of that small percentage of land, 80-85% was in the hands of only eight women, almost all of them in the families of the great earls, particularly of earl Godwine or the royal family.^[41] Therefore, it seems that the control of

large estates by some women was an isolated phenomenon.^[42] These few women--especially those of the eorlisc family of Godwine of Wessex--controlled estates much larger than would have been customary even for women of their status.^[43] Women who were great landowners in Domesday were Queen Edith (The Confessor's wife and earl Godwine's daughter), Godwine's widow Gytha, and earl Harold's concubine Eadgifu.^[44] The greatest landowner of all the women in Domesday was Countess Judith, widow of earl Waltheof,^[45] who owned great estates in Huntingdonshire and Middlesex.^[46] The niece of William the Conqueror, she was given in marriage to earl Waltheof, one of the greatest of the surviving English earls. Waltheof was later executed for rebelling against William. The famous countess Godiva, widow of Earl Leofric, was also a substantial landowner in Domesday. Since it appears that only women in great families owned the bulk of that small five percent of total land owned by women, it is possible that the endowment of some eorlisc women assumes the appearance of a deliberate act.^[47] It was thus a ploy to use the marriage of these women to control areas of land and to control the succession of the throne, since women who were widowed would naturally turn to their families for advice. This kind of control over property and power in Anglo-Saxon England was no different from the control of property ushered in by feudalism after the Norman Conquest. This tells us that, at least for a few noble women of great families, land inheritance was possible and probable. What actual control these women had over their estates is not known, but for the great majority of noble women, any land they might have owned was usually a lesser amount, and it seems probable that only a few women were ever able to inherit land at all. This negates the argument that women were able to achieve a great era of independence.

One other option for women besides marriage was to enter a religious order. Many single women and widows chose this life; however, it was not always a voluntary decision. Families with several daughters often sent them to nunneries both to control the inheritance of the land and to have someone to pray for them, especially if they were not able to make profitable marriages for them. An exception to this was Aethelthryth, queen of the Northumbrians, who begged her husband to let her enter a monastery.^[48] Anglo-Saxon monasteries had been very successful, and many were double houses, having been founded for men and women. Often under the control of an abbess of royal birth, these monasteries were founded not as retreats from the world but as a means of both Christianizing and ruling it.^[49] While all members took vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, the imposition of strict monogamy may have created a surplus of young unmarried women or widows,^[50] hence the establishment of double monasteries may have been a solution for unmarried women. Henrietta Leyser posited that in the later Anglo-Saxon period, kings used nunneries as dumping grounds for their daughters,^[51] ostensibly to prevent them from marrying and producing a rival claimant to the throne.^[52] Still, churchmen and monastic chroniclers tended to esteem monastic women highly, for they not only tended to be literate, but were responsible for educating some of the more wealthy young noblewomen. These early Anglo-Saxon nuns appeared to be treated equally with their male counterparts, at least until the Gregorian reforms later began to curtail women's involvement in religion.

Even though contemporary chronicles seldom made reference to women, they are nonetheless a valuable source. One possible reason Anglo-Saxon chroniclers spoke of women rarely, according to historian Betty Bandel, is because of the prevailingly patriarchal method of filling what we would call public offices; and when they do occur, except in the case of churchwomen,

they are linked with the political and economic rights of some family.^[50] Bandel also argues, however, that when the chroniclers did mention the activities of women they were very accepting of them, as compared to later views of Anglo-Norman women, citing the astonishment of chroniclers reporting the activities of women such as the Empress Matilda.^[51] However, Matilda was never condemned for pursuing her claim as a woman, but rather was criticized for her arrogant behavior, having alienated the very people who could have supported her. The chroniclers were not opposed to a woman daring to lead men, for Stephen's wife Queen Matilda was praised for coming to the aid of her husband, leading his armies, and negotiating the trade of her husband for Robert of Gloucester in the succession crisis of 1135-1154. In fact, if Queen Matilda had not been so successful in leading her husband's armies, the Empress Matilda (countess of Anjou) would probably have remained in power and would have been crowned queen.

The chroniclers credit Matilda of Flanders, the wife of William the Conqueror, for managing the kingdom while William was away, as well as for her virtuous conduct.^[52] Another woman who figured prominently in the chronicles was Mabel of Talvas, the wife of Roger of Montgomery, countess of Shrewsbury and possibly Arundel. Orderic Vitalis described her as a forceful and worldly woman, cunning, garrulous, and extremely cruel.^[53] The mother of nine children, Mabel traveled with a retinue of one hundred soldiers and was very capable of seizing castles. Surprisingly, she even took her children with her on her escapades. She was later murdered by Hugh Bunel and his brothers, who cut off her head while she slept in her bed.^[54] Her epitaph read: A shield of her inheritance, a tower guarding the frontier; to some neighbors dear, to others terrible. She died by the sword, by night, by stealth, for we are mortals all....^[55] Mabel was given as an example of despicable behavior in a woman, just as Queen Matilda was praised for being the example of what women were expected to be. Athelflaed, another woman extolled by Anglo-Saxon chroniclers, was noted for her outstanding virtue.^[56] She defeated the Danish army and ruled England after the death of her husband in 911.^[56] Henry of Huntingdon wrote that Athelflaed was so powerful that she was sometimes called not only lady or queen, but king also, in deference to her great excellence and majesty.^[57] Conversely, Eadburg, wife of Brihtric, was castigated by John of Worcester, saying that she soon began to behave tyrannically, to perpetrate all that was hateful to God and man, to denounce before the king whomever she could, and thus deprive them of life or authority by her plots, and if she could not carry this out through the king, she took to killing them with poison.^[58] In fact she accidentally poisoned the king, and thereafter they would not let the king's wife be crowned queen in Wessex.

Women generally figured in the chronicles only when they did something extraordinary or were exceptionally virtuous women. This was especially true of a queen who was in a position to reward the writer. There were several instances of chroniclers being commissioned by queens to write favorable works regarding their lives.^[59] Thus, women were seldom condemned for being in the public sphere, only for exhibiting cruel and unusual character traits that would not be acceptable behavior even for men.

THE NORMAN INVASION

William of Normandy defeated the Anglo-Saxons at the Battle of Hastings in 1066 and claimed

the crown of England as William I (1066-1087). England was devastated--war is catastrophic to the losers, but the coming of the Normans was the turning point that made possible a new order of administrative government and the development of laws common to all of England. The Normans not only brought feudalism from the continent, but they protected England from the frequent Danish invasions which had previously plagued Anglo-Saxon lands.

In a feudal society, all land belonged to the king to give to those whom he could trust. William had promised to reward those men who had followed him from Normandy to claim his throne. To those warriors he gave the lands of the men he conquered, thus dispossessing many of the Anglo-Saxon nobles. He also realized that he could strengthen his hold over England by marrying his followers to English heiresses. The Danes had been successful using this method as a means to secure conquered lands. As a consequence, castles were quickly built by William throughout England to prevent uprisings. England thus became a military society; it was of the utmost importance to be able to defend one's land and to provide the mandatory military service and knights' fees due the king. In this type of society it was rare for women to be in control of land. This was necessary to keep one's lands safe from invaders and pillagers. A single or widowed woman who held land was consequently at the mercy of a man who might try to seize the manor or castle, abduct the woman, and force her to marry him. A woman would not be as likely to be able to defend a prolonged siege, although there were women who did, usually only temporarily defending their homes while their husbands were away. In the absence of men, however, noble women were expected to take charge of the defense of the property. In 1335, King Edward III (1327-1377) wrote to Margaret, widow of Edmund, earl of Kent, and sent copies to two other widows, telling them of the imminent danger of invasion by their enemies. The women were ordered to have all their people arrayed (furnished with arms), and along with their people, to repel the invasion. He told them they were responsible for the protection of the realm, much the same as men.^[60]

ANGLO-NORMAN MARRIAGE CUSTOMS

In this new martial society it was necessary to have male heirs to inherit the land. Hence, primogeniture became the rule, especially by the time of Henry I (1100-1135). In this effort to have legitimate male heirs, it was important to have a wife of good family descent, preferably of royal blood. Since control of land was necessary, the king required all noble marriages to be approved by him in order to prevent his enemies from gaining strength. Widows and heiresses thus became wards of the king, a relationship which in later years became a profitable business. The king could sell wardships and demand that widows pay *A fines* to remain unmarried for a time. Since legitimate heirs were so essential, it was therefore necessary to know the family background of the betrothed couple to prevent marriage within the four degrees of consanguinity allowed by the Church, even though a papal dispensation could be obtained for these cases to ensure legitimacy of the offspring. This led to the formation of an aristocratic group that intermarried within itself to maintain family power and to increase wealth and land.

William the Conqueror set out to keep King Edward's laws.^[61] The laws of William written in 1066 recorded that *Athey* [were] the same as King Edward his cousin observed before him.^[62] Thus he did not make any concrete changes in the laws concerning women,^[63] but he did need to reward the men who supported him with gifts of land. Those women who held property were not

dispossessed, but were allowed as widows to live out their lives on their own land. Accordingly, the laws provided women with legal recourse against a male assailant. For example, any man who assaulted a woman would be castrated.^[64] Gradual changes took place up to the time of Henry I (1100-1135); however, it seems that many sudden changes took place during the oppressive rule of William Rufus (1087-1100).^[65] The Coronation Charter of Henry I in 1100 provided more protection for women, especially widows. It specified that all marriages were required to have the king's permission, and that widows would be given their rightful marriage settlement and dowry. Moreover, the charter stated that widows would not be forced to marry against their will.^[66]

It was important for men to provide for widows and heirs. Instead of the morning gift, women now received dower, which consisted of one-third of the property of her husband, with the remaining two-thirds inherited by the husband's designated heir. Most noble marriages set out by contract before the marriage the exact amount of the wife's dower. This was very important later, for the husband's heir might try to prevent the widow from receiving her dower. According to the laws of Henry II's justiciar Ranulf de Glanvill (1189), the wife could not be given more than one-third of the husband's property as dower, but she could be given less, provided she agreed to it. While Florence Buckstaff noted that even if a husband obtained more property later, the wife would not be entitled to any of it,^[67] Glanvill recorded that if there was any mention or agreement before the marriage regarding additional lands obtained by the husband after the marriage, the wife could be entitled to a specified amount, as long as it had been agreed upon before the ceremony. The dower did not belong to the wife alone during the marriage, and she had no power over it until her husband's death, although he could not sell it.^[68] A woman was entitled to keep her dower lands upon the death of her husband. However, if a woman committed adultery, the punishment was forfeiture of her dower.^[69] For example, Margaret de Camoys brought suit in 1300 to claim her dower but was denied because it was proven that she had committed adultery during her first husband's lifetime.^[70] Even if a woman's husband had sold her dower after she had received it, the husband's heir was ordered to give or trade with the buyer of that land some equal lands in trade. If he could not accomplish this, he was required to give the widow some of his lands in exchange.^[71] Alice, widow of Ralph fitz Hugh, brought suit against her son and eleven other men in 1199, claiming her right to dower lands that had been alienated. She won each case.^[72] The development of jointure in the 13th century provided more security for wives, for with joint ownership of land, it automatically went to the surviving spouse upon his or her death.^[73] A few women were able to accumulate large amounts of land due to several marriages after which they became widows, only to marry again. A woman named Isolda, daughter and heir of William Pantolf, married five times between 1180 and 1223, and was widowed each time, resulting in accumulation of a large estate through her dower rights.^[74]

The Anglo-Norman bride's father gave a marriage portion called *maritagium* to the husband.^[75] The *maritagium* could be a gift of land or money, and the reason for it was to ensure that the couple would have a means of support.^[76] The exact property or money to be included in the *maritagium* was usually spelled out in the formal marriage agreement. According to Glanvill, any free man could give a certain portion of his land to a daughter or another woman as her dowry, and his heirs could not prevent this.^[77]

The women who held land in the Domesday Record were mostly widows. While all the land in England was owned by four or five thousand people,^[78] it is estimated that only two percent was owned by women in 1086.^[79] Obviously if Anglo-Saxon women were so endowed with liberties concerning land ownership, it would seem likely that one would find a large number of women owning land in 1066. However, this is simply not the case. It also seems likely that only women of the greatest families or relatives of the king were able to accomplish land ownership.

Married women could still own land, but the husband was responsible for its upkeep and the goods gained from it. The legal position of married women was derived from the belief that once married, husbands and wives were literally one person. This is the reason the wife was under the protection and cover of her husband, who would represent her interests. Since they were considered one person, the husband was responsible for his wife's actions and debts.^[80] This caused problems for men whose wives were involved in disreputable or criminal behavior, for they would be punished for the transgressions of their spouse. Conversely, women were not held accountable for treasonous activities of their husbands, since a woman could not prevent her husband's actions. Even though married women were under the power of their husbands, Glanvill wrote that a husband of any woman whatsoever cannot alienate any part of the inheritance of their wives without the consent of their heirs.^[81]

There are large numbers of charters which record grants of land by women in Anglo-Norman England, land which they could sell or give in reward to a servant or religious house, according to their desire.^[82] In early Anglo-Norman times the eldest daughter inherited if there were no living legitimate son, but later it changed to a division of the property between all daughters if there were no male heirs. For example, William Marshal, the epitome of medieval knighthood, died in 1219, leaving five sons and five daughters. All of his sons died childless, so his five daughters shared the huge Marshal estate as their inheritance.^[83] After the death of her last surviving brother, Matilda Marshal was given the honorific title a Marshal of England.^[84] In another instance, the entire barony of Peverel was divided among the four daughters of William Peverel upon his death in 1133.^[85] Since so many English landowners were killed in battles of the Conquest and subsequent rebellions, there were a great number of heiresses (both unmarried daughters and widows) who were married to loyal Norman supporters of William. In fact, by 1130, more than twenty post-Conquest baronies had descended in the female line; by 1150 the number had risen to thirty.^[86] The earl of Hereford and Essex, Humphrey de Bohun, died in 1380, leaving his daughters Mary and Eleanor as heirs of his vast estate. Mary, the eldest, was married to Thomas of Woodstock, earl of Buckingham, who contrived to educate her sister Eleanor as a nun and place her in the order of St. Clare, with the result that he would inherit all of Hereford's holdings. While Buckingham was in France, his brother, John of Lancaster, brought Eleanor to Arundel castle, where his son Henry immediately consummated a marriage to her, thus preventing Buckingham from inheriting the whole estate.^[87] This action shows the desirability of female heiresses, which often took precedence over family relationships, since acquisition of land was the ultimate goal in a feudal society.

There is also an instance of a woman inheriting property even though she had living brothers. Mabel of Bellême (also known as Mabel of Talvas) inherited from her father William Talvas because her brothers Oliver and Arnold were disloyal and unacceptable as heirs.^[88] This was a great inheritance which included all the substantial lands of Bellême as well as Alençon, Sées,

Domfront, and Saosmois.^[89] It shows the acceptance of inheritance by a woman since none of her male relatives objected to her as heir.^[90] Clearly, women were of great importance in passing along their inheritance to their children. There were also women who after the 12th century became great landowners and dominated the functions at court. These women were very important in the political scheme of things, for heiresses were great matrimonial prizes, and the sale of their wardships became very profitable for the king. Men who were allies of the king were given heiresses as a reward for faithful service; it was rare, however, for women to receive land as a result of service.^[91]

The Pipe Roll of 1130 shows the many offers to the king for marriage to heiresses and widows.^[92] Later Pipe Rolls show heiresses and widows paying money to the king to be able to choose their own husbands or to remain unmarried.^[93] The widow of Ralph de Cornhill paid Henry II to be able to choose her own husband.^[94] Noble men might also give daughters in marriage as a result for service, as was the case when Richard de Clare, earl of Hertford, gave his ward Belesent in marriage to his vassal Hugh de Kent.^[95] Marriage to an heiress could certainly raise the social status of a man and his family, and could also raise the social status of a woman who married into a wealthy and influential family. One excellent example is William Marshal, who married a much younger heiress and obtained great estates and the earldom of Pembroke. A humorous incident occurred in 1297 involving Joan of Acre, daughter of Edward I (1272-1307) and Eleanor of Castile. Joan was the widow of Gilbert de Clare, earl of Gloucester, and while her father was negotiating her marriage to Amadeus V, count of Savoy, she secretly married Ralph de Monthermer, who it is said was elegant in appearance but poor in substance.^[96] Although several magnates angrily informed the king, she insisted that it is not ignominious or shameful for a great and powerful earl to marry a poor and weak woman; in the opposite case it is neither reprehensible nor difficult for a countess to promote a vigorous young man.^[97] Her father was so delighted with her answer that he forgave her and ordered his magnates to forgive her as well.

Love was not considered when contracting a marriage. In fact, the only reasons allowed by the Church were procreation and to avoid fornication.^[98] Numerous marriages were certainly made for political alliances, and in these cases, the daughters had no choice. One obvious example of this is the marriage of Henry I's daughter Matilda to the Holy Roman Emperor Henry V in 1110. These marriages sometimes required that as part of the alliance the daughter in question would be raised in her future husband's home. Matilda was approximately eight years old when she was sent to the Empire to learn the language and customs of her future people. Sometimes marriages of alliance would be made by those other than royal families. Waltran de Beaumont arranged for his sisters to marry his political allies Hugh de Montfort, Hugh fitz Gervase, and William Louvel. This was to guarantee their cooperation when later he rebelled against Henry I.^[99]

There are cases of marriages made to make peace with an enemy, since land disputes often arose between the barons. The Empress Matilda was an example of this as well. After her husband's death, Henry I bade her return to England. Shortly afterward, he arranged her marriage to Geoffrey, count of Anjou, one of England and Normandy's traditional rivals. In fact, this marriage to Geoffrey was the primary reason the barons of England would not support Matilda's later claim to the throne; they did not want Geoffrey, as her husband, to become king and wield

his power against them. There was no law preventing a woman from inheriting the throne, though it was universally accepted that her husband as king would be the real sovereign. This would make a female sovereign and her subjects very vulnerable to a king who did not have the welfare of England as his priority. Parliament later reversed this practice, making possible the inheritance of the crown by a woman; her husband was simply a consort. It appears that marriage in this fashion made life very uncomfortable for the women involved. However, many of these unions created a loving partnership, or at least an amicable friendship. Some men certainly asked their wives for advice and opinions, while others made all important decisions. Conversely, there were instances of abuse, as in the case of Agnes Bellême, who was beaten and imprisoned until she escaped with the help of her chamberlain to her overlord's court.^[100] There is also evidence of a noble losing his lands because he was abusive to the wife given to him by Henry I.^[101]

Many marriages were contracted when either one or both of the parties were children. This could be an advantage, because the children would grow up together and grow to love each other, but the Church frowned on consummation of marriages until the girl was at least twelve years old, although at the time of the marriage the girl might be as young as six. Occasionally a betrothal occurred, but marriage actually took place when she was older. The Church required consent of both parties to complete the marriage, and there are some instances of marriages that took place when the girl and boy were very young, and by the time they reached the age of consent, they refused the marriage and it was annulled. Lord John de Warrene, earl of Surrey, brought suit for divorce in 1314, stating that he had been forced to marry while he was a minor.^[102] William de Roos was married to Margaret de Neville in 1342, while he was too young to give his consent. It was mentioned in the record of the marriage that due to his minority there might in the future be a divorce when he came of age.^[103] Although there were no divorce laws as we know them today, there were grounds for dissolution of a marriage. These were consanguinity (under which most were based), adultery (of the female), impotence, and leprosy.^[104] Another reason for the dissolution of a marriage was the existence of a previous betrothal or marriage contract. There are instances of the marriage being dissolved and the woman married to the man with the prior claim.

In a society where the aristocracy married within itself, there were bound to be many instances of marriage where the intended couple were related within the forbidden degrees of consanguinity. In these cases, a papal dispensation had to be obtained to ensure the legitimacy of the heirs, since only legitimate heirs could inherit. In some families the necessary dispensation was obtained prior to the marriage, and in some cases it was obtained after the fact, resulting in a required penance. This was a strategy for terminating marriages that no longer served the purposes for which they were contracted, or in cases where the woman was barren. Very few dispensations were denied, because the nobility could and would pay for them if necessary.^[105] For example, the 1368 marriage dispensation for the earl of Pembroke, John de Hastings, and Ann de Brotherton, cost the couple 1,000 gold florins, an assessment by Pope Urban V that would help pay for repairs to the church of the monastery of St. Paul in Rome.^[106]

Great age difference between the wife and the husband was not uncommon. It seems that many men put off marriage until they were in their thirties, and then they usually married a woman in her teens. This was especially true of second marriages. Since a wife was very likely to become

a widow during her life, several widows were married three or more times. Such is the case with Lucy, countess of Chester, who was widowed three times.^[107] Later, when she was in her seventies, she was required to pay a large sum of money not to have to marry for five years.^[108]

LIVES OF ANGLO-NORMAN WOMEN

Women were normally in control of running the household, including the servants. Part of their duties included buying supplies needed for the house, for many noblewomen were in charge of feeding large numbers of their husband's retinue of knights. There were often guests who asked for room and board while they were traveling, and women were expected to be gracious and generous hosts. It was also common for the king to visit several of his vassals (partly as a way to reduce his own expenditure for his household), and on these visits it was expected that the whole entourage would be sumptuously fed and housed at the expense of the host. Some women, including Elizabeth, countess of Hereford, had their own Amini-households, @ which they controlled.^[109] Women were required to learn to sew and embroider as part of their education, which in some cases may have been more extensive than their husbands', since men spent so much of their time in military training.^[110] The duties of a noble woman could give her Agenuine power, @^[111] for there is ample evidence that many noblewomen could read and take care of the accounting for their household. Women were responsible as well for the education of their children, although some nobles sent their children to nunneries or monasteries to be educated. Occasionally women were trained at weapons to be able to defend their homes in the absence of the husband. Women who assumed this role were praised by chroniclers. In 1338 Agnes, countess of Dunbar, defended Dunbar castle for nineteen weeks while it was under siege by William Montague, earl of Salisbury.^[112] He finally gave up and returned to his home. Women furthermore became the religious and moral conscience of the family.

They held honor courts just as men, and were able to resolve disagreements among the tenants or servants and enforce feudal rights over wardships and vassals.^[113] Queen Matilda, the wife of William the Conqueror, was responsible for Normandy as regent while William was in England, and later she was regent in England while William was away in Normandy. Henry I's wife, Matilda, also acted as queen regnant during her husband's absence. Adela of Blois, King Stephen's mother, administered the duchy of Blois while her husband was on crusade. Clearly, men often trusted their wives with caring for the property in their absence. Later during the succession crisis between Stephen and Matilda (1135-1154), Stephen's wife Queen Matilda was responsible for negotiating her husband's release from prison. Mabel of Gloucester was also instrumental in securing the release of her husband Robert, earl of Gloucester, in exchange for Stephen. Although women were generally not allowed to hold public office, there were some women who inherited a royal office that had been in her family. Ela, countess of Salisbury, served as sheriff of Wiltshire after the death of her husband in 1227.^[114] Surprisingly, the only woman ever given a title in her own right was Margaret de Brotherton, who was created duchess of Norfolk in 1397 by her cousin Richard II (1377-1399).^[115] Women's importance in political matters cannot be denied; while many of these women had no say in the formation of their marriage, @ they were given control of the family's destiny. @^[116] In fact, Eileen Power posits that in daily life, men could not get along without women, since they relied on them for their comfort and the protection of the land in his absence.^[117] For those noble women who were not

married, the only acceptable choice was to take the veil and become a nun. They were required to endow the nunnery they entered with the same amount as they would have for a dowry. In fact, lack of the necessary means was the one thing that kept some women from taking the veil.^[118] Peasant-class women never entered monasteries, partly because they did not have the required dowry and because they were needed to work elsewhere.^[119] It has been recorded that after the Norman Conquest, many women chose to become nuns rather than be subjected to abuse by Norman soldiers or risk marriage to Norman nobles. Whatever the reason for entering a nunnery, and there were many from which to choose, they were still expected to pray for the repose of the souls of their family.^[120]

Noble women were expected to endow monasteries of their choice. Women who became nuns were still considered part of the laity,^[121] and they depended upon the priests to give them the sacraments.^[122] Eleanor Searle reports that some women who retired to nunneries were asked to leave the monastery by Lanfranc, William I's Archbishop of Canterbury, because they were Awaited at home as peace-weavers and channels of inheritance.^[123] Other noble families sent their daughters to monasteries to be raised and educated in reading and morals, although later they declined this practice.^[124] Matilda, daughter of Malcolm of Scotland and later wife of Henry I, was brought up in a nunnery. There was later some speculation that she had worn a veil and took vows, although she denied it. This speculation caused considerable problems for their daughter, the Empress Matilda. Some of her enemies claimed that, because her mother was a nun, she was illegitimate. There is no way to know for certain; history has only her mother's word. In any case, both Matilda (the wife of Henry I) and her daughter (the Empress) Matilda were great benefactors to monasteries and nunneries, as was her son Henry II's wife, Eleanor of Aquitaine. In fact, Matilda (Henry I's wife) founded Holy Trinity Aldgate, which was one of the first Augustinian houses in England.^[125]

It has been suggested that women were not allowed to witness charters and write wills in post-Conquest England. This is not the case. William I's wife, Matilda of Flanders, is listed in thirty documents for the abbey of Caen. Of these, Atwenty-three mention women either as signatories, grantors, consenting to grants, or as involved in some way in the making of the grant.[@] In fact, Ano collection of pre-1066 English documents shows the same proportions.[@]^[126] Numerous Anglo-Norman charters in the 12th century in fact list women as giving their consent to land grants. Some women left wills, although they could not do so while their husband lived, and these wills could be guaranteed by the king, following a suitable payment for this privilege.^[127] Women also were involved in charters that gave gifts to monasteries. Matilda de Clare, countess of Gloucester, granted land to the priory of Augustinian friars at Clare in 1276. Ela, countess of Salisbury founded a nunnery at Lacock in 1236.^[128]

Most of the Anglo-Norman queens had a good relationship with churchmen. Many felt that it was Athe queen's duty to intercede with the king on behalf of the poor and oppressed.[@]^[129] In fact, many queens had influence over their husbands in strictly political areas as well. Anglo-Norman queens had unprecedented public roles to play. They were chosen as queens because of political necessity. Royal bloodlines were especially important, particularly with the early Norman kings who wanted to strengthen their right to the throne. It was for this reason that Henry I married Matilda, who had the lineage of the early Anglo-Saxon kings in her veins. Queens throughout the next few centuries were chosen from rival countries' royal families, and

the only commoner to become queen after the Conquest was Elizabeth Woodville, who married Edward IV of the House of York in the 16th century.

Henry I's wife Matilda was a member of her husband's curia, and was a frequent attestor to his charters.^[130] She and other queens had and used their personal seals with which to authenticate documents and charters. Matilda even had the power to free a man who was accused of usury and imprisoned. She was also able to influence her husband to fulfill his religious duty,^[131] and it was accepted behavior to appear before the queen and request her help in difficulties both with the king and with other vassals.

One interesting fact is that after the Norman Conquest, the language of the nobility became Norman French. The language a person spoke was one way to distinguish persons of the nobility from the peasant or working class. Since many Normans married Anglo-Saxon wives, English was still kept by some families. One would think that perhaps the English language would not have survived, but since many noble houses used Anglo-Saxon women as nurses for their children and as servants, this language was kept alive^[132]; however, it went through changes as a result of being influenced by the language of the Normans. Thus, it was not uncommon for children to be bilingual. Some of the wealthier nobles could speak or read Latin, although this declined in the later years.

Doris Stenton made the claim that women of the Anglo-Norman age had no public duties.^[133] This is inaccurate. Many women indeed held their own courts in which they heard complaints among their vassals, and some appeared in court as witnesses, especially in cases which concerned their dower. Stenton weakened her claim somewhat when she recorded the instance in which a woman was allowed to plead her case in court to recover her dower because she had convinced King John that she had been cheated out of it.^[134] Women also judged matters on their estates while their husbands were absent. Elizabeth de Burgh held her honor court separate from her husband's, and even received homage personally from her vassals.^[135]

Ecclesiastical writers often did not favor women in their records. It has been noted by many modern historians that the Church tended to be misogynistic and viewed women as sexual temptresses who could endanger men's souls. While the didactic treatises stressed the virtues of meekness, humility, obedience, and emphasized women's religious duties,[@] the women found that in practice they needed to be active, forceful, and energetic.^[136] In an attempt to try to force monogamy on aristocratic society, ecclesiastical writers tended to emphasize the fall of Eve and concluded that women had a deceiving nature that needed to be closely monitored by men. Indeed, with the objective of curbing sexual temptation, the Church strictly controlled marriage laws and attempted to end the practices of concubinage and keeping mistresses. Needless to say, their attempts were often in vain.

Since women were accepted as spiritually inferior to men, they were urged to marry and keep close to the home to avoid temptation. However, in reading the history of England, one notices that often it was the women who were more devout and were likely to be the stronger spiritual partner, urging their husbands to attend mass, give alms and endow religious houses. Women made numerous grants to these houses, especially royal women, who were praised by clerics for their generosity. While early Anglo-Saxon houses often were controlled by abbesses, in later

years women were urged to silence in the Church due to the teachings of St. Paul. Pilgrimages were one way women found to achieve spiritual goals.^[137] There were also a few women who became anchoresses and lived solitary lives in prayer and supplication to God.

While the Church often portrayed women as inferior, a cult of the Virgin grew in some areas of Anglo-Norman England, which extolled the Virgin Mary's virtues as the ultimate goal for all women. Simultaneously, a cult of chivalry sprang up which portrayed women as superior beings worthy of undying love of chivalrous men.^[138] From this idea came the abundance of literature on the ideas of courtly love and proper courtly behavior prominent in the court of Eleanor of Aquitaine, the wife of Henry II. Troubadours and artists were welcomed at the court where knightly virtues were emphasized. Although these were the often expected modes of behavior in the Renaissance of the 12th century, it must be realized that it may not reflect the true state of affairs in everyday life.

CONCLUSION

While there were certainly some great noble women in Anglo-Saxon times, we have much less information about them and their lives. There are numerous women who after the Norman Conquest had very public lives and influenced the affairs of all of England and the Continent. The Anglo-Norman and Angevin queens were certainly among the most powerful women in history. In fact, the names read like a who's who in history, for the queens of this period had great influence over their husbands and the reigns of their sons as queen dowagers, as well as great political influence. In her claim to the throne after the death of her father Henry I, Matilda certainly lived a public life and came very close to receiving the crown. It may be noted that it was not so much her sex that doomed her claim, but rather her temper and conceited demeanor, which turned potential supporters against her. Although she never became queen, she did make possible the reign of her son, Henry II (1154-1189), under whose tutelage the kingdom included not only England, but Ireland, Normandy, Aquitaine, Brittany, and Poitou. He was also responsible for an administrative government that was instrumental in producing the common law. Matilda's epitaph, Agreat by birth, greater by marriage, greatest in her offspring,^[139] speaks loudly the importance of her life, and the lives of all noblewomen who were channels of inheritance. Certainly Anglo-Norman queens were adequate and even resourceful generals when they needed to be, effectively leading men into battle. In fact, all the Norman and Angevin kings had strong willed and influential queens, with the exception of William Rufus, who never married.

Nothing presented in the works consulted has substantiated that Anglo-Saxon noble women were more independent and powerful than women after the Conquest. In fact, Anglo-Saxon women seem to be more obscure in public life. Perhaps this is due only to the scarcity of surviving documents and letters by women. Certainly during the Anglo-Norman age great effort was made to keep stringent records of every transaction regarding land or marriage. The stress on administrative government by the Norman kings and the importance of recording court decisions makes research about women more accessible. Noble women in either age definitely had influence over their husbands and sons, even though in theory they were not as endowed with rights or freedoms as men. It was necessary in a feudal society to protect women from opportunistic men, and in a world where legitimate heirs were so important, wives were of great

importance, for it was through them that heirs would be born to increase the family holdings. Of course, women in either age did not have the freedom and independence of women in the 21st century, but this does not diminish their importance. The status of women cannot be judged from a modern perspective, but from the perspective of those who lived in that age. Although history may have portrayed women as inferior, in fact, the protection given to women as wives, mothers and widows shows that they were not always on the fringes of society, but were active and successful participants in their world.

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Biographical Sketch

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