

REDEFINING EMPRESS MATILDA: A POLITICAL FORCE IN HER OWN RIGHT

by

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the Degree of  
Bachelor of Arts with  
Honours in History

Acadia University

April, 2023

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This thesis by Laura E. Sharpe  
is accepted in its present form by the  
Department of History & Classics  
as satisfying the thesis requirements for the degree of  
Bachelor of Arts with Honours

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## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Jennifer MacDonald, for always having faith in my ability to complete this thesis. Dr. MacDonald, you always went above and beyond in your support and for that I am extremely gracious. Without you, this thesis never would have started, let alone finished.

Thank you to Dr. David Duke, who acted as my second reader. Your suggestions and support throughout the writing of my thesis, and my entire university career, have been invaluable. You were a steady influence throughout this writing process.

Finally, to my family, who never cease to amaze me with their love and support. To my parents, Harold and Patti, thank you for always believing in me and being there to help me whenever I needed it. To my sister, April, thank you for always being able to put a smile on my face, and cheer me up whenever I am in need. Thank you to my grandmother, Fronz, for always being there for me with your love, hugs, and compassion. To my grandfather, Wilfred, I am sorry that are not here to see me finish this thesis, but I know that your love and support will always be with me. And last, but certainly not least, thank you to my partner, Brandon. You have always believed in me, even when I have not believed in myself. You are what made this possible.





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## **Abstract**

Empress Matilda has long been remembered for her involvement in the civil war known as “The Anarchy” and for her relation to three powerful men: her father, King Henry I of England; her husband, Holy Roman Emperor Henry V; and her son, King Henry II of England. However, by narrowing the focus of her life to these key events and individuals, both Matilda and her accomplishments are diminished. By moving away from the traditional manner of studying Matilda, as having been “great by birth, greater in marriage, greatest in her offspring”, Matilda can instead be viewed as being a product of her own choices and experiences. By focusing instead on her accomplishments, Matilda is transformed into a woman wielding significant power on the European stage throughout the entirety of her life. Not only this, but by switching angles, Matilda becomes a survivor of her circumstances, changing tactics and adapting as her situation changed repeatedly.

Her initial life course set her up to be an empress, but when she was widowed at a young age, she utilized her knowledge and experience to situate herself as a viable candidate for the throne of England. When her attempts for the throne ultimately ended in a power struggle, she once again changed tactics, preparing her eldest son to be heir. By doing so, she ensured that she continued to have political influence for the remainder of her life. By studying the surviving chronicler’s accounts of her life, the charters she witnessed, and the letters she wrote, Matilda is shown to have been a woman of formidable power and influence. And her legacy should reflect such.



## **Preface**

Empress Matilda, born in 1102, was the first woman to stake a claim to the throne of England, based upon her own right to rule. While governing was seen as an acceptable role for a woman in certain circumstances in this period, Matilda did not fall within this framework. Governing was only appropriate when the women in question was wielding power in place of an absent husband or as regent on behalf of an underage son. Therefore, when Matilda was named as heir to her father, Henry I, in her own right, it was highly unusual. Ultimately, Matilda never was crowned Queen of England, with the throne instead passing to her cousin, Stephen, following a civil war commonly known as “The Anarchy”. Despite never having succeeded in her goal, Matilda was a prominent figure in the history of this time.

“Great by birth, greater by marriage, greatest in her offspring” is the epitaph on Matilda’s grave, and it is largely how she has been remembered by chroniclers as well as by later historians. As seen in the historiography section of this thesis, Matilda’s life has frequently been defined in terms of the important men to whom she was related. As the epitaph suggests, she was the daughter of a king (Henry I of England), wife of an emperor (Henry V, Holy Roman Emperor), and mother of another king (Henry II of England). This is how the stages of her life have always been marked. While chroniclers contemporary to her life also remarked on how she failed to conform to the feminine standards of her time, later scholars branched out and placed more importance on how she was defined by her actions not only throughout the civil war, but also in the rest of her life. This allowed more focus to be placed on Matilda’s activities following the war, such as her religious devotion, and her role advising the king. While this focus on her later life demonstrates a wider breadth of Matilda’s actions, the scholars writing from the 1970s

to present time are still quick to resort to portraying her in the same context as that exhibited on her grave.

In the following article, Matilda's life will be presented in a different light, with her experiences shaping her future instead and establishing the actions of her later years. As a well-educated noble-born woman, Matilda was able to make a suitable marriage match. Utilizing that education, Matilda was able to hold her own in the kingdom of her new husband, and it was, in fact, her wealth which allowed him to pursue the title of Holy Roman Emperor. Following her return to England after his death, it was Matilda's experiences as Empress which allowed her to be a serious contender for the throne of England, as well as a formidable opponent during the civil war. Finally, her experiences throughout the entire course of her life resulted in her being well-respected on the European stage and a trusted advisor during the reign of her son, Henry II. Prior to Matilda, there was no precedence for how the mother of an English King should live out the remainder of her life; Matilda could have just as easily retired following the war. Instead, she chose to continue to be a formidable force politically. Matilda was a trailblazer, and she should be remembered not for her relationships, but for her spectacular ability to adapt to her ever-changing circumstances, while remaining a daunting figure in European politics throughout her life.



## **Redefining Empress Matilda: A Political Force in Her Own Right**

### **Introduction**

Empress Matilda was a remarkable historical figure, as she utilized power in various forms throughout her life to gain and wield political influence. While Empress Matilda is best remembered for her attempts to gain the throne of England and to rule in her own right, her battle with her cousin, King Stephen, is just one chapter in her story. While women had previously exercised power in England, it was always in place of an absent husband or as regent to an underage son. Thus, Matilda has been memorialized as an exception, in a long history of male-dominated rule in England.

Portrayals of Matilda within history have changed drastically over the years. The chroniclers who were her contemporaries tended to portray her in one of two ways: either favourably if they supported her, or in a negative light if they supported Stephen's claim. Those chroniclers who did not support her criticized her actions during the civil war, but also went as far as to attack her looks and attitudes, stating that they could not be attributed to someone of the "gentle sex".<sup>1</sup>

During the Victorian era, much of the historical work tended to focus on the history of various countries, as well as the "great men" who governed or played leading roles within them. As such, in that period's literature Matilda's claim to the throne was largely ignored, and she was mostly discussed in terms of the men to whom she was related. One such historian who takes this angle on Matilda is Edward A. Freeman in *Outlines of History*. Upon introducing Matilda, Freeman establishes her as daughter of Henry I, and wife of the Holy Roman Emperor Henry V.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Gesta Stephani*, trans. and ed. K. R. Potter and R. H. C. Davis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 119.

<sup>2</sup> Edward A. Freeman, *Outlines of History* (New York: H. Holt, 1873), 148.

During the first half of the twentieth century not much of substance was written about Matilda or her involvement in the history of England. However, this lack of attention changed in the 1970s, as the rise of second wave feminism saw a renewed interest in Matilda and her life. For the first time, there were entire biographies written solely about Matilda, such as Nesta Pain's *Empress Matilda: Uncrowned Queen of England*. However, such biographies still tended to be structured around the men in her life, and how these men related to the course of her life. This trend continues into the 1990s, at which point Marjorie Chibnall's *The Empress Matilda: Queen Consort, Queen Mother, and Lady of the English*, goes so far as to use the phrases of Matilda's epitaph as chapter titles.<sup>3</sup>

The trend of Matilda-centric biographies continued throughout the rest of the twentieth century, and into the twenty-first. However, anthological histories of various female rulers also came to dominate the literature during the early 2000s. Within these histories, Matilda is held up against other notable female rulers, with her actions compared to the power that was typically afforded to female rulers throughout various time periods such as can be seen in Helen Castor's *She-Wolves: The Women Who Ruled England Before Elizabeth*.<sup>4</sup> This power, unsurprisingly, is often seen as having come in connection to being related to some power-wielding male. Such power is therefore seen in the context of being held temporarily by a woman in place of an absent husband or son.

Much of Matilda's life has thus been reduced to being remembered within the context of the activities of important male members of her family. Her own epitaph contains the inscription

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<sup>3</sup> Marjorie Chibnall, *The Empress Matilda: Queen Consort, Queen Mother, and Lady of the English* (Oxford, UK; Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA: Basil Blackwell, 1992), 1, 5, and 143.

<sup>4</sup> Helen Castor, *She-Wolves: The Women Who Ruled England Before Elizabeth* (New York, USA: HarperCollins Publishers, 2011), 54.

“great by birth, greater by marriage, greatest in her offspring”.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, each stage of her life can be viewed based on the accomplishments she made in her own right. In this thesis, Matilda will be shown to be the architect of her own accomplishments. She continuously used her skills and education to face the shifting directions in her life, and to apply them to her advantage. Due to this resourcefulness, she was able to adapt to and to a certain extent shape the changing circumstances that greeted her at almost every stage of her life. Matilda was a trailblazer. There were no previous women in Medieval Europe who had attempted quite what she did, and hence she had no one on whom she could model her actions. Meaning that, each reach for power was made by her own volition, and not out of a sense of obligation to anyone. Thus, her life should be defined not in relation to her male relatives, but instead by her own accomplishments and ambition.

### **Destined for Power**

By the very fortune of her birth, Matilda entered a position of considerable power and influence at infancy. She was born in 1102 and was the first child of King Henry I and his first wife, Edith Matilda of Scotland. Approximately a year later in 1103, Matilda’s only legitimate brother, William Adelin, was born. Therefore, while primogeniture had not yet been established in England at this time, William Adelin was nevertheless the obvious choice to succeed Henry I upon his death, largely due to the way the throne had been passed on since the time of William the Conqueror. This line of inheritance favoured sons, but not necessarily the eldest son of a king, as can be seen in the crowning of William Rufus over his eldest brother Robert Curthose.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Catherine Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior*, table 1.

Henry I also continued this pattern as he was neither his father's eldest son; nor the son of William Rufus.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the crown can be seen as favouring a male heir, although not in the manner of descent as is typical of primogeniture . Matilda, despite being first born, was female, and thus was not presented as a viable choice for the throne while her brother was alive. However, while not seen as a viable candidate for the throne of England upon the birth of her younger brother, Matilda was nonetheless raised in a manner which later allowed her the ability to wield power in her own right.

As a woman of noble birth, Matilda's childhood set her up for her future role as wife and mother. While marriage was the expected role of a woman, it was also the one accepted way in which women stood to gain power and influence. And not only did women utilize marriage to benefit their position in society but marriage was a particularly useful method for families wishing to improve their position in society or to solidify alliances. Lands and other forms of wealth were also heavily utilized in marriage negotiations, and as such daughters were often prized for the benefits which they could bring to their birth families upon their nuptials. In the case of royal daughters, these negotiations stood to benefit the woman's direct family and could also provide stability for the entire kingdom.

Throughout her childhood, Matilda was instructed in the many ways in which royal women were expected to act, and of the duties which they were able to perform. As stated by Eileen Power in *Medieval Women*, in the "widest sense education comprised the inculcation of good manners, good religion and good housecraft and not merely intellectual instruction".<sup>8</sup> Therefore, practical skills were emphasized in the education of medieval women, and this

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<sup>7</sup> Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior*, table 1.

<sup>8</sup> Eileen Power, *Medieval Women* (Cambridge University Press, 1975), 76.

corresponds with Matilda's upbringing. And this form of education certainly aided Matilda, as during her childhood not only was she educated in the manners in which she stood to gain power and influence, but also taught skills and methods which she could utilize to adapt to the changing circumstances throughout her life.

One of the earliest examples for Matilda, as to how her future was to unfold, was the marriage of her parents. The marriage of King Henry I and Edith Matilda of Scotland mirrored the relationship which Matilda later had with her first husband, Henry V, Holy Roman Emperor. Thus, her parents' marriage provided the future Empress with an example of the role she was to fulfil as wife of a ruler. And, as Matilda likely spent her early years residing at the court of her mother,<sup>9</sup> she was able to observe first-hand her mother's deployment of the powers that she held, such as by acting as an intercessor.

One way women frequently used their power and position, was through the work of acting as an intercessor. Evidence of Edith Matilda's work as an intercessor for her husband survives in the form of letters written between herself and Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury. While many of these surviving letters demonstrate the works of a religiously devoted woman, within them there are also examples of Edith Matilda working in her role as intercessor for her husband. Anselm sought her assistance in various situations in which he was at odds with the king. In 1102, for example, Anselm requested Edith Matilda's aid in swaying the king on a certain matter.<sup>10</sup> Anselm wrote: "I pray that [God] may cause your good intention to progress in such a way that through you the heart of our lord the King may turn away from the counsel of

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<sup>9</sup> Chibnall, *The Empress Matilda*, 10.

<sup>10</sup> Anselm, "A letter from Anselm, archbishop of Canterbury (1102)," Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury to Matilda of Scotland, Queen of the English, 1102, <https://epistolae.ctl.columbia.edu/letter/791.html>.

princes which the lord rejects and be made to follow God's counsel".<sup>11</sup> While no response from Edith Matilda survives on this matter, the fact that Anselm believed that she was in a position to attempt to change the mind of her husband, and appeals to her to do so, is well established.

Assuming Edith Matilda did exert herself as intercessor on several occasions, she demonstrated to Matilda a skill which she later exerted as Empress during the life of Henry V.

Edith Matilda taught Matilda additional lessons, in the importance of religious devotion, which Matilda would go on to practice in her own life. Edith Matilda was known to have been a pious woman throughout her life, having been raised in a nunnery, and for devoting much of her life to various religious activities. It was well established at this time that royal women stood to gain power and influence through both their religious gifts, as well as through their own devotion to religion.<sup>12</sup> Edith Matilda used both avenues, commissioning a priory and a leper hospital during her lifetime,<sup>13</sup> while the letters between herself and Anselm again speak of her religious devotion.

In one such letter, dating from 1104-1105, Anselm addressed Edith Matilda's involvement in an unspecified number of churches.<sup>14</sup> He wrote that he had "heard that you were dealing with the churches in your hands otherwise than is expedient for them or for your own soul".<sup>15</sup> While the letter details the fact that Anselm was not entirely happy with the manner in

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<sup>11</sup> Anselm, "A letter from Anselm, archbishop of Canterbury (1102)," Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury to Matilda of Scotland, Queen of the English, 1102.

<sup>12</sup> Pauline Stafford, *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers: The King's Wife in the Early Middle Ages* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1983), 120.

<sup>13</sup> Susan Signe Morrison, *A Medieval Woman's Companion: Women's Lives in the European Middle Ages* (Havertown: Oxbow Books, 2015), 46.

<sup>14</sup> Anselm, "A letter from Anselm, archbishop of Canterbury (1104-05)," Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury to Matilda of Scotland, Queen of the English, 1104-1105, <https://epistolae.ctl.columbia.edu/letter/405.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Anselm, "A letter from Anselm, archbishop of Canterbury (1104-05)," Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury to Matilda of Scotland, Queen of the English, 1104-1105.

which Edith Matilda was treating the churches, although he states that he does “not wish to say here how you are acting...because to no one is it better known than to yourself”,<sup>16</sup> it also stands to emphasize the degree of power which she did hold over the churches. Anselm continues: “I beg, advise and admonish you...if your conscience testifies that you have anything to correct in this matter, hasten to correct it”.<sup>17</sup> While Anselm was willing to ask the queen to change her actions, he “begs” her to do so, instead of demanding it. Therefore, at least to some degree, Edith Matilda was ultimately the one in charge of her work within the churches. Once again, Edith Matilda provided her daughter with a demonstration of the power available to her, this time through religious works.

Acting as an intercessor and utilizing religious influence were not however the only methods of display power that were available to women. Politically significant women, such as Matilda, were also able to showcase their support of matters of politics which potentially had the power to impact entire kingdoms, through the witnessing of charters. During the latter years of Matilda’s childhood in England, she performed her first act of power. Through the act of being listed as a witness to a charter establishing the See of Ely, Matilda’s name came to represent that power which was afforded to her by her betrothal to Henry V. The signing of this charter took place on October 17, 1109, when Matilda attended a royal council meeting at Nottingham.<sup>18</sup> The charter in question established the See of Ely.<sup>19</sup> While this charter is important, as it serves as the first surviving evidence of Matilda participating in governance, the way her mark appears on the

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<sup>16</sup> Anselm, “A letter from Anselm, archbishop of Canterbury (1104-05),” Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury to Matilda of Scotland, Queen of the English, 1104-1105.

<sup>17</sup> Anselm, “A letter from Anselm, archbishop of Canterbury (1104-05),” Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury to Matilda of Scotland, Queen of the English, 1104-1105.

<sup>18</sup> Chibnall, *The Empress Matilda*, 16.

<sup>19</sup> Chibnall, *The Empress Matilda*, 16.

charter is also important. Furthermore, her signature is the third listed on the document, preceded only by her father's "King Henry" and mother's "Queen Matilda", in that order.<sup>20</sup> The inclusion of Edith Matilda on the list of witnesses further cements the role of acting as witness as a lesson the then seven-year-old Matilda would have learned from her mother.

On the charter, Matilda's signature appears as "Mathildis 'Sponsa regis Romanorum'",<sup>21</sup> the "betrothed wife of the king of the Romans".<sup>22</sup> The signatures or marks of the witnesses were listed in perceived order of importance, thus signifying the importance which had now been placed upon Matilda. It was only once Matilda became engaged that she became influential enough to be named as a charter witness. The phrase "betrothed wife of the king of the Romans"<sup>23</sup> was added to her signature to demonstrate that fact that Matilda was now deemed important, at least in relation to her connection to her future husband. However, as the signature denotes, this charter also marks the end of her childhood as she sets out from England to the Continent as a "betrothed wife".<sup>24</sup>

### **Empress of the Holy Roman Empire**

Matilda's betrothal and later marriage in 1114 to Henry V, the future Holy Roman Emperor, marked the first major shift in Matilda's life. This marriage marked Matilda's coming of age, when she began to act on her power and influence, whereas before she was being educated in the tasks befitting her future role as wife of a politically powerful man. When the

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<sup>20</sup> Regesta Regnum Anglo-Normannorum 1066-1154, ed. Charles Johnson, C.B.E., F.B.A., and H. A. Cronne (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), 87.

<sup>21</sup> Regesta Regnum Anglo-Normannorum 1066-1154, 87.

<sup>22</sup> Chibnall, *The Empress Matilda*, 16.

<sup>23</sup> Chibnall, *The Empress Matilda*, 16.

<sup>24</sup> Chibnall, *The Empress Matilda*, 16.



couple became engaged Matilda was a mere seven years old, but the marriage did not occur until she reached the age of twelve. By this time, Matilda had been sent to the Holy Roman Empire to be raised in the homeland of her new spouse. It was here, in the court of her husband, that she continued her education, and gained her first taste of power through her roles as intercessor and regent.

While William of Newburgh notes that it was Henry V who sought the betrothal between himself and Matilda,<sup>25</sup> the marriage was advantageous for both kingdoms. Through the union, Matilda's family gained legitimization as the rightful rulers of England, which was important as the family was only in its second generation since the Norman Conquest.<sup>26</sup> Conversely, the betrothal to a royal woman lent authority to Henry V, when he usurped his father as Holy Roman Emperor a year after Matilda joined his household.<sup>27</sup> And not only did having Matilda as his wife act as a demonstration of Henry I's belief that Henry V was the rightful heir to the Holy Roman Empire, but the marriage negotiations resulted in Henry V receiving the funds necessary to make the journey to Italy.<sup>28</sup> This in turn afforded him the opportunity to demand to be crowned Emperor by the Pope.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, both rulers, Henry I and Henry V, had a vested interest in the peaceful continuation of the relationship. Matilda's importance was proved, as through her familial and financial support, Henry V was a much more promising candidate for the highly prized title of emperor.

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<sup>25</sup> William of Newburgh, *The History of English Affairs*, ed. P.G. Walsh and M. J. Kennedy (Warminster, Wiltshire: Aris & Phillips, 1988), 51.

<sup>26</sup> Joseph P. Huffman, *The Social Politics of Medieval Diplomacy: Anglo-German Relations (1066-1307)* (University of Michigan Press, 2009), 38.

<sup>27</sup> Huffman, *The Social Politics of Medieval Diplomacy: Anglo-German Relations (1066-1307)*, 39.

<sup>28</sup> Castor, *The Women Who Ruled England Before Elizabeth*, 54.

<sup>29</sup> Castor, *The Women Who Ruled England Before Elizabeth*, 54.

Matilda's early childhood provided her with examples of the utilization of power, but her more formal education in the Holy Roman Empire provided her with the knowledge and skills needed to wield power in her own right. The Empresses of the Holy Roman Empire tended to have an active role in the government of the empire. Thus, an understanding of the empire's language, customs, and politics was essential. And by receiving her formal education in the Holy Roman Empire, Matilda had no choice but to be fully immersed in the language and customs of her new homeland, becoming fluent through necessity.

Like many elite women of the time, Matilda was literate, and educated in a number of subjects which assisted her in the duties she performed throughout her life.<sup>30</sup> Upon her arrival in the Holy Roman Empire, Archbishop Bruno of Trier was assigned as her guardian and instructor.<sup>31</sup> While Matilda would have learned much about the empire by residing there, Archbishop Bruno was the one who educated her on other important fundamentals of her new life. Matilda's education under Archbishop Bruno included lessons in two languages: Latin and what is now known as Middle High German.<sup>32</sup> It was important that Matilda be fluent in both languages, as while Latin was the language of written communication at the time, Middle High German was the language spoken at the court of Henry V.<sup>33</sup> In addition to learning the two languages, Matilda was also educated in grammar.<sup>34</sup>

Following Matilda's marriage at the age of twelve, her formal education was deemed to be completed, and she stepped into the role of empress. While Matilda had a glimpse of the

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<sup>30</sup> Power, *Medieval Women*, 77.

<sup>31</sup> Catherine Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 22.

<sup>32</sup> Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior*, 22.

<sup>33</sup> Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior*, 22.

<sup>34</sup> Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior*, 22.

power and influence afforded to her engagement while in England, it was through the role of intercessor at the court of the Holy Roman Empire that she began to wield her power. Just as Matilda had seen her mother, Edith Matilda, perform the task of an intercessor, Matilda now was able to fulfill that role herself. In her first act as empress, Matilda was tasked with negotiating with Henry V on behalf of Godfrey, count of Leuven and duke of Lower Lotharingia, who had fallen out of favour with the emperor.<sup>35</sup>

Acting as an intercessor was a well-established role for royal women to perform at this time, and one that Matilda performed repeatedly throughout her first marriage.<sup>36</sup> While the task was common, it remains unknown who specifically requested Matilda's input on Godfrey's particular case. Through this role, Matilda was able to communicate the words of the wrongdoer to the emperor, in a manner which (it was hoped) would not provoke the emperor's ire further.<sup>37</sup> In turn, Henry V was then able to forego or reduce a harsh punishment, and if his decision in the situation was questioned, he could attribute such change of mind to the influence of the empress, in order to stave off criticism of his actions.<sup>38</sup> And while this position allowed for a peaceful resolution to problems, it also allowed for a royal wife to influence the situation and exert her own control and opinion on the events at hand.

The role of intercessor was not the only way Matilda was able to demonstrate her influence and power within the empire. She was also able to work more directly to exert her will. Throughout her marriage, and after the death of Henry V, Matilda acted as regent numerous times, thus providing her with direct experience in leadership, which continued to benefit her

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<sup>35</sup> Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior*, 20.

<sup>36</sup> Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior*, 20.

<sup>37</sup> Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior*, 20.

<sup>38</sup> Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior*, 20.

throughout her life. Matilda is first noted as having acted as regent at the age of 16.<sup>39</sup> At this time, Henry V was forced to travel to Germany, to quell a rebellion beginning there.<sup>40</sup> Meanwhile, his young wife Matilda was left to rule over his Italian holdings in his absence. Unfortunately, very few records survive from Matilda's time as regent.<sup>41</sup> However, surviving evidence shows her declaring a ruling during a court case involving a dispute over a church between a bishop and an abbey.<sup>42</sup> While her active participation in these court proceedings was limited overall, her decision was considered final, and marked the end of the court case, thus demonstrating her right to dictate terms of governance, at least as she saw them. Furthermore, this progression of Matilda acting as regent on behalf of Henry V later in their marriage, demonstrates the advancement of her power as she matures. In four short years she progressed from acting as an intercessor, to wielding her husband's holdings in his name.

While Matilda acted as regent for Henry V at various times throughout their marriage, her largest influence within the Holy Roman Empire only came after his death. When Henry V died in 1125, the empire was left without an heir, as no children had been born to Henry V and Matilda during their marriage. As such, until a new emperor could be selected, Matilda was appointed by Henry V whilst on his death bed, to act as regent within the empire.<sup>43</sup> Matilda only held this position for a short period of time, as Henry died on May 23<sup>rd</sup> of that year, and the election for his replacement was held that Fall.<sup>44</sup> While regency was an acceptable role for a royal woman, her regency still differed from tradition as she was not acting as regent for an

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<sup>39</sup> Castor, *She-Wolves: The Women Who Ruled England Before Elizabeth*, 62.

<sup>40</sup> Castor, *She-Wolves: The Women Who Ruled England Before Elizabeth*, 62.

<sup>41</sup> Castor, *She-Wolves: The Women Who Ruled England Before Elizabeth*, 62.

<sup>42</sup> Castor, *She-Wolves: The Women Who Ruled England Before Elizabeth*, 62.

<sup>43</sup> Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior*, 33.

<sup>44</sup> Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior*, 33.

underage son, as was more common following the death of a royal husband. Instead, she was ruling in place of a husband who was never to return. It also served to provide Matilda with further experience, and the knowledge that she could rule over a kingdom on her own merit.

## **Heir to the Throne**

The death of the emperor changed the course of Matilda's life.<sup>45</sup> Her position in the Holy Roman Empire was in question. Following the new emperor's appointment, Matilda was left with few options regarding the path which her life could then take. The first option was for Matilda to retire to a convent, however, there is no evidence that she seriously considered this possibility.<sup>46</sup> Second, it was possible for Matilda to marry another member of the German nobility, although Matilda rejected all offers that arose.<sup>47</sup> Catherine Hanley suggests in her book *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior*, that after having been married to an emperor, any marriage would have paled in comparison.<sup>48</sup> Her final option to remain within the empire was to retire to the lands of her dower and remain a widow.<sup>49</sup> Instead, Matilda opted to return to Normandy late in 1125,<sup>50</sup> and later to England in September of 1126.<sup>51</sup>

At the same time that Matilda had been left widowed, her father, Henry I, had begun to consider who should be his heir to the throne. After the death of his son, William Adelin, in the White Ship Disaster of 1120, Matilda was his only surviving legitimate child. There is some

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<sup>45</sup> Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior*, 33.

<sup>46</sup> Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior*, 33-34.

<sup>47</sup> Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior*, 34.

<sup>48</sup> Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior*, 34.

<sup>49</sup> Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior*, 34.

<sup>50</sup> Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior*, 34.

<sup>51</sup> Marjorie Chibnall, *The Empress Matilda: Queen Consort, Queen Mother, and Lady of the English* (Oxford, UK; Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA: Basil Blackwell, 1992), 44.

suggestion made by the chronicler William of Malmesbury that Matilda was hesitant to leave Germany behind: “The empress, as they say, returned with reluctance, as she had become habituated to the country”.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, some other force, be it her father’s wishes or the possibility of a throne, must have caused her to return to her homeland.<sup>53</sup> After all, many of the alternatives presented were a step down from the position of empress. In her biography, *The Empress Matilda: Queen Consort, Queen Mother, and Lady of the English*, Marjorie Chibnall suggests that Henry I would have made no secret of what he expected Matilda to do, and where he believed her duty lay.<sup>54</sup>

However, Matilda’s status as heir to the throne of England was not ensured merely by her return to the country, or even by her father’s declaration to that end. In an attempt to produce an heir, Henry I had remarried in 1121. However, this union still remained childless at the time of Matilda’s return to England. In fact, Henry continued to hope that he and his second wife, Adeliza of Louvain, would yet manage to produce an heir, as can be seen in the oath supporting her claim to the throne, that was sworn to Matilda by the barons of England. William of Malmesbury notes that the oath included the following condition on Matilda’s proclamation as heir to the throne: “if he [Henry] should die without male issue, they [the barons] would, without delay or hesitation, accept his daughter Matilda, the late empress, as their sovereign”.<sup>55</sup> Thus, even in the very oaths taken in support of Matilda’s naming as heir, it was established that the preference was for the future monarch to be a male.

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<sup>52</sup> William of Malmesbury, *Chronicle of the Kings of England: From the Earliest Period to the Reign of King Stephen*, ed. John A. Giles, trans. John Sharp (Bohn’s Antiquarian Library, London: H. G. Bohn, 1847), 481.

<sup>53</sup> Chibnall, *The Empress Matilda*, 43.

<sup>54</sup> Chibnall, *The Empress Matilda*, 43.

<sup>55</sup> William of Malmesbury, *Chronicle of the Kings of England*, 482.

While this preference for a male heir descended from Henry I put Matilda at a disadvantage in many ways, it also worked in other ways to make her a viable candidate for the throne. As established, Matilda was only 23 years old when made a widow, so it was still entirely reasonable to expect that she would produce children if she entered a second marriage. Therefore, during the same period in which Henry I was having allegiance sworn to Matilda, he was also searching for a potential match for his daughter.

Henry I made no secret of the fact that he expected Matilda to produce children, as can be seen in William of Newburgh's *The History of English Affairs*. In his chronicle, William notes that, as part of the oath taken in support of Matilda, the nobility also swore that "the kingdom of England and the duchy of Normandy would pass to this daughter of his, and to his grandchildren already born of her or later to come".<sup>56</sup> Therefore, Henry was signaling to the nobles that he expected Matilda would give birth to further heirs, and that in these heirs there stood the potential for the throne to once again pass to a male. These possibilities for heirs came in the form of Henry's potential future sons, or Matilda's potential future sons, promoted enough promise within the nobility of England that by the beginning of January 1127, all the bishops and magnates present at Henry's court had sworn allegiance to Matilda.<sup>57</sup>

The marriage match which Henry I ultimately concluded was between Matilda and Geoffrey, Count of Anjou. This was a match, which Matilda initially refused.<sup>58</sup> For Matilda, a marriage to a count would have been a demotion, after having served as empress for a significant portion of her life. Through a marriage to Geoffrey, she could not be expected to act as regent

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<sup>56</sup> William of Newburgh, *The History of English Affairs*, ed. P.G. Walsh and M. J. Kennedy (Warminster, Wiltshire: Aris & Phillips, 1988), 51.

<sup>57</sup> Chibnall, *The Empress Matilda*, 51.

<sup>58</sup> Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior*, 62.

over a country, nor have the political importance and power which she once had. Furthermore, Matilda was twelve years Geoffrey's senior, which may have been a contributing factor to her initial distaste towards the union. However, Matilda did later yield to her father's wishes, and the couple were married in 1128.

Upon her marriage to Geoffrey, Matilda became the countess of Anjou. While several chroniclers from the 12<sup>th</sup> century refer to Matilda as the Countess of Anjou, Matilda never referred to herself by that title.<sup>59</sup> For the entirety of her life, Matilda would continue to sign documents, letters, and charters as the "Empress Matilda". The title of empress is one which is bestowed for life, and as such Matilda did not lose it upon the death of her first husband.

As may have been predicted by Matilda's initial disinterest in the marriage, the eventual acceptance of the union did not mark the end of the disputes between the couple. A year following the marriage, the couple separated for a period of at least a year, during which time Matilda once again returned to Normandy.<sup>60</sup> However, such a separation was not to last, as at the bidding of Henry I and the barons, Matilda returned to her husband.<sup>61</sup> It was clear to Matilda that as a woman, she was expected to produce children.<sup>62</sup> And of course, to produce said children, Matilda and Geoffrey had to reunite. William of Newburgh notes that the reason behind the match between Matilda and Geoffrey was so that Henry "might at least have grandchildren from her [Matilda] to succeed him."<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Chibnall, *The Empress Matilda*, 55.

<sup>60</sup> Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior*, 70.

<sup>61</sup> Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior*, 71.

<sup>62</sup> Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior*, 71.

<sup>63</sup> William of Newburgh, *The History of English Affairs*, ed. P.G. Walsh and M. J. Kennedy (Warminster, Wiltshire: Aris & Phillips, 1988), 51.



Following the reunion of Matilda and Geoffrey, Matilda gave birth to their first son, Henry, in March of 1133. Henry was followed a year later by a second son, Geoffrey. As noted by Chibnall, it is possible that new oaths were sworn following the birth of Matilda's two sons, with some possibility of the newly born Henry being named as Henry I's heir at this time.<sup>64</sup> Even if Henry was not specifically named as heir at this time, the plan for him to act as Henry's heir was well established. In William of Newburgh's *The History of English Affairs*, he notes that the initial oath taken by the nobles regarding making Matilda his heir had the following to say about any children she may bear: "the kingdom of England and the duchy of Normandy would pass to this daughter of his, and to his grandchildren already born of her or later to come".<sup>65</sup> Thus, Henry I was planning for his line to continue for many years to come, through Matilda and her offspring.

During the birth of her second son, Geoffrey, Matilda almost died. In the days following his birth, she made arrangements regarding her burial, and the various churches which she would like to receive donations on her behalf.<sup>66</sup> Ultimately, she did recover, but when she found herself pregnant a year and a half later, concerns were raised regarding her ability to survive yet another childbirth.<sup>67</sup> Very little is known of Matilda's political actions during this time, leading Catherine Hanley to suggest that she may have been very ill during this third pregnancy, or that she was residing at one of her residences in order to rest prior to and during the birth of her third son, William FitzEmpress.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Chibnall, *The Empress Matilda*, 61.

<sup>65</sup> William of Newburgh, *The History of English Affairs*, 51.

<sup>66</sup> Chibnall, *The Empress Matilda*, 61.

<sup>67</sup> Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior*, 76.

<sup>68</sup> Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior*, 76.

Unfortunately for Matilda, it was also during the course of her third pregnancy that Henry I died, leaving the throne of England vacant. Matilda, unable to travel to England, potentially due to her third pregnancy, or alternatively due to ongoing war in Anjou, was unable to make claim to the throne and be crowned as had been sworn.<sup>69</sup> Thus, with Matilda unable to claim the throne, it remained open for opposing claims, which is precisely what happened when her cousin Stephen of Blois claimed it for himself in December of 1135.<sup>70</sup>

### **“Lady of the English”, Claimant to the Throne**

Matilda has traditionally been remembered for the civil war, which resulted from the competing claims for the throne of England by Empress Matilda and King Stephen. This is no surprise, as her claim to the throne which sparked the war is notable for being the earliest example of a woman trying to hold the crown of England in her own right. Thus, through the lens of traditional study, her life during this period stands as the height of her achievement, even though she never succeeded in her goal to rule England.

It is also during the period of the civil war that Matilda attracted the long-held prejudices that surround her character. Through the surviving writings of the medieval chroniclers, Matilda’s legacy is of an overly ambitious woman, who claimed superiority in subjects on which she had little knowledge, and who was quick to discredit the advice of her supporters and advisors. This portrayal may seem accurate when viewed solely through the descriptions of the chroniclers, however, Matilda’s life did not start with the civil war, and her childhood and life leading up to the civil war sheds light on her actions during this period.

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<sup>69</sup> Chibnall, *The Empress Matilda*, 62.

<sup>70</sup> Chibnall, *The Empress Matilda*, 65.

Furthermore, chroniclers often demonstrate bias towards the subjects of their writing, either for or against. For example, the author of the *Gesta Stefani*, attached unflattering traits to Matilda, such as when describing her following her receiving the title of Lady of the English, as can be seen in the following quotation: “she at once put on an extremely arrogant demeanour instead of the modest gait and bearing proper to the gentle sex, began to walk and speak and do all things more stiffly and more haughtily”.<sup>71</sup> This anonymous chronicler’s negative attitudes towards Matilda are demonstrated in the mere fact that the chronicle itself is titled *Gesta Stefani* - “Deeds of King Stephen”. As the name would suggest, in this chronicle Matilda acts as a secondary character, mentioned only in relation to her role as a foil to Stephen’s claim on the throne. This relegation of Matilda to a mere secondary character is seen further in the fact that she is never once referred to as Empress, with the author instead choosing to utilize her lesser title of Countess of Anjou.<sup>72</sup> In one notable case, she is relegated to being referenced only as being the sister of Robert, Earl of Gloucester, who was, in fact, acting in the role as her supporter.<sup>73</sup>

All the tactics which Matilda deployed throughout the civil war to oust King Stephen were tools which she had already utilized throughout her life. Thus, through understanding Matilda’s complete history, not only can her actions during this time period be explained in the proper context, but it becomes clear that the civil war was yet another stage in Matilda’s already remarkable life. By focusing on the civil war period, Matilda’s ability to adapt to changing circumstances is de-emphasized, while her connection as cousin to the king is highlighted. While the civil war does demonstrate her will to step into roles not traditionally attributed to women,

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<sup>71</sup> *Gesta Stephani*, 119.

<sup>72</sup> *Gesta Stephani*, 247.

<sup>73</sup> *Gesta Stephani*, 85.

the importance placed on it above her other pursuits of power places emphasis on her life being defined as simply a struggle against men.

Matilda's involvement in the civil war, and her very claim to the throne was seen as being inappropriate for a woman during her lifetime, despite breaking gender norms in other areas, there were still parts of the civil war in which Matilda was unable to actively participate. One of the gender norms which Matilda did choose to uphold was related to her direct involvement in the battles comprising the civil war. Matilda did not lead an army or participate in any of the military operations which accompanied the war.<sup>74</sup> While Matilda was involved in the military effort, by playing an active role in the planning for military attacks, it was instead her half-brother, Robert of Gloucester, who led Matilda's armies.

While Matilda's involvement in military planning during this time may be viewed as having been unusual, the only thing that truly sets it apart was the goal which it was set to accomplish, claiming the throne of England in her own right. Otherwise, Matilda's role in her military was not unique as she was not the first royal female to have been involved in the planning of military invasions and battles. This role as military strategist was another role which was commonly taken on by royal wives when they were left as regents for their husbands, be it as an interim ruler due to the death of said husband, or merely in his place whilst he be away on official business. Matilda's own mother had played this very role on the occasions when Henry I was away on official business, thus this role was not unheard of for a woman within England, or even within Matilda's own family.

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<sup>74</sup> Nesta Pain, *Empress Matilda: Uncrowned Queen of England* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1978), 97.

Therefore, Matilda was not establishing new norms by advising her own military, especially when consideration is given to her own previous experience in the role. During her first marriage to Henry V, Holy Roman Emperor, Matilda had been left in charge of the military in Italy, amongst other matters, while her husband was away.<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, she also acted in this capacity as advisor over military actions following his death. As has already been seen, Matilda was left as regent of the Holy Roman Empire, until such a time as the process could be completed to appoint the new Holy Roman Emperor.<sup>76</sup>

However, Matilda's experience in the military is often replaced by ridicule by the chroniclers of this period, who favour accusing her of being too confident in her abilities, instead of mentioning areas in which she was able to make substantial impact. In particular, the *Gesta Stephani* frequently makes note of Matilda's unwillingness to listen to her male advisors on many matters throughout the civil war, concerning both military matters, and other areas of concern. Her unwillingness to listen to advice is highlighted by the *Gesta Stephani*, portraying her as thinking it to be beneath her to seek advice. The *Gesta Stephani* notes that when her advisors tried to suggest various actions to her, she would send "them away with contumely, rebuffing them by an arrogant answer and refusing to hearken their words".<sup>77</sup> Not only does this author paint Matilda's actions towards these advisors in a cruel light, but they continue by suggesting that she should use any help offered to her, and that her own knowledge of such matters was lacking. The *Gesta Stephani* even goes as far as to suggest that Matilda may not

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<sup>75</sup> Castor, *She-Wolves: The Women Who Ruled England Before Elizabeth*, 62.

<sup>76</sup> Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior*, 33.

<sup>77</sup> *Gesta Stephani*, 121.

have even had so much as a plan to achieve what she was attempting, as she organized things by “her own arbitrary will”.<sup>78</sup>

While some of the chroniclers may have had a lot of ill will towards Matilda and her involvement in military matters, one area on which they seem to remain silent is regarding her use of charters and donations throughout the civil war. Throughout the civil war, Matilda made numerous donations to monasteries and religious orders throughout England. While some of these gifts were of her own volition, others were made as confirmations of gifts which had previously been made by King Stephen.<sup>79</sup> By confirming these donations, the receipts were more likely to support her in turn, as they did not risk losing their donation by doing so. While Matilda made two types of donations, her own donations as well as the confirmations of donations, both forms served to gain her influence and power throughout the war. These charters would have also served to create and solidify alliances between the parties, in this case between Matilda and the religious order being granted the donation. Examples of donations made by Matilda include her gifts of both land and money to the nuns of the church of St. Mary and John the Baptist on Godstow, as well as money and lands to the church proper.<sup>80</sup> Additionally, she confirmed the gift of “100 pieces of land” which King Stephen had previously gifted.<sup>81</sup>

The charters established by Matilda, as well as those that acted as confirmations of Stephen’s gifts, created alliances during the war, but they also were to serve as promises of lands to be kept by the religious houses should Matilda emerge victorious over Stephen. This is

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<sup>78</sup> *Gesta Stephani*, 121.

<sup>79</sup> Kathleen Thompson, “Reconsidering the Empress Matilda’s Act for Andwell,” *Historical Research: The Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 84, no. 224 (2011): 376.

<sup>80</sup> Empress Matilda of England, “A letter of donation to Godstow,” Matilda of England, Empress to Public. 1141.

<sup>81</sup> Empress Matilda of England, “A letter of donation to Godstow,” Matilda of England, Empress to Public. 1141.

particularly important to note in the case of Matilda's confirmations. By issuing confirmations, Matilda was ensuring that the gifts granted to the religious houses were to remain valid and lawful no matter who ended up on the throne.<sup>82</sup> While this may have served to reassure the religious groups of their holdings, it also opened the possibility for them to change alliances within the dispute, as their land holdings were no longer tied to the necessary crowning of one party.

While the issuing of charters served to gain power and influence for both Matilda and Stephen, dependent on the issuing figure, it is important to note that this policy of issuing charters was not an unusual one for a woman seeking to gain more power and influence. At this time, many noble and royal women were making gifts to their favoured religious groups in order to cement their agency and to gain further influence.<sup>83</sup> Not only were they able to gain influence in this manner, but it was one which was viewed as being an appropriate avenue for women to exert their power.<sup>84</sup> As previously discussed, Matilda's own mother, Edith Matilda, was one such royal women who was known to have left gifts to the religious groups in which she had a direct interest, and in doing so gained a certain amount of influence within those churches.<sup>85</sup>

Once again, however, Matilda also had her own experience when it came to the signing and issuing of charters. As seen throughout her life, Matilda's own significance was repeatedly demonstrated to the public through her signing of charters. For example, the charter which she signed following her betrothal to Henry V demonstrated her political power, but it also provided

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<sup>82</sup> Thompson, "Reconsidering the Empress Matilda's Act for Andwell," 377.

<sup>83</sup> Stafford, *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers*, 120.

<sup>84</sup> Stafford, *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers*, 120.

<sup>85</sup> Anselm, "A letter from Anselm, archbishop of Canterbury (1104-05)," Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury to Matilda of Scotland, Queen of the English, 1104-1105, <https://epistolae.ctl.columbia.edu/letter/405.htFml>.

a way in which she could begin to style herself as the future wife of Henry V, as well as the future Empress of the Holy Roman Empire.<sup>86</sup> Using this same logic, Matilda was able to portray herself as the rightful heir to the kingdom of England. While she never signed her name as Queen, as she had never been crowned as such, she did frequently portray herself as Lady of the English in many of the surviving documents from throughout the remainder of her life, such as in her “A letter of confirmation to Godstow” wherein she introduces herself as “M[atilda] empress daughter of king H[enry] and lady of the English”.<sup>87</sup> Lady of the English was a makeshift title which Matilda had been assigned prior to a planned coronation, which was never actually accomplished. In fact, it was Henry I who first used the title “Lady of the English” in connection to Matilda.<sup>88</sup> The title was meant to act as a recognition of her proclamation as future monarch of England, with “Queen of England” meant to take its place following her coronation.<sup>89</sup> While the title had not been used prior to Matilda, it made a reappearance when Matilda’s grandson, John, adopted the male equivalent “Lord of the English” during the period between his initial claim to the throne and his actual coronation.<sup>90</sup> Therefore, Matilda never did stop being Lady of the English, as she remained Henry I’s proclaimed heir, while never progressing to Queen. Thus, by utilizing it throughout the remainder of her life, Matilda was establishing that she was in fact a claimant to the English throne.

The use of charters is not the only example of Matilda utilizing traditionally feminine instruments of power during her campaign for the throne of England. She also acted as a peace

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<sup>86</sup> Chibnall, *The Empress Matilda*, 16.

<sup>87</sup> Matilda of England, Empress. “A letter of confirmation to Godstow.” Matilda of England, Empress to Public. April 1141-December 1142.

<https://epistolae.ctl.columbia.edu/letter/26084.html>.

<sup>88</sup> Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior*, 150.

<sup>89</sup> Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior*, 150.

<sup>90</sup> Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior*, 150.



broker during the period when she held King Stephen as her prisoner. The history of women acting as peace brokers is a long one, with such a role having been deemed as acceptable for a woman to hold. Furthermore, the role of peace broker was also one which Matilda herself had previously held during her first marriage. Within the Holy Roman Empire, the role of peace broker was one commonly assigned to the Empress.<sup>91</sup> Through this role, arguments could be settled more easily, often with less harsh punishments also being assigned.<sup>92</sup> Such a case was previously seen in the early days of her first marriage when Matilda petitioned on behalf of a family to her husband, resulting in a reduced sentence for the perceived wrongdoing.<sup>93</sup>

Matilda's role as peace broker during the civil war came when she held King Stephen as captive, while Stephen's wife, Queen Matilda, held Empress Matilda's half-brother, Robert of Gloucester as her own prisoner.<sup>94</sup> The captivity of these two opposing figures meant that very little could be done to advance the war at hand. Without Stephen, his side was leaderless and devoid of its claimant to the throne, and without Robert of Gloucester, Matilda lacked a leader capable of pressing her case militarily.

Stephen's imprisonment by Empress Matilda preceded that of Robert of Gloucester, and during this period, Stephen's wife, Queen Matilda, had very little leverage with which to negotiate for Stephen's release. However, with the capture of Robert of Gloucester, Empress Matilda's claim for the throne was unable to proceed, and as such, she was forced to negotiate with Queen Matilda. During these negotiations, the two Matildas entered into peace talks, in hopes that an equally advantageous arrangement could be met.<sup>95</sup> In the end, an agreement was

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<sup>91</sup> Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior*, 20.

<sup>92</sup> Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior*, 20.

<sup>93</sup> Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior*, 20.

<sup>94</sup> Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior*, 168.

<sup>95</sup> Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior*, 170.

made to trade Robert's freedom in exchange for Stephen's.<sup>96</sup> While these negotiations did not end the civil war, it did mark the beginning of the end. For, the war had now been going on for six years, and the two opposing sides fighting for the throne began to look at alternative ways in which to gain power, such as through establishing future heirs to the throne.

Empress Matilda's involvement in the civil war with King Stephen may be what she is best remembered for, but overall it was not all that different from the events from her life leading up to the war. Throughout the war, Empress Matilda employed many of the skills available to women, which she had seen demonstrated to her throughout her early childhood, and she even used these throughout her first marriage. Throughout the entirety of the war she utilized charters and the skills which she had previously gained from overseeing the military in the Holy Roman Empire. Near the end of the war, she also demonstrated her ability to broker peace, which was a skill long practiced by women in positions of power. While Queen Matilda's peace brokering may be viewed as having been more successful than Matilda's, as the freedom of Stephen meant that his claim to the throne could continue, without her half-brother, Matilda's military campaign and by connection her claim to the throne would also have ceased. Therefore, Matilda's achievements in this brokering should not go uncelebrated. Furthermore, Matilda's goals when it came to the use of peace brokering may have different than those of the typical female, but the fact that she utilized this method was not. And despite the feelings held towards her by the medieval chroniclers, she did in fact have the experience needed to act with confidence in her actions. However, as the civil war carried on, Matilda began to switch purposes, moving towards the more accepted goal for a woman and mother, seeing that her son Henry would sit on the throne of England.

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<sup>96</sup> Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior*, 172.

## **Duchess of Normandy and Advisor to a King**

Matilda left England prior to the end of the civil war, but she still continued to be active in the dispute from afar. This departure also marked Matilda's change in goals, as she recognized that she was never to be queen, and instead set her sights on having Henry succeed Stephen. The eventual crowning of Henry did not mark the end of Matilda's influence in her son's life, nor in English politics, as she continued her role as advisor long after he came to the throne.

In 1148, prior to the end of the civil war, Matilda returned to Normandy.<sup>97</sup> Being the Duchess of Normandy provided Matilda with a safe location to settle following the civil war. There never seems to have been any dispute over Matilda and Geoffrey's holdings in Normandy, and as such, there was no unrest upon her return concerning her right to the title of duchess.<sup>98</sup> In Normandy, she resided in a variety of locations comprising of her own lands, as well as those owned by her husband.<sup>99</sup> Because these lands were removed from the ongoing battles in England, they provided her with an area in which to regroup and plan further invasions into England.<sup>100</sup> What may have begun as a way for Matilda to step back from the ever increasing need to retreat within England became permanent, as Matilda never returned to England during her lifetime.<sup>101</sup>

In 1151, Henry was recognized as the duke of Normandy by Louis VII of France, thus securing the passage of Normandy to Matilda's heirs.<sup>102</sup> This also continued to allow Matilda to

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<sup>97</sup> Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior*, 200.

<sup>98</sup> Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior*, 203.

<sup>99</sup> Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior*, 203.

<sup>100</sup> Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior*, 203.

<sup>101</sup> Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior*, 200.

<sup>102</sup> Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior*, 207.

make her home in Normandy. When Henry left for England during the winter of 1153, Matilda was left “to rule and keep the peace in Normandy”.<sup>103</sup> She was never challenged in this role, as she was now wielding this power in “name of a male relative”, which was seen as an acceptable utilization of female power, unlike her attempts to gain the English crown in her own right.<sup>104</sup> While Henry’s dukedom of Normandy ensured that the title continued to pass to Matilda’s heirs, it also represented yet another title which Matilda lost to a man.

Throughout the years, Matilda was in frequent communication with her son, and she never hesitated to make her opinion known on various political matters, with her involvement in political matters concerning her son beginning in the run up to his eventual reign. In 1153, Henry was involved in a dispute with Pope Anastasius IV. As was typical of the time period, Pope Anastasius wrote to Henry’s wife Eleanor, in hope that she would be able to intercede on his behalf with Henry. This role as intercessor was also one which Matilda herself had held during her marriage to Henry V, as had her mother, Edith Matilda, during the reign of Henry I. As such, the role of wife as intercessor was well established, and proven to work in many circumstances. Therefore, it was not unusual that Anastasius should request that Eleanor should act on his behalf. What was unusual about this matter was the fact that Anastasius sent the same request to Matilda, hoping that she too could intercede on his behalf with her son.

The conflict rose between Henry and the pope because Henry has used his power within Normandy to remove and replace an abbot.<sup>105</sup> Therefore, through Matilda and Eleanor, Pope Anastasius hoped that Henry could be convinced to reverse his actions and allow the abbot to

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<sup>103</sup> Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior*, 213.

<sup>104</sup> Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior*, 214.

<sup>105</sup> Anastasius IV. “A letter from Anastasius IV.” Anastasius IV to Matilda of England, Empress. Available online: <https://epistolae.ctl.columbia.edu/letter/207.html>.

return to his position. Within his letter, Anastasius asked Matilda to “command, admonish, and exhort your nobility by these writings in the Lord that you strive to suggest...that he permit that abbot to return to his monastery in peace”.<sup>106</sup> This language used by Anastasius reveals a couple of facts regarding the situation at hand.

Firstly, he stressed the importance of the matter by suggesting that Matilda ought to use every skill at her disposal in order to sway the mind of Henry, be it by command, admonishment, or by using her position within the nobility.<sup>107</sup> Secondly, and perhaps more importantly than the fact that Matilda had been asked to intercede on such a seemingly important matter, Anastasius acknowledged that Matilda possessed all of these forms of power over her son. At this point in their lives, Matilda had already begun to change her motive in the civil war to the aim of placing Henry on the throne, having become aware that her chances of becoming queen in her own right were diminishing rapidly. Thus, Matilda began working to place Henry in a position of power, as future heir to the throne, as was originally suggested by the previous king, Henry I, during his debates over whom to name as his heir.<sup>108</sup> Therefore, by asking Matilda to “command, admonish, and exhort your nobility”, Anastasius is recognizing her own power and influence over the potential future king. Therefore, even when not as an immediate contender for the throne of England, Matilda was still being seen as an individual possessing great power, that was universally renowned.

While the example with Anastasius asking both wife and mother to intercede on his behalf is unusual in the fact that he requested the assistance of both women, there are also numerous other examples of important church and political figures seeking only Matilda’s

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<sup>106</sup> Anastasius IV. “A letter from Anastasius IV.” Anastasius IV to Matilda of England, Empress.

<sup>107</sup> Anastasius IV. “A letter from Anastasius IV.” Anastasius IV to Matilda of England, Empress.

<sup>108</sup> Castor, *She-Wolves: The Women Who Ruled England Before Elizabeth*, 68.

assistance in such matters. These requests for input continued throughout the remainder of Matilda's life, even after her son had come to the throne. In some cases it also appears that Matilda's assistance as intercessor or peacemaker had not always been requested, however she sought to provide her input nonetheless.

Matilda's efforts to have Henry follow Stephen on the throne materialized not long after the end of the war in 1153. In October of 1154, King Stephen died, and before the end of the year, Henry II was crowned King of England. There is also no evidence that Matilda ever received another royal title, despite acting in various capacities during the reign of her son. However, despite residing in Normandy until her death, her interests in England never abated. And while her direct power in England following the war was sharply diminished, her indirect influence over the politics in the country under the reign of her son should not be discounted.

During Henry II's reign, for example, a dispute arose between him and Louis VII, King of France over the manner in which to provide contributions to the Holy Land from the French territories held by Henry.<sup>109</sup> In a letter written by Matilda regarding the conflict, she addressed Louis VII, and requested that he inform her of his side of the dispute with her son, so that she may be able to "amend" it.<sup>110</sup> These letters provide evidence that Matilda was using a typical instrument of power afforded to women, that of the role of intercessor. As has been since, this was a role which by this time in her life she had frequently utilized, and from a wide variety of positions such as empress, and claimant to the throne.

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<sup>109</sup> Matilda of England, Empress. "A letter from Matilda, empress." Matilda of England, Empress to Louis VII, King of France. Available online: <https://epistolae.ctl.columbia.edu/letter/173.html>.

<sup>110</sup> Matilda of England, Empress. "A letter from Matilda, empress." Matilda of England, Empress to Louis VII, King of France.

However, once again, this situation differs slightly in the fact that she was acting as intercessor to her son, not her husband. Despite Henry having a wife, the powerful and highly intelligent Eleanor of Aquitaine, Matilda was still asked to intercede with him on occasion. Therefore, the fact that Matilda was still being asked to intercede by the King of France, demonstrates the extreme amount of influence which she had over Henry, and in turn, over the kingdom of England.

Besides acting as an intercessor at times, Matilda also advised her son on a variety of other matters which he would come to face throughout his reign. While Matilda did not shy away from sharing her opinions on various political matters, Henry II did not always follow her guidance. Matilda advised on was the appointment of Thomas Becket as the Archbishop of Canterbury, for example. Matilda opposed Becket's appointment to the office of archbishop, as it was her belief that he was too opinionated, which would only cause strife between himself and Henry II.<sup>111</sup>

However, Becket did become the Archbishop of Canterbury, and as had been predicted by Matilda, strife soon resulted. There are a series of letters written back and forth between Becket and Matilda regarding Henry's oppressive treatment of churches in England. Within this exchange between Becket and Matilda, Becket requests that Matilda assist him in the matter by discussing the issue at hand with Henry, "You ought, if you please, employ the diligence of a mother and the authority of a lady [female of lord] to recall him to duty...".<sup>112</sup> In a response to

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<sup>111</sup> Empress Matilda of England, "A letter from Matilda, empress, queen of the Romans," Matilda of England, Empress to Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury. Famously and tragically, Matilda's concerns were borne out by later events.

<sup>112</sup> Thomas Becket, "A letter from Thomas Becket," Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury to Matilda of England, Empress.

this letter, Matilda agreed to assist Becket with the task, provided that Becket was willing to make some concessions to Henry.<sup>113</sup>

These letters between Matilda and various political and church officials are important, as not only they showcase her acting as intercessor and peacemaker on behalf of Henry, but they also demonstrate the fact that these important figures knew that Matilda's power was not to be ignored. While the letters demonstrate the role being commanded by Matilda, the fact that there were numerous requests being made of her by different figures shows that it was well known that she was entirely capable of fulfilling the role being asked of her. Finally, by asking her to provide her influence and opinions of these matters, the men of prominence are demonstrating that they too trusted in Matilda's abilities in this role, and valued her involvement in the disputes in question.

Direct involvement in the Kingdom of England was not the only way which Matilda showcased and utilized her power throughout the later years in her life, she also continued her religious donations. While Matilda's donations throughout her battle with Stephen served a practical purpose of creating alliances, and in some cases, ensuring that she had locations to retreat to when she was on the defensive in the battle, the donations made later in her life are more representative of her own personal religious beliefs. Matilda's later donations were more representative of her own personal beliefs, but she also used them for the benefit of her soul, that of her father, her husband, and her son.<sup>114</sup> As such, not only was Matilda utilizing donations as an instrument of power, she was also using them in a more maternal and nurturing manner, to

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<sup>113</sup> Empress Matilda of England, "A letter from Matilda, empress, queen of the Romans," Matilda of England, Empress to Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury.

<sup>114</sup> Empress Matilda of England, "A letter of donation to Godstow," Matilda of England, Empress to Public. 1141.



care for her loved ones. While it was common for religious donations to be done in order to benefit one's soul, the act of also utilizing them for the good of the souls of others in a woman's family would also have been seen as a suitable use of female influence.

## **Conclusion**

History has long remembered Matilda as a daughter, a wife, and a mother. Even the modern sources which present Matilda in a more favourable light, still chart the course of her life in relation to the roles she held in the lives of her powerful male family members. Despite this legacy, Matilda instead can be viewed as having been adapted to the ever-changing circumstances which faced her. Additionally, she used the tools available to her, and the lessons she had learned from previous experiences to chart a new course for herself. While she was ultimately limited by her gender, no previous women had ever tried to accomplish what she had, thus she had to chart her own course throughout the majority of her life. Ultimately, what she attained was outside the realm of anything achieved by noble women before.

History remembers Matilda as having been “great by birth, greater by marriage, greatest in her offspring”, but what she truly accomplished throughout her life she did so by utilizing her education, and experiences. As one opportunity ended for Matilda, she was always willing to change course and work to gain power from a different angle. The result being that Matilda was an Empress, claimant to the throne of England, duchess of Normandy, and advisor to a King, all within her lifetime.



## **Appendix A-Historiographical Essay**

This historiography will explore the scholarship regarding the Empress Matilda by examining portrayals of Matilda and her ambitions, as well as the language surrounding her. Such an examination will showcase how attitudes, and even the view of her importance to English History, have changed over time. The first section of the chapter will look at the works of the medieval chroniclers, who were contemporaries of Matilda. Following that, this study will focus on the works of the Victorian era. The historical depictions of Matilda during the medieval period and Victorian era tend to showcase descriptions of Matilda's character, while also stressing her connection to the prominent men in her life. The first half of the twentieth century sees no new scholarship concerning Matilda, with the 1950s and 1960s contributing only a single article each. In fact, it is not until the rise of second wave feminism that Matilda's position in history is expanded upon and solidified. The 1990s and early 2000s also saw a rise in more substantial studies of Matilda, with broader analysis of her activities outside of the period in which she was fighting with Stephen for the throne of England.

Through the study of the historiography surrounding Matilda, it is not only possible to see the views of Matilda contemporary to her time, but also to track how the views of her have shifted throughout history to showcase her entire life. There has also been an expansion of study into her agency and power. These shifts in the study of Matilda frequently coincide with the changing views of women throughout history.

### **The Medieval Chroniclers**

There were several medieval chroniclers who lived, and were writing, during the period in which Matilda made her claim to the throne. Such sources are essential for the study of the

Empress Matilda as they sometimes provide a first-hand account of the events occurring at the time. Furthermore, they also showcase the attitudes surrounding the idea of female rule at the time, thus giving an accurate account of some of the challenges which Matilda faced based solely upon her gender.

One of the medieval chroniclers who explored Matilda's reign was Orderic Vitalis, who wrote *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*. As the title suggests, this book was written from a religious and church-oriented perspective. However, it still provides a glimpse into many of the important figures and events in English history, Matilda included. Additionally, the volumes of *The Ecclesiastical History* documenting Matilda's claims to the throne and the ensuing civil war are contemporary to the events being documented therein. Thus, allowing *The Ecclesiastical History* to showcase the attitudes towards the conflict, without the future context of the dispute resulting in the naming of Matilda's son as heir.

From *The Ecclesiastical History* it is possible to see how even very early writers on the subject of Matilda had begun to discount Matilda and her claim as heir. With Vitalis's work, Matilda is always introduced as the Countess of Anjou, instead of Empress.<sup>1</sup> While it is true that Matilda was the Countess of Anjou, due to her second marriage to Geoffrey, Count of Anjou, the title of countess is the lesser of Matilda's two titles. By ignoring the title of empress, which Matilda initially held as wife of the Holy Roman Emperor, Vitalis serves to discredit Matilda's power and experience, thus undermining her bid for the throne. And to add further insult, in one instance, Vitalis merely refers to Matilda as the wife of Geoffrey, Count of Anjou, not even bothering to use her name.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Orderic Vitalis, *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, ed. Marjorie Chibnall (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 215.

<sup>2</sup> Vitalis, *The Ecclesiastical History*, 219.

William of Malmesbury's *Chronicle of the Kings of England: From the Earliest Period to the Reign of King Stephen*, which he completed in 1125 prior to the death of Henry I, appears to lend a more favourable view to Matilda. Much like Vitalis, William of Malmesbury does not widely refer to Matilda as an empress, but instead simply calls her Matilda, followed by some reference to being the daughter of Henry I.<sup>3</sup> However, within a passage regarding the death of the Holy Roman Emperor (HRE), Henry V, William of Malmesbury does briefly refer to Matilda as "The Empress".<sup>4</sup>

The main significance of this passage surrounding the death of HRE Henry V is not due to the use of Matilda's title of empress, the passage also gives a brief insight into Matilda's opinions regarding her return to England. William of Malmesbury states: "The empress, as they say, returned with reluctance, as she had become habituated to the country which was her dowry"<sup>5</sup>. This quotation provides the reader with a glimpse into her potential motivations, thus displaying that she is more than a pawn being moved around by Henry I.

Another book which presents a less than favourable view of Matilda is the *Gesta Stephani*. The author of this book is unknown, however, as the title suggests, it was written to favour Stephen. Returning once again to the style of Orderic Vitalis, this book refers to Matilda as the Countess of Anjou, instead of Empress.<sup>6</sup> However, the use of the title of countess is one of the lesser affronts to Matilda's character within this book.

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<sup>3</sup> William of Malmesbury, *Chronicle of the Kings of England: From the Earliest Period to the Reign of King Stephen*, ed. John A. Giles, trans. John Sharp (London: H. G. Bohn, 1847), 457.

<sup>4</sup> William of Malmesbury, *Chronicle of the Kings of England*, 481.

<sup>5</sup> William of Malmesbury, *Chronicle of the Kings of England*, 481.

<sup>6</sup> *Gesta Stephani*, trans. and ed. K. R. Potter and R. H. C. Davis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 47.

The *Gesta Stephani* takes every opportunity to portray Matilda as the villain within Stephen's story. She is said to have confiscated the lands, honours, and fees given by Stephen to his former supporters and favoured religious orders.<sup>7</sup> She also "arbitrarily annulled any grant fixed by the king's royal decree".<sup>8</sup> Thus, Matilda is demonstrated as being objectionable as she is overturning every perceived good deed performed by Stephen. Not only is she undoing the deeds of Stephen, but she is hurting her own cause as Stephen's supporters would now be against her due to her "arbitrary" actions, "uncontrolled annoyance", and by "insulting and threatening them".<sup>9</sup>

Gendered language also plays an important role in the *Gesta Stephani*'s portrayal of Matilda. This use of language first appears in order to display how she should be presenting herself, and then shows how her actual actions do not line up with how women should behave. This use of parallel actions and examples can be seen in the following quotation: "instead of the modest gait and bearing proper to the gentle sex, [Matilda] began to walk and speak and do all things more stiffly and more haughtily than she had been wont".<sup>10</sup> Later on, attributes which would generally be seen as positives, especially in a leader, are used as negatives when exhibited by Matilda. For example, she is said to have had "too much boldness and confidence".<sup>11</sup> This description of Matilda is in direct contrast of the manner in which the same author describes Stephen, for him he has much flattery to impart. The author describes Stephen as being "generous and courteous; moreover, in all the conflicts of war or in any siege of his enemies,

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<sup>7</sup> *Gesta Stephani*, 121.

<sup>8</sup> *Gesta Stephani*, 121.

<sup>9</sup> *Gesta Stephani*, 121.

<sup>10</sup> *Gesta Stephani*, 119.

<sup>11</sup> *Gesta Stephani*, 125.

bold and brave, judicious and patient”.<sup>12</sup> This description of Stephen goes as far as to include the same descriptor of “bold”, but in the case of Stephen it is seen as a positive trait, whereas Matilda had too much “boldness”.

Finally, William of Newburgh’s *The History of English Affairs*, written at the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, takes a more balanced view of Matilda. His work showcases the dedication of the nobles towards her, while also mentioning her flaws. However, overall, Matilda does not feature heavily within the work of William of Newburgh, and these two separate portrayals of her are indicative of her inclusion within the book. As William of Newburgh was still writing his account during the reign of Henry II, and following his death, he had the hindsight of how Matilda’s dispute with Stephen eventually became resolved. Therefore, his familiarity with the proceeding events may have made him more inclined to show leniency to Matilda, where previous chroniclers had not.

In his writing, William of Newburgh demonstrates a more favourable view of Matilda, by exploring how her supporters felt following the crowning of Stephen. He writes that: “She stirred the hearts of many nobles with the thought of the oath formally sworn to her concerning the kingdom”.<sup>13</sup> Thus, it is demonstrated that at least some of the nobles felt a connection to Matilda, seen through the “stirring of their hearts”, and favoured her as replacement for Stephen. By focusing on these affected feelings of the nobles, William of Newburgh is able to shift away from some of the negative views of Matilda, by showing that there was at the very least a faction of individuals who admired her, and that the negative viewpoints were not the only ones available at the time.

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<sup>12</sup> *Gesta Stephani*, 5.

<sup>13</sup> William of Newburgh, *The History of English Affairs*, ed. P.G. Walsh and M. J. Kennedy (Warminster, Wiltshire: Aris & Phillips, 1988), 61.

The language surrounding the swearing of the oath to uphold Matilda's right of the throne also differs from that utilized by William of Newburgh when discussing oaths taken in support of men. While the previous quotation regarding the oath of Matilda is comprised of more feminine association such as the heart being caused to stir, oaths to men bring forth an attitude of excitement. In the same text as that containing the oath to Matilda, William of Newburgh writes of an oath taken in support of Bishop Wilmund. In this case, the oath is sworn during the bishop's mission trip to the Isle of Man, at which he had get success in gaining followers.<sup>14</sup> The men of the Isle, William of Newburgh states, "were all roused, and took an oath to him", following a speech he gave.<sup>15</sup> The word "rouse" denotes a more active role on behalf of the oath takers, than was seen in the case of Matilda's.

However, these feelings of goodwill were not to last as William of Newburgh notes her successes in the battle made her arrogant. In fact, her attitude was so disagreeable that according to William of Newburgh, through "intolerable female arrogance she fired the still ambivalent spirits of the nobility against her".<sup>16</sup> The use of female to describe her arrogance is also important, as it shows some of the gender stereotypes which affected Matilda in her fight, in this case that arrogance is a disagreeable trait often attributed to women.

While the depictions of Matilda made by medieval chroniclers tend to center on criticisms of Matilda, be it of her character or even her looks, they nonetheless contribute an account of how Matilda's contemporaries received her during her lifetime. These records from the chroniclers also work to provide concrete examples of the attitudes which Matilda faced in her pursuit of the throne. These attitudes were indictive of the views surrounding Matilda which

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<sup>14</sup> William of Newburgh, *The History of English Affairs*, 105.

<sup>15</sup> William of Newburgh, *The History of English Affairs*, 105.

<sup>16</sup> William of Newburgh, *The History of English Affairs*, 63.



had to be shifted if she were to ever claim the throne, as her father had willed. Furthermore, these depictions of Matilda were the base upon which her entire life story had to be gleaned from by future historians, looking to provide insight on her actions taken throughout the entire course of her life.

### **Victorian Viewpoints**

The Victorian Era saw the production of numerous in-depth studies of the history of England, written by both men and women. While the works of Edward A. Freeman, and William Stubbs during this time tended to focus more broadly on the history of England, Agnes and Elizabeth Strickland wrote predominantly on significant female figures throughout history. This difference between focus of the male writers versus the female writers is indicative of the changes going on at this time period. As views of women in contemporary society began to change, as did the manner in which historical female figures were seen. Therefore, as women gained the ability to become published authors, such as the Strickland sisters did, it opened up a new door to exploring the actions of past generations of women. The fact that it is the female authors who choose to be the first to further explore the lives of historical women establishes their wish to see stories like their own represented. While the male authors' focus remains firmly rooted in former methods of study, exhibiting this change in scholarship at the time it was occurring.

The Stricklands jointly worked on, and subsequently published, *Lives of the Queens of England From the Norman Conquest; with Anecdotes of Their Courts*. This book proved to be one of the most popular historical publications of the Victorian era and played an important part

in the creation of the genre of biography.<sup>17</sup> While the book was published under Agnes's name, it is believed that Elizabeth wrote many of the biographies of the women contained within it.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, Agnes undertook most of the correspondence and publicity involved in the publication of the *Lives of the Queens of England*.<sup>19</sup>

Within this book, the chapters are broken down into short biographies of the queens of England from the time of Matilda of Flanders, up until Queen Victoria. Written during the late Victorian era, this book showcases many of the attitudes held towards women at the time, with their position being primarily in the home sphere. Such perceptions of the role of women are very transparent within the book, the introduction states that the biographies contained therein: “intended likewise to portray equally the grandeur of the queen, the attachments of the wife, the affection of the mother, and the charms and the infirmities of the woman”.<sup>20</sup> This quotation is very apt to the study of Matilda's life, as Matilda is frequently referenced in her domestic role as wife and mother, as can be seen throughout the pre-twentieth century sources. Even though the introduction of the book perfectly sets up how she fits in with the biographies that follow, Empress Matilda makes next to no appearance within the book. The only appearances of Matilda within *The Lives of the Queens of England* comes in the chapters dedicated to her mother, Matilda of Scotland, and her daughter-in-law, Eleanor of Aquitaine.

Within the chapter “Matilda of Scotland”, the Empress Matilda is never mentioned by name, instead being referred to in passing as being part of the collective of “children” of

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<sup>17</sup> Rosemary Mitchell, “Strickland, Agnes (1796-1874),” Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, online ed., 10 October 2019, <https://doi-org.ezproxy.acadiau.ca:9443/10.1093/ref:odnb/26663>.

<sup>18</sup> Mitchell, “Strickland, Agnes”.

<sup>19</sup> Mitchell, “Strickland, Agnes”.

<sup>20</sup> Agnes and Elizabeth Strickland, *Lives of the Queens of England From the Norman Conquest; with Anecdotes of Their Courts*, (Philadelphia: Blanchard and Lea, 1852), 4.

Matilda.<sup>21</sup> Not only is the Empress Matilda not mentioned by name within the chapter, but the order of her birth is incorrectly stated as well. Strickland declared that: “Matilda then lay in with her first-born child, William the Atheling”, incorrectly assigning William as Matilda of Scotland’s first child, when in fact that position was held by the future Empress Matilda.<sup>22</sup>

Strickland’s book continues with the next chapter being devoted to Eleanor of Aquitaine, who was the daughter in-law of the Empress Matilda. It is within this chapter that Matilda receives her first and only reference by name within *The Lives of the Queens of England*, and even when she is mentioned, it is done to establish the fact that she was mother of Henry II.<sup>23</sup> While she is still being introduced in relation to her son, no mention is made of her being the daughter of Henry I. Instead, Strickland notes that the Empress Matilda is the daughter of Matilda of Scotland, thus finally connecting her back to the previous chapter in which she was all but ignored.<sup>24</sup>

Edward A. Freeman was another historian who was writing during the late Victorian era, and in his *Outlines of History*, he creates an overarching historical narrative of the history of England. Freeman’s work differs from the work of Agnes and Elizabeth Strickland in that it is not a biography. As such, while Empress Matilda does at least get mentioned, it is always in connection to prominent male figures, and therefore Matilda is once again relegated to having her position defined in the way she is related to these men.

The first mention of Matilda within *Outlines of History* establishes her relationship to various male figures within her life. Freeman states that Matilda married Henry V, Holy Roman

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<sup>21</sup> Strickland, *Lives of the Queens of England*, 18.

<sup>22</sup> Strickland, *Lives of the Queens of England*, 16.

<sup>23</sup> Strickland, *Lives of the Queens of England*, 24.

<sup>24</sup> Strickland, *Lives of the Queens of England*, 24.

Emperor, and further elaborates that she was also the daughter of King Henry I.<sup>25</sup> Freeman then added that Henry V and Matilda had no children, and that upon the death of Henry V in 1125, the Franconian dynasty ended.<sup>26</sup>

The second, and final appearance of Matilda in Freeman's book comes with the introduction of Matilda's son, Henry. Even here, not only is Matilda referenced merely in relation to her son, but Freeman reiterates that Matilda herself is the daughter of Henry I.<sup>27</sup> Her battle with Stephen is completely ignored within this book, and thus, Matilda is presented only in the roles of daughter, wife, and mother. In fact, Stephen is ignored entirely by Freeman, not garnering so much as a mention. Therefore, by erasing Stephen from the history, Matilda is made even more a product of her relations to the various Henrys.

The work of William Stubbs gives the most in-depth examination of Matilda that is to be found during the Victorian era. In *The Early Plantagenets*, William Stubbs goes as far as to include an entire chapter devoted to the conflict between Stephen and Matilda. This chapter is then followed by one on the reign of Henry II, in which Matilda also makes several appearances.

Stubbs, as was typical of the time in which he was writing, introduces the Empress Matilda as being the daughter of Henry I.<sup>28</sup> He then proceeds to outline the relationship which existed between father and daughter, noting that Henry I appears to have had "no great love for his daughter", with all his parental attentions having been focused on his son.<sup>29</sup> Stubbs also makes further use of the relationship between Henry I and Matilda, in order to add insight into the attitudes and personality of Matilda. Stubbs notes that Matilda "exerted power sufficient to

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<sup>25</sup> Edward A. Freeman, *Outlines of History* (New York: H. Holt, 1873), 148.

<sup>26</sup> Freeman, *Outlines of History*, 148.

<sup>27</sup> Freeman, *Outlines of History*, 153.

<sup>28</sup> William Stubbs, *The Early Plantagenets*, (Boston: Estes and Lauriat, 1876), 12.

<sup>29</sup> Stubbs, *The Early Plantagenets*, 12.

show that she had all the pride and tyrannical intolerance of her father, without his prudence or self-control”.<sup>30</sup> This quotation by Stubbs therefore serves not only to reinforce the fact that Matilda was the daughter of Henry I, but also to discredit her character by attributing to her the worst traits of her father, while also implying that she lacked his better attributes.

Even though Stubbs upholds the tradition of introducing Matilda in relationship to men, he does begin the foundation for the analysis of Matilda’s personality and attitudes which was to come. Stubbs also returns to Matilda her agency, which she had lost in other studies pertaining to her in the Victorian era. Thus, Stubbs’s work establishes many of the patterns of study pertaining to Matilda which will be expanded on in the twentieth century.

### **The Lean Period**

During the first half of the twentieth century, there were no notable works published concerning the Empress Matilda. In fact, this dearth of new information on Matilda largely continues until the influence of second wave feminism begins to be felt on the study of history, with two exceptions. These two exceptions come in the form of articles published in the 1950s and 1960s.

The first of these exceptions is the 1955 article by Betty Bendel, entitled: “The English Chroniclers’ Attitudes Toward Women” which was published in the *Journal of the History of Ideas*. This article does not place its focus on Matilda, but instead uses her life as one example of how the English chroniclers wrote about female figures. Within this article, Bendel explores the attitudes of the English chroniclers by comparing the ways which they portrayed women in pre-Conquest writing, compared to that of post-Conquest writing. One overarching theme within her

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<sup>30</sup> Stubbs, *The Early Plantagenets*, 22.

article concerns how pre-Conquest sources show women partaking in many activities, while the chroniclers of the post-Conquest period seem to be astonished when women partake in government or war.<sup>31</sup>

Bandel's article is also the first to analyse the language which medieval chroniclers used to describe both the physical traits, as well as the actions of the women who were being studied. While Stubbs discussed Matilda's personality, Bandel takes this one step further by exploring the gendering of words used to describe her. Bandel notes that pre-Conquest chroniclers were known to describe females as being "learned, devout, an able administrator, or a brave fighter".<sup>32</sup> Meanwhile, the post-Conquest chroniclers, while content to label women as devout, were hesitant to assign them any of these other attributes.<sup>33</sup> Instead, when a woman demonstrated any of these other ambitions, she was labeled as being "manlike".<sup>34</sup> In many cases, Bandel posits that this term was meant as a compliment, as it was also used by chroniclers who were supporters of Stephen to describe his wife.<sup>35</sup>

The second article of relevance written during this period is that of Peter Walne. This article, entitled: "A 'Double Charter' of the Empress Matilda and Henry, Duke of Normandy, c. 1152", was published in *The English Historical Review* in 1961. This article examines one of the joint charters which was issued by both Empress Matilda and her son, Henry II. Study of Matilda's charters is significant not only because it addresses some of Matilda's contributions

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<sup>31</sup> Betty Bandel, "The English Chroniclers' Attitude Toward Women," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 16, no. 1 (January 1955): 114, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2707530>.

<sup>32</sup> Bandel, "The English Chroniclers' Attitude Toward Women," 114.

<sup>33</sup> Bandel, "The English Chroniclers' Attitude Toward Women," 114.

<sup>34</sup> Bandel, "The English Chroniclers' Attitude Toward Women," 114.

<sup>35</sup> Bandel, "The English Chroniclers' Attitude Toward Women," 117.

after her own fight for the throne, but it also establishes the basis for further study of her religious works.

The charter examined within the article is in fact a transcript made of the original, which had been in the possession of Dr. George Owen, physician of Henry VIII.<sup>36</sup> While there are a few things in the transcript which are believed not to be original to the charter, such as changed abbreviations of the Latin, Walne notes that the transcript seems to have been otherwise accurately copied from the original, as it showcases all the hallmarks of a charter from the 1150s.<sup>37</sup> The charter deals with the attempted founding of a house of Austin canons at the castle of Wallingford,<sup>38</sup> but there is no evidence that such a foundation ever occurred.<sup>39</sup> Despite this, Walne still believes the transcription to be real, and accounts for the lack of action as arising from the politics of the time, with other religious orders already having claim of the castle.<sup>40</sup>

While this article does mostly focus on the reliability of the charter in question, it establishes the study of such charters issued not only by Henry II and Matilda together, but also by Matilda alone. Such charters allow for exploration into Matilda's contributions to England even after her own fight for the throne ended. Furthermore, the study of these charters also creates the opportunity to study the confirmation letters made by Matilda during the civil war with Stephen. It is through the confirmation letters that evidence of Matilda's agency during the civil war can be seen, as it establishes the work that she was doing at the time. Using confirmation letters, Matilda was able to assure various religious orders that gifts made by

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<sup>36</sup> P. Walne, "A 'Double Charter' of the Empress Matilda and Henry, Duke of Normandy, c. 1152," *The English Historical Review* 76, no. 301 (October 1961): 649, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/558201>.

<sup>37</sup> Walne, "A 'Double Charter' of the Empress Matilda and Henry," 650.

<sup>38</sup> Walne, "A 'Double Charter' of the Empress Matilda and Henry," 649.

<sup>39</sup> Walne, "A 'Double Charter' of the Empress Matilda and Henry," 650.

<sup>40</sup> Walne, "A 'Double Charter' of the Empress Matilda and Henry," 652.

Stephen would continue to be valid under her rule as well, thus establishing support for her cause.

### **The Influence of Second Wave Feminism**

The rise of second wave feminism is when the study of many notable female historical figures really began to expand, Empress Matilda included. In fact, in the chapter entitled “Women in Historiography” in *The Birth of Nobility: Constructing Aristocracy in England and France 900-1300*, author David Crouch goes as far as to say that while there were a few studies of noble women prior to the 1970s, that decade is when the “serious study of medieval women began”.<sup>41</sup> Crouch notes that it was also in the 1970s that there was a rise in a new genre of women’s history, the study of queenship.<sup>42</sup> This area of study looked at the exceptional ways in which royal women were able to gain power. These women had the unique opportunity to “exercise patronage” in both the church and royal household, and gain or maintain power as regents and dowagers.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, the study of queenship would later lead to an interest in the study of duchesses and countesses as well.

Due to this newfound interest in women in positions of power, the study of the Empress Matilda benefits from second wave feminism. Instead of only being noted in relationship to her father, husbands, and son, new studies also consider Matilda’s agency. During this period, Matilda’s role in the conflict with Stephen is explored more in depth, with specific attention paid not only to the military side of things, in which her half-brother was primarily involved, but also

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<sup>41</sup> David Crouch, “Women in Historiography,” *The Birth of Nobility: Constructing Aristocracy in England and France 900-1300* (Pearson Education Limited, 2005), 304.

<sup>42</sup> Crouch, “Women in Historiography,” 314.

<sup>43</sup> Crouch, “Women in Historiography,” 314.



with how Matilda aligned herself as the heir to the throne. The period following second wave feminism also sees more detailed study into Matilda's church devotion through examination of her charters and letters. Finally, this is the period during which the first biography devoted solely to Matilda was published.

This biography devoted entirely to Matilda was *Empress Matilda: Uncrowned Queen of England* by Nesta Pain, which was published in 1978. Not only was this the initial biography of Matilda, but it set the structure for future biographies on the subject, with many of those subsequent works taking similar layout schemes to those seen within this book. Pain's study of Matilda is the first to provide an extensive examination of Matilda's childhood, as previously this served as a footnote within her story. By discussing Matilda's childhood, Pain establishes the experiences which served Matilda well during her war with Stephen, and future leadership of the country. Pain notes that as empress, Matilda began to play a role in government at the age of only fifteen.<sup>44</sup> Matilda acted as a representative of her husband at this time, and even appears to have had some degree of influence over him.<sup>45</sup> By detailing these experiences, Pain creates a more nuanced image of Matilda, and thus establishes that her status as her father's heir was not the first political triumph in her life.

While Nesta Pain's biography is the first to establish the full extent of Matilda's agency within her own life, it still captures some of the developing trends first seen during the Victorian era. As previously seen in Strickland's book, there has been some confusion over the order of birth of Matilda and her bother, William. Pain adds to this confusion by proclaiming William to

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<sup>44</sup> Nesta Pain, *Empress Matilda: Uncrowned Queen of England* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1978), 15.

<sup>45</sup> Pain, *Empress Matilda: Uncrowned Queen of England*, 15.

be a twin to Matilda.<sup>46</sup> Thus, despite the exploration and increased knowledge surrounding some areas of Matilda's life, mistakes regarding the facts are still being made in others.

In 1986, Margaret Wade Labarge's book, *Women in Medieval Life*, was published. In the book, Labarge examines the everyday lives of medieval women, thus allowing for a more balanced examination of what the Middle Ages were like. An important consideration regarding Labarge's book is that it gives a well-rounded look into the women of this period, examining noble women, peasants, and women in religious roles.

However, despite the importance of *Women in Medieval Life* to the study of medieval women, it is not a significant example of scholarship regarding Matilda directly. She does appear in two separate chapters, the first being the chapter devoted to queens. In this chapter, Labarge notes that Matilda's conflict with Stephen is a prime example of what occurs when a king has no surviving male heirs.<sup>47</sup> Matilda also makes another brief appearance in this chapter as she is noted as being mother to Henry II.<sup>48</sup> The final mention of Matilda within this book comes in the next chapter which is devoted to noble women. Within this chapter, Matilda is merely mentioned as being involved in a civil war with Stephen, as she was not an overly popular choice as heir upon the death of Henry I.<sup>49</sup>

Following this period of increased scholarship regarding the general lives of women, the number of books anthology texts showcasing the importance of multiple female increased. One such example *The Warrior Queens: Boadicea's Chariot* by Antonia Fraser, in which there is a chapter devoted to the Empress Matilda. Within this chapter, Fraser outlines Matilda's life from

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<sup>46</sup> Pain, *Empress Matilda: Uncrowned Queen of England*, 5.

<sup>47</sup> Margaret Wade Labarge, *Women in Medieval Life* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1986), 44.

<sup>48</sup> Labarge, *Women in Medieval Life*, 51.

<sup>49</sup> Labarge, *Women in Medieval Life*, 78.

the time of her marriage to Henry V, Holy Roman Emperor, to her death in 1167. While Matilda's marriages and role as mother of a king are mentioned within the chapter, Fraser also elaborates on some of Matilda's actions during the civil war, such as her escape from Stephen's intended capture by way of dressing as a corpse.<sup>50</sup>

Fraser also explores some of the language which was used to describe Matilda's personality and actions, and how this language compared to the descriptions given of Queen Matilda, Stephen's wife. An important distinction noted by Fraser is the fact that Queen Matilda also fought for power, but her actions were undertaken with the understanding that she was not fighting for her own right to rule, but instead for her husband and son.<sup>51</sup> This distinction often led chroniclers to be more forgiving of the actions of Queen Matilda, even when chastising Empress Matilda for the same or very similar acts.<sup>52</sup>

Fraser ends her chapter on Matilda on a very thought-provoking, and yet familiar note. As Fraser notes, Matilda's epitaph says nothing of the accomplishments she made throughout her life, and instead returns to a portrayal of her as daughter, wife, and mother.<sup>53</sup> By making such an observation, Fraser brings awareness to the past histories of Matilda, showcasing the emphasis has been placed overwhelmingly on Matilda's relationship to men. Such a view of Matilda has been clearly established by continued use of the epitaph, "Great by birth, greater by marriage, greatest in her offspring".

While Walne did briefly examine Matilda's religious affiliations, "The Empress Matilda and Church Reform" by Marjorie Chibnall from the *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*

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<sup>50</sup> Antonia Fraser, *The Warrior Queens: Boadicea's Chariot* (London: Phoenix Press, 1988), 181.

<sup>51</sup> Fraser, *The Warrior Queens: Boadicea's Chariot*, 176.

<sup>52</sup> Fraser, *The Warrior Queens: Boadicea's Chariot*, 176.

<sup>53</sup> Fraser, *The Warrior Queens: Boadicea's Chariot*, 184.

is unique when it comes to the scholarship surrounding Matilda, as it is one of the few studies to place its focus on Matilda's connection to the church. Chibnall recognizes that this is unexplored territory as she notes that while contemporary English historians tend to explore the efforts of Matilda to gain the throne of England, chroniclers, and historians from other locales, such as Germany and Normandy, placed more emphasis on her piety and contributions to the Church.<sup>54</sup>

Matilda's role as a patron of monasteries and churches can be viewed from two perspectives, Chibnall believes, with some gifts being made from her private resources, while others were founded upon the power of her roles as regent or "lady of the English".<sup>55</sup> The donations made during the time when she was trying to claim the throne of England were used to showcase her power and control of lands, and to gather supporters to her cause.<sup>56</sup> Conversely, according to Chibnall, most of Matilda's personal donations were made later in her life, with the donations themselves being more representative of her personal beliefs.<sup>57</sup>

However, not all of the contributions that Matilda made to the church were physical and in the form of donations. Matilda also shared her opinions on the appointment of various church officials, and as such was an important political ally for reformers of the church.<sup>58</sup> For example, in one case, she was opposed to the election of Thomas Becket as Archbishop of Canterbury due to a perception of trouble that he may cause her son in the future.<sup>59</sup> As such, Matilda, through her work with the church, was able to influence to some degree the future of the institution.

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<sup>54</sup> Marjorie Chibnall, "The Empress Matilda and Church Reform," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 38 (1988): 107-8, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3678969>.

<sup>55</sup> Chibnall, "The Empress Matilda and Church Reform," 109.

<sup>56</sup> Chibnall, "The Empress Matilda and Church Reform," 109.

<sup>57</sup> Chibnall, "The Empress Matilda and Church Reform," 109.

<sup>58</sup> Chibnall, "The Empress Matilda and Church Reform," 127.

<sup>59</sup> Chibnall, "The Empress Matilda and Church Reform," 127.

Marjorie Chibnall later went on to publish a biography of Matilda in 1992, entitled: *The Empress Matilda: Queen Consort, Queen Mother, and Lady of the English*. Chibnall's biography of Matilda is divided into chapters based on the various stages within Matilda's life. While this book is a big step away from previous studies of Matilda, it does still showcase the prominent men in her life in a very focused manner. Three of the chapters within the book are titled: "Great by Birth", "Greater by Marriage", "Greatest in Offspring", which are direct quotations of the epitaph on her grave. However, while Matilda's grave gives no mention of any of her other accomplishments, this biography does devote numerous chapters to her involvement in the civil war and her title as "Lady of the English".

One area in which this book provides an updated look at Matilda's life, is by examining her role as "Lady of the English", and what such a title may have signified. There is no debate over the fact that Matilda was titled as such in 1141.<sup>60</sup> However, there is some debate over what the meaning behind the title was, and why she was not instead crowned as queen at this time. Chibnall suggests here that the title "Lady of the English" may have "been intended as a recognition of her right to the throne: an intermediate stage before Stephen could be persuaded to renounce his title and she could be crowned queen".<sup>61</sup> Therefore, if Chibnall's suggestion is correct, Matilda may have been very close to becoming the first queen of England, with a mere formality standing in the way.

Chibnall's book also expands upon her earlier article by devoting a chapter within the biography to Matilda's religious patronage. Therefore, Chibnall's book provides a glimpse into what else Matilda accomplished throughout her life, instead of implying that her importance ends

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<sup>60</sup> Marjorie Chibnall, *The Empress Matilda: Queen Consort, Queen Mother, and Lady of the English* (Oxford, UK; Cambridge, Massachusetts., USA: Basil Blackwell, 1992), 102.

<sup>61</sup> Chibnall, *The Empress Matilda: Queen Consort, Queen Mother, and Lady of the English*, 102.

with the crowning of Henry II. While other biographies of Matilda, such as that written by Nesta Pain, do touch on Matilda's later life, Chibnall expands on the topic and views it largely through the lens of religious devotion.

### **Twenty-First Century Studies**

The twenty-first century sees a continuation of the more detailed studies of Matilda which arose from the influence of second wave feminism. While this century has seen only one biography solely devoted to Matilda, it has given rise to anthologies exploring the contributions of various female rulers. While such anthologies heavily feature queens who did rule in their own right, such as Elizabeth I, instead Matilda's inclusion in such books establishes the importance of what she did accomplish throughout the civil war and in her religious patronage, while also bringing her story to more people.

Fiona Harris Stoertz's article: "Young Women in France and England, 1050-1300", published in *Journal of Women's History* in 2001, continues with the study of the influence and power which could be gained by elite women through the act of marriage. A similar exploration of the role that marriage and motherhood had on medieval women can be seen in Marjorie Chibnall's biography of Matilda, however, Stoertz's article instead focuses on the role that marriage played not only in the life of Matilda, but also those of other medieval women. Stoertz starts the article by explaining that the life stages at this time in history, for these women, were largely impacted by marriage.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Fiona Harris Stoertz, "Young Women in France and England, 1050-1300," *Journal of Women's History* 12, no. 4 (2001): 22.

Marriage plans would have had influence over a noble girl's early education, residence, and treatment.<sup>63</sup> These girls were typically married at the age of 12, or sometimes even younger, and the ceremony of marriage functioned as a symbolic rite of passage into adulthood.<sup>64</sup> However, Stoertz also notes that society at the time recognized the "youth and inexperience of new brides" and as such full adulthood was often postponed for several years and that the women were slowly introduced to sexual and social duties.<sup>65</sup> Full adulthood was reached by individuals at differing ages, based on their childhood education, the position of their husbands within society, and the initiation of regular sexual activity.<sup>66</sup> While many girls remained at their parents' household until marriage, some were sent to the households of their future husbands to be educated.<sup>67</sup> This was most common in situations where the girls would later become queens, so that they could be educated in the culture and language of their new homes, by the people native to these locales.<sup>68</sup>

This article by Stoertz is important in the study of the Empress Matilda, as it outlines many of the influences which marriage had on her life. Matilda was one such young girl from an elite family who was sent to be raised in the household of her future husband.<sup>69</sup> While being raised as the future empress, all of Matilda's English attendants were sent back to England upon her arrival in Germany, to limit the English influence in her upbringing.<sup>70</sup> Also, much like the scenario presented in Stoertz's article, Matilda became betrothed to Emperor Henry V at the age

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<sup>63</sup> Stoertz, "Young Women in France and England," 22.

<sup>64</sup> Stoertz, "Young Women in France and England," 22.

<sup>65</sup> Stoertz, "Young Women in France and England," 22-3.

<sup>66</sup> Stoertz, "Young Women in France and England," 23.

<sup>67</sup> Stoertz, "Young Women in France and England," 24.

<sup>68</sup> Stoertz, "Young Women in France and England," 25.

<sup>69</sup> Stoertz, "Young Women in France and England," 25.

<sup>70</sup> Stoertz, "Young Women in France and England," 25.

of 7, with the actual marriage ceremony likely being performed shortly before Matilda turned 12.<sup>71</sup>

Charles Beem is the author of a book entitled: *The Lioness Roared: The Problems of Female Rule in English History*. While *The Lioness Roared* examines four examples of females and their attempts (in three cases, successfully) to rule England, the focus of the first chapter is on Matilda. Beem starts the book by examining the power which was afforded to women in both the pre- and post-Conquest eras. He pays special attention to the power which female queens of the time held. Of course, it is important to note that by looking at female queens at this time, he was looking at women who held their power in relation to their husbands or sons. While these women held power through their ability to influence and give religious donations, in some cases they were also able to act as regents for underage sons or their husbands when they were away.<sup>72</sup> Therefore, Beem notes, that prior to Matilda, no woman had tried to reign over England based upon their own direct claim to being sole ruler.<sup>73</sup>

In the end, Beem concludes, perhaps conservatively, that much of the power afforded to Matilda came through her relationship to men.<sup>74</sup> She was heir to the throne as the child of a king, empress through her first marriage, and finally, she died the mother of a king.<sup>75</sup> This conclusion lines up directly with the way she was portrayed by her contemporaries, as well as the authors writing during the Victorian era who always made mention of the men to whom she was related.

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<sup>71</sup> Stoertz, "Young Women in France and England," 25.

<sup>72</sup> Charles Beem, *The Lioness Roared: The Problems of Female Rule in English History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 2.

<sup>73</sup> Beem, *The Lioness Roared*, 25.

<sup>74</sup> Beem, *The Lioness Roared*, 61.

<sup>75</sup> Beem, *The Lioness Roared*, 61.



While the majority of the chapter surrounding Matilda discusses her life and fight for the throne, Beem also makes note within his work of the types of primary sources which are used in the study of the Empress Matilda. As he establishes, many of the primary sources which pertain to Matilda were written by men.<sup>76</sup> The exception to this being the letters of donations which were issued by Matilda. Otherwise, the chroniclers of the time were all men. While learning was typically reserved for men at this time, Beem notes that women who resided in convents were able to partake in intellectual endeavors such as reading and writing.<sup>77</sup> Despite this however, no female created accounts of Matilda from this time exist.<sup>78</sup>

Ann Lyon's article, "The Place of Women in European Royal Succession in the Middle Ages", which was published in *Liverpool Law Review*, looks not only at the actions of Matilda and other royal women during the Middle Ages, but also examines the context under which they were able to make claims to power. Lyon starts out the article by explaining that at the start of the Middle Ages, there was no precedent for primogeniture, with throne-worthy males competing for the throne in the past.<sup>79</sup> Henry I wanted the throne of England to pass through his family line, but when his only legitimate son died, he was left with few options.<sup>80</sup> Lyon notes that primary sources stress that Henry I did not make his decision to proclaim Matilda his heir lightly, and that he consulted with others on the matter.<sup>81</sup> However, Lyon notes that there is also no evidence of any other alternatives to Matilda having been considered by Henry I.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Beem, *The Lioness Roared*, 27.

<sup>77</sup> Beem, *The Lioness Roared*, 27.

<sup>78</sup> Beem, *The Lioness Roared*, 27.

<sup>79</sup> Ann Lyon, "The Place of Women in European Royal Succession in the Middle Ages," *Liverpool Law Review* 27, no. 3 (2006): 363.

<sup>80</sup> Lyon, "The Place of Women in European Royal Succession in the Middle Ages," 367.

<sup>81</sup> Lyon, "The Place of Women in European Royal Succession in the Middle Ages," 367.

<sup>82</sup> Lyon, "The Place of Women in European Royal Succession in the Middle Ages," 367.

The fact that Henry I potentially did not consider any other heirs is interesting as not only was Matilda a woman, but at the time she was proclaimed heir, she was an unmarried widow. Lyon notes that it was only after she was named heir that her father arranged a second marriage for her.<sup>83</sup> In fact, Lyon suggests that Henry may not have even been planning that the throne would be passed onto a grandson through Matilda, as she had failed to produce children during her first marriage.<sup>84</sup> The fact that no children were produced within Matilda's first marriage is all the more notable as Matilda was quite young during the course of this marriage, and through much of it she was in her prime childbearing years. Lyon further notes that other secondary source writers have even questioned if Henry planned on Matilda ruling jointly with a husband.<sup>85</sup>

*She-Wolves: The Women Who Ruled England Before Elizabeth* by Helen Castor is another anthology telling the stories of various women who exerted power and agency in their own right within Medieval England. Despite the feminist views prevalent to the period in which this book is being published, 2011, the entire first chapter surrounding Matilda is devoted exclusively to her male relations, explaining the line of intended succession favouring her brother, as well as the death of her first husband which led to her returning to England. In fact, Matilda is shown to be little more than a pawn within this chapter, as her father uses her husband's death to his benefit. Castor notes that: "Henry lost no time in taking advantage of Matilda's abrupt liberation from her imperial duties".<sup>86</sup> This apparent use of Matilda for his

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<sup>83</sup> Lyon, "The Place of Women in European Royal Succession in the Middle Ages," 368.

<sup>84</sup> Lyon, "The Place of Women in European Royal Succession in the Middle Ages," 368.

<sup>85</sup> Lyon, "The Place of Women in European Royal Succession in the Middle Ages," 368.

<sup>86</sup> Helen Castor, *She-Wolves: The Women Who Ruled England Before Elizabeth* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2011), 49.

benefit then continues with his selection of her second husband, and Castor spares not a single sentence for Matilda's own actions during this time.<sup>87</sup>

In the second chapter of Matilda's story, Castor finally begins to establish who Matilda was, as more than a mere pawn. The second and third chapter both work to establish Matilda's role as an empress, as well as to outline her fight for the throne of England. Thus, in these chapter Castor returns to the post-feminism trend of exploring the power and influence held by royal women.

The final chapter devoted to Matilda within Castor's book is entitled: "Greatest in Her Offspring", again circling back to her epitaph.<sup>88</sup> While this chapter does by nature return to the discussion surrounding influential men in her life, in this case her son, this is done while also presenting "her influence at work in her son's government".<sup>89</sup> Castor notes that Henry II "recognized his mother's acumen and the wisdom of listening to her words of caution".<sup>90</sup> Therefore, while Castor may at times explore previous trends of study with regard to Matilda's relationships to powerful men, she does so while also noting the areas in which Matilda did hold influence.

Kathleen Thompson's article "Reconsidering the Empress Matilda's Act for Andwell" was published in 2011 in *Historical Research: The Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*. Within this article, Thompson further explores Matilda's contributions to the church, and her double charters, such as the one seen in the article by Peter Walne. As touched on by Walne, this charter sees Matilda and her son Henry, jointly attempt to establish a house of Austin

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<sup>87</sup> Castor, *She-Wolves: The Women Who Ruled England Before Elizabeth*, 49.

<sup>88</sup> Castor, *She-Wolves: The Women Who Ruled England Before Elizabeth*, 100.

<sup>89</sup> Castor, *She-Wolves: The Women Who Ruled England Before Elizabeth*, 123.

<sup>90</sup> Castor, *She-Wolves: The Women Who Ruled England Before Elizabeth*, 123.

canons at the castle of Wallingford.<sup>91</sup> The charter, the Act for Andwell, has been dated to the reign of King Henry I by Marjorie Chibnall and the editors of the English translation of the *Gesta Stephani*, although there remains some debate on this matter, with some suggesting it is from a later date.<sup>92</sup>

This act is interesting as it is an example of the Empress Matilda making a confirmation of a grant previously made by Stephen. While it appears as if the act is being made by Matilda herself, with no other motivation, a further confirmation made by Archbishop Theobald of Canterbury in the early 1150s states that it is a confirmation made of a grant by Stephen.<sup>93</sup> Thompson's work with this charter is important as not only does it showcase Matilda's religious contributions, as have been explored by a few other scholars, but it also showcases some of Matilda's efforts taken during the civil war. By issuing charters during the war, even if they were merely to confirm gifts already made by Stephen, Matilda was showcasing her power to give such gifts. Furthermore, by confirming Stephen's gift, she would draw more people to support her by assuring them that such support would not lead to the loss of grants. While Matilda may not have been able to partake directly in the military efforts in the war, this charter showcases that she was indeed contributing and fighting for her right to reign, not merely waiting for others to fight for her.

The most recent scholarship regarding Matilda is the 2019 biography entitled: *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior* by Catherine Hanley. This biography builds on the work of previous biographies such as those by Marjorie Chibnall, and Nesta Pain, while also further developing

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<sup>91</sup> Walne, "A 'Double Charter' of the Empress Matilda and Henry," 649.

<sup>92</sup> Kathleen Thompson, "Reconsidering the Empress Matilda's Act for Andwell," *Historical Research: The Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 84, no. 224 (2011): 374.

<sup>93</sup> Thompson, "Reconsidering the Empress Matilda's Act for Andwell," 376.

the story of the life of Matilda. One significant contribution made to the study of Matilda by this book is the fact that it delves more deeply into the childhood of Matilda, than has been previously seen.

While Pain and Chibnall both briefly touched on Matilda's upbringing in Germany, Hanley expands on this with an in depth look at Matilda's upbringing and influence at court during the time in which she was empress. By exploring Matilda's childhood in a more in-depth manner, Hanley can portray Matilda as a fully formed individual, who has been shaped by her many experiences, instead of as someone whose life was a mere footnote prior to being named as heir to the throne of England.

Castor explores the many subjects in which Matilda would have received an education in upon her arrival in Germany. During her childhood at the court, Matilda learned two languages; Latin for written communication, and German for speaking at the court.<sup>94</sup> She also would have studied grammar, and the Empire's politics.<sup>95</sup> Castor notes that "the implication is clearly that Henry wanted an empress who would be a helpmeet in his day-to-day life".<sup>96</sup> In fact, Matilda's role within the court was so well received that she became known as "the good Matilda".<sup>97</sup>

By understanding Matilda's early life and education, a new understanding is brought to her fight for the throne. Not only was Matilda an educated woman who fully understood the complexities of the war with Stephen, but she was used to holding some degree of power in her first husband's court. Her experience with power would have helped her in her role as "Lady of the English", and potentially allowed her to organize her claim and fight as well as she did.

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<sup>94</sup> Catherine Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 22.

<sup>95</sup> Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior*, 22.

<sup>96</sup> Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior*, 22.

<sup>97</sup> Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior*, 24.

## **Conclusion**

The historiography surrounding Empress Matilda has certainly come in ebbs and flows in the centuries since Matilda was alive. As a politically important woman throughout all stages of her life, Matilda is frequently reduced to being remembered for her claim to the throne of England, as well as for the resulting civil war with Stephen. While Matilda's contemporaries seemed to favour critiquing her actions in the war, the Victorian era gave rise to a slightly more well-rounded look at Matilda, as she was now being examined throughout the various stages of her life, and how each of those stages can be seen as focusing around an important male family member. However, this "great man" view continued to disserve Matilda's legacy, as it placed increased emphasis on how her work served to bolster the fame of her father, husbands, and son.

Second-wave feminism gave rise to a new method of viewing Matilda's actions, as actions completed by a woman, for that woman's own benefit. However, focus is once again placed on the seemingly all important goal of being crowned the ruler of England, diminishing not only the impact she had as Empress of the Holy Roman Empire, but also that of the accomplishments she made during the reign of her son, Henry II. Yes, Matilda was the daughter of a king, the wife of an emperor and a count, and the mother of a king. However, she was also a survivor.

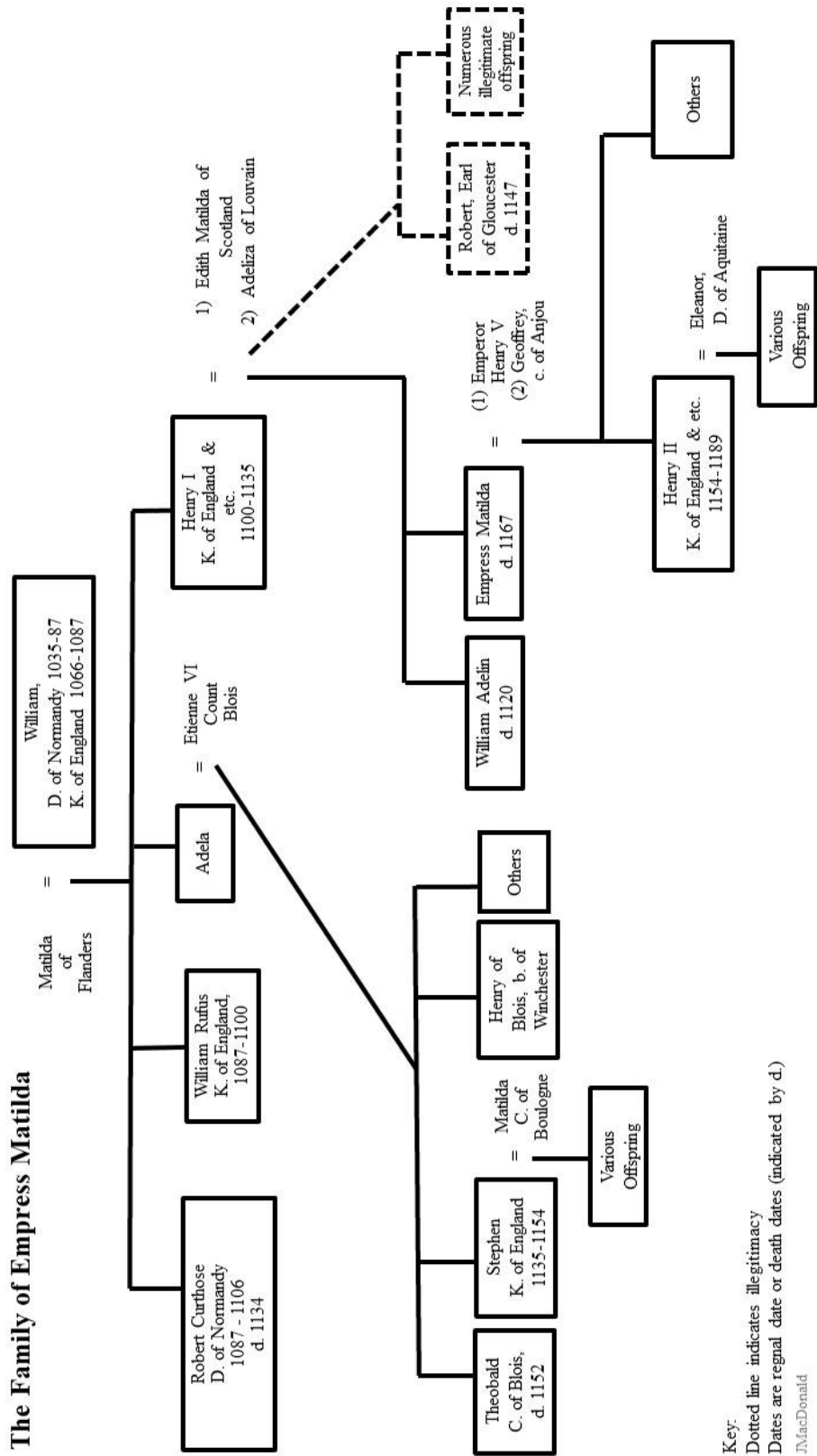
The course of Matilda's life changed numerous times. However, in each situation, she adapted to the changing circumstances, and sought to continue to prove her importance on the European stage. While some of her positions held in life did not offer the same level of prestige as others, she continued to stay relevant throughout. Matilda did not fade into obscurity as each

phase of her life ended, instead she changed her goals and continued to showcase her abilities not only as a woman, but as an ambitious power player in numerous regions of Europe.





Figure 1-The Family of Empress Matilda Family Tree





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