

**The Agency and Social Capital of English Medieval Noblewomen during the
Twelfth to Fifteenth Centuries**

by

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ABSTRACT

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Medieval noblewomen did not live waiting to be rescued. There is evidence that they acted with agency and autonomy to determine whether or not to marry, and occupied the leadership roles of estate manager, and military quartermaster. This exploration of noblewomen, in England and Wales during the twelfth to fifteenth centuries, focuses on their ability to exercise agency and employ social capital undertaking leadership roles to advance themselves and their heirs in politically turbulent times. Letters, household records, and government documents establish that medieval noblewomen performed roles conventionally interpreted to be masculine. Medieval noblewomen understood the importance of personal support networks, in addition to being versed in legal and financial issues. Their life experiences and training were critical to safeguarding their personal and economic security and that of their families. This topic is as relevant today as when noblewomen of the Middle Ages held important leadership roles.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The feminist movement of the 1970s argued for equality of the sexes, equal pay for equal work, and a recognition of the important roles of women throughout history. Feminists demonstrated for the recognition of the legal rights of women to extend past the simple right to vote. This movement clamoured for the inclusion of women in leading roles in politics, business, and the military. Since the French Revolution, various authors have supported women's rights. Olympe de Gouges wrote *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne* ("Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the [Female] Citizen") in 1791, asserting women's right to stand alongside men in the revolutionary cry of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Mary Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792. A year later Olympe de Gouges was guillotined for expressing opinions similar to those of Mary Wollstonecraft. Canadian women began to campaign for voting rights in the mid-1800s. They achieved partial success during World War I, when close female relatives of soldiers received the right to vote. Women in Canada only achieved complete suffrage in 1948.

Recent research into professional occupations observed that women's access to white-collar positions remains restricted. Certain fields have endured as male-dominated from the 1900s onwards.¹ Popular media reports generally confine women who held positions of leadership and acted with agency to the modern and post-modern periods. This correlates with the notion that women in earlier historical periods did not occupy traditional

¹ Kathryn Haynes, "Accounting as Gendering and Gendered: A Review of 25 Years of Critical Accounting Research on Gender," *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, 2016, 5.

male roles in the areas of business or the military and they did not act with any degree of agency in the determination of their lives. In actual fact, the movement for gender equality is one which spans centuries and that has received a significant amount of study.

Contrary to outdated notions that medieval noblewomen lived waiting to be rescued, there is evidence that they acted with agency to determine whether, or not to marry, and they occupied the roles of an estate manager, and military quartermaster. The examination of letters, wills, household accounts, chronicles, government records, and charters is valuable to establish whether medieval noblewomen were unusual in their actions when they performed roles conventionally interpreted to be within the domain of men. The knowledge about how noblewomen of the high Middle Ages exercised agency and employed social capital to function in leadership roles can inform women of the twenty-first-century. The importance of developing and maintaining interpersonal support networks, as well as understanding legal and financial issues, remains as relevant today as it did to the noblewomen in medieval England.

To examine the actions of English noblewomen it is necessary to understand the social, political, and cultural contexts that shaped their lives in the Marches of Wales and Scotland. From William the Conqueror in the eleventh century until the decline of feudalism in the mid-fourteenth, the English nobility held its land under feudal tenure from the king.² The struggles of the nobility coincided with the manoeuvres and negotiations that occurred while families endeavoured to increase their rights. The right to hold land was commensurate with the ability to collect rents and fees from the land. Noble families

² Hans Delbruck, *The History of the Art of War, Volume III, Medieval Warfare*, trans. Walter J. Renfro (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 167.

who expanded the number and quality of the manors and estates that they held, could reasonably expect their revenues to grow. Indeed, any expansion on the part of one noble family came at the expense of another because land remained a limited resource and was an important source of wealth.

A noble's wealth was adversely impacted when the king levied taxes to raise armies to supplement the required military service.³ A vassal owed a certain number of days of military service to the lord because tenure was associated with the garrisoning and rule of their demesne lands. This had economic, social, and political ramifications.⁴ Nobles from the twelfth century onwards expected that the crown would consider their views in matters of state, and that they would receive lands and titles commensurate with their status and service.⁵

Rank and social structures were extremely important. Gendered roles placed constraints on the degree of agency with which noblewomen could act. These constraints were in turn dependant on ranking in society. Social rank overrode gender constraints. A noblewoman's authority did not extend over her husband, but she was superior to those men below her on the social scale. An individual's place in society governed the scope of their ability to act decisively and was therefore important to their economic and personal well-being.

The competition among the English nobility to increase its holdings occurred as much or more through the courts and the law as on the battlefield. During the twelfth

³ Ibid.

⁴ Charlotte A. Newman, *The Anglo-Norman Nobility in the Reign of Henry I* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), 2.

⁵ Ibid., 18.

century, court often meant the judgement of the king.⁶ Control of most aspects of daily life, including, marriage, currency, hunting rights, farming, and markets came from the highest level. Henry I's reign (1100 to 1135) was one of emerging laws and fledging bureaucracies.⁷ Legislation regulated the right to take wood from the forest, or where cattle could graze, as well as the right to hunt. Various courts, from the *curia regis* or court of the king to the shire-court at the local level, enforced the charters issued to establish rights and property ownership. The monarch also issued coinage and grants to hold markets and fairs.⁸ The monarchs who succeeded Henry II added to the slate of laws in their progress in establishing a constitutional monarchy.

Before the thirteenth century, medieval noblewomen had few avenues of legal recourse to defend their rights to their dower and marriage portion. Michael M. Sheehan put it succinctly noting, "the lot of the widow of the upper classes was a rather hard one."⁹ The loss of land on the continent in 1214, during John's reign, precipitated a decline in wealth for many of his nobility. The king attempted to exact increasing amounts of money from his nobles to carry on with his military campaigns. This prompted high-ranking members of nobility, especially those whose losses were the greatest, to band together to force upon the king the Great Charter (1215). It was an important document that served to elevate a wealthy widow's agency. Specific clauses were included that promised better

⁶ Paul Dalton and Graeme J. White, eds., *King Stephen's Reign (1135-1154)* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: The Boydell Press, 2008), 184.

⁷ H.A. Cronne and R.H.C. Davis, eds., *Regesta Regum Anglo-Normannorum, 1066-1154*, vol. IV Facimiles of Original Charters and Writs of King Stephen, The Empress Matilda and Dukes Geoffrey and Henry 1135–1154 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 1.

⁸ Charles Johnson and Cronne, eds., *Regesta Regum Anglo-Normannorum, 1066-1154*, vol. Volume II Regesta Henrici Primi 1100-1135 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), xviii–xxi.

⁹ Michael M. Sheehan, "The Influence of Canon Law on the Property Rights of Married Women in England," in *Marriage, Family, and Law in Medieval Europe* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 23–24.

economic and personal security for widows. The Great Charter proved to be an important source of legal support for a widow's status and provided elite medieval women with the ability to exercise agency to secure their rights to certain classifications of property, in particular, their dower.

Political intrigue and violent upheavals filled the lives of English noblewomen in the Marches of Wales and Scotland. Interpersonal connections could be either a boon or a hindrance depending on the success or failure of a woman's family and relationships. Temporal, cultural, and geographic constraints were external factors that influenced a noblewoman's education and experience. The extrinsic circumstances in which medieval noblewomen found themselves factored into the determination of the roles they performed. Medieval noblewomen exercised agency and assumed leadership roles because of the absence of a male alternative.

This exploration of noblewomen in the Marcher areas of the British Isles during the twelfth to fifteenth centuries, reveals their ability to exercise agency and employ social capital to undertake apparently masculine roles. This analysis focuses on medieval noblewomen who were below the level of queen and whose primary residence was in England or Wales.

The scattered nature of the sources from the high Middle Ages requires that a variety of types of sources be examined about different noblewomen to pull together a composite picture of the situation based on the available documents. To do this a prosopographical approach is useful. Prosopography, a subgenre of historical writing, is a significant component of the methodology employed here because it draws together the common elements of the surviving fragments of evidence about the English medieval

noblewomen, who are my subjects. Prosopography examines the shared experiences of a similar category of individuals to reach conclusions and make interpretations for the group.¹⁰ RaGena C. DeAragon utilized a prosopographical approach to re-examine the life of Eleanor of Aquitaine.¹¹ Although much of the land transactions related to this field have disappeared from individual family records, monasteries often recorded copies of these transactions in bound volumes called cartularies many of which have survived.¹² Linda Mitchell also uses prosopography to study English noblewomen, noting “the fault lies in the imperfections of the archives ...[and] the serendipitous preservation of documents.”¹³ Mitchell also notes that the daunting size of the British archives necessitates that a researcher target specific functions rather than attempt to trace a biography for the person.¹⁴ The primary sources are incomplete and therefore a wide number and variety of documents must be utilized in order to reach an understanding of the person and her life.

The methodology for this study entailed close reading of primary sources including letters, charters, and other public records. Together these allow a picture of medieval noblewomen to emerge. These primary sources outline the actions of women who actively furthered their family’s financial interests. Many of these sources were written by men, however, they do support the argument that medieval English noblewomen were able to

¹⁰ Simon Gunn and Lucy Faire, eds., *Research Methods for History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 84.

¹¹ RaGena DeAragon, “Do We Know What We Think We Know? Making Assumptions about Eleanor of Aquitaine,” *Medieval Feminist Forum* 37, no. 1 (2004): 16.

¹² Katherine L. French, “Medieval Women’s History: Sources and Issues,” in *Understanding Medieval Primary Sources* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 199.

¹³ Linda Mitchell, *Portraits of Medieval Women, Family, Marriage and Politics in England 1225-1350* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 10.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

exercise agency to advance their personal and economic well-being, and that of their families and allies.

This prosopographical approach has been informed by the sociological notion of social capital and the theories of Pierre Bourdieu about *habitus*, *field*, and social capital. *Habitus* is characterized by a set of precepts that an individual internalizes because of their lived experiences and upon which they can draw the situation arises. Bourdieu argues that an individual's responses become outwardly automatic, and the individual reacts without appearing to be directed in their responses.¹⁵ Bourdieu's theoretical concept of *field* is analogous to "an area of land, a battle field, and a field of knowledge... [or even] the field on which a game of football is played."¹⁶ The *field* upon which the noblewomen fulfilled their roles would therefore be the cumulative areas in which they lived; their estates, manors, and the geographic regions surrounding them. The notion of social capital is critical to understand noblewomen and their activities. Bourdieu defines social capital as a derivative of "cultural and social resources."¹⁷ Bourdieu's sociological equation "[*habitus*](*capital*) + field = practice" brings these three elements together into a cohesive theory.¹⁸ This illustrates the importance of the intersection of these concepts for the study of medieval noblewomen and their ability to exercise agency and employ their own social capital.

This examination of English medieval noblewomen's exercise of agency and their ability to employ social capital, for their own benefit and that of their families, is organized

¹⁵ Michael Grenfell, *Pierre Bourdieu, Key Concepts*, Second Edition (Durham: Acumen Publishing Limited, 2012), 49–51.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

into three sections. The first, *Uxor vel vidua* (Wife or Widow), examines how noblewomen expended social capital by reason of their social status. These women were able to exercise agency and to enjoy a degree of autonomy in decisions such as whether as widows to remarry. Expanding upon that analysis is an exploration of medieval noblewomen who served as estate managers, a traditionally masculine role, but one women assumed because of the absence of a male alternative. A medieval noblewoman's ability to utilize her skill as an estate manager, to support the military efforts of the king, allies, or family is the subject of the third section. This thesis demonstrates that medieval English noblewomen made important life choices and exercised agency and employed social capital in the course of performing male-dominated activities.

Chapter two discusses the historiography and how historical research about medieval noblewomen has changed over time. Indeed, medieval women's history has advanced from little more than a footnote to the present rich field that continues to challenge assumptions that have placed women in the margins of history. In researching the agency and social capital of English medieval noblewomen in the twelfth through fourteenth centuries this study builds upon the work of historians such as Linda Mitchell, Judith Bennett, among others, who are "challenging old interpretations and providing new ways of seeing familiar things."¹⁹

¹⁹ Judith M. Bennett, "Medievalism and Feminism," *Speculum* 68, no. 2 (April 1993): 326.

Chapter 2: Historiography

The Middle Ages, from its earliest point in the fifth century to its end in the sixteenth century, is the period historians categorize as separating the Classical period and the Renaissance. The period is commonly understood to embrace feudalism, chivalry, knights on horseback, monks in monasteries, castles and the exploits of conquering kings. A few damsels in distress were occasionally included in histories written prior to the pre-second wave feminist movement.²⁰ The overarching feature of earlier historical research was that the Middle Ages was male-centred. Until the 1970s and 1980s, most historical interpretations assumed medieval women were subordinate to men in all facets of life.

In 1948, when Sir Francis Hill was writing his conventional political history of medieval Lincoln, gender issues, social hierarchies, and social structures were not his horizon. Nicholaa de la Haye was constable of the castle for over thirty-seven years and held the castle during a siege although Hill devotes few pages to this noblewoman and fails to provide any analysis of her life.²¹ Hill's work is representative of much history about women prior to the second wave feminist movement. Exceptions of course existed. Eileen Power's work during the mid-1900s, including her lectures on the lives of medieval women published posthumously, examines all facets of life for both elite and common women during the Middle Ages.²²

²⁰ Maurice Keen, *A History of Medieval Europe* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), 77,81,87. Heloise is afforded one sentence in this text in regard to her relationship with Abelard and she is the only woman mentioned by name. A scan of the index reveals one page devoted to women in literature and it is a passing reference. The civil war between Stephen and Matilda is referred to with seven words: "the civil wars between Stephen and Matilda."

²¹ Francis Hill, *Medieval Lincoln* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 88–89.

²² Eileen Power, *Medieval Women* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1924).

To understand the progress of scholarly research relating to medieval noblewomen in England and Wales it is necessary to reflect on the determinants of this change. Prior to the 1970s, there were few analyses of medieval women. Those that did exist conformed to the Victorian ideology that women were subordinate to men and unfit to wield power.²³ During the 1950s and 1960s, prior to the second wave feminist movement, certain social assumptions influenced historical writing. It is likely that historians then presupposed that women of all earlier periods lived under patriarchal control given the prevalent ideology.

Various factors influence historians in their choice of topic and the questions they ask of their sources. The feminist and social movements of the mid to late twentieth century has provided much, if not all, of the impetus for the creation of the field of women's history and the sub-set of that, gender history. Arguably, women's history is itself a sub-set of social history, which was still a relatively new field in the early 1960s. According to H. J. Perkin in a 1962 collection of essays on historiography, women's history "can scarcely be said to exist."²⁴ The second wave feminist movement of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s fostered the development of women's history as a historical genre.²⁵ The demographic of the "baby boom" questioned many traditional ideologies of the mid-twentieth century and cultivated the growth of women's history.²⁶ Women's history rose in company with other histories, then considered radical, political movements including the

²³ Joan Kelly, "Early Feminist Theory and the 'Querelle Des Femmes', 1400-1789," *Signs* 8, no. 1 (Autumn 1982): 4–28.; Bennett, "Medievalism and Feminism."

²⁴ H.P.R. Finberg, ed., *Approaches to History, A Symposium* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), 51.

²⁵ Peter Burke, ed., *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 43.; Judith M. Bennett, *History Matters, Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 1.

²⁶ Michael Novak, "Remembering 1968," *National Review*, May 5, 2008, 50–54.; Bennett, *History Matters, Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism*, 1.

civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, and the women's liberation movement. The histories written in this period are recuperative histories also referred to as a 'finding' of the women in the historical record.²⁷

In 1987, Susan Mosher Stuard proposed that the evolution of history into a scientific field should shoulder some of the responsibility for the suppression of women's history. Rankean historians, applying new methodologies, may have found women's experiences in the past to be a poor fit with "trac[ing] the milestones of human progress" and if it they did not fit they were not included.²⁸ Stuard agreed that the second wave of feminism, in the twentieth century, had an impact on writing women's history, and she suggested that the lives of medieval women even offered models feminists could utilize to promote their own modern agendas.²⁹

This survey will use a thematic approach to discuss the historiography of medieval noblewomen in England and Wales. Historians who have written historical analyses about medieval noblewomen have used various interpretative approaches. Scholars of medieval noblewomen have utilized the methodologies of recuperative history, biography, and prosopography, as well as the application of linguistics, periodization, and gender analyses. The earliest inquiries into medieval women's history used recuperative history, a type of biographical approach that entailed returning to the primary sources to search for references to women that had been overlooked. These studies were followed by biographies and prosopographical approaches.

²⁷ Gunn and Faire, *Research Methods for History*, 89.

²⁸ Susan Mosher Stuard, ed., *Women in Medieval History & Historiography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), ix.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, xiv.

The earliest biographies were those of women who had succeeded against harsh conditions, that were intended to be read as role models, or as Natalie Zemon Davis called them, “women worthies.”³⁰ The women’s movement asked where were the women in history thus prompting new scholarship on the theme of women’s history.³¹ A collective work on medieval women published in honour of Rosalind T. Hill, contains an essay written by Bernard Hamilton. Hamilton’s work examines the life of Melisende, queen of Jerusalem during the period of the crusader wars from 1100 to 1190.³² Melisende is classed as a “curious case” because “mastery in the Latin kingdom was not woman’s work” according to the author of the introduction.³³ Pauline Stafford’s essay, “Sons and Mothers: Family Politics in the Early Middle Ages,” took a very conservative approach because it argued from an essentialist viewpoint that a medieval queen’s primary importance was to produce a male heir.³⁴

Nesta Pain’s monograph of the Empress Matilda is a traditional biography that provides little gender analysis or in-depth discussion of the methods Matilda used to circumvent a contemporary ideology that sought to portray her as unfit for command. Pain’s inclusion of a vignette imagining a scene of “pillow-talk,” in which Pain has Adela “in the marriage bed, in the midst of an embrace ...whisper with her husband,” advanced no theories of historical significance but rather kept medieval noblewomen frozen in the

³⁰ Bennett, *History Matters, Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism*, 5.; Natalie Zemon Davis, “‘Women’s History’ in Transition: The European Case,” *Feminist Studies* 3, no. 3/4 (Spring-Summer 1976): 83.

³¹ Barbara J. Harris, “Aristocratic and Gentry Women, 1460-1640,” *History Compass*, no. 4/4 (2006): 670.

³² Derek Baker, ed., *Medieval Women* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1978), 4, 143–74.

³³ Derek Baker, ed., *Medieval Women* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1978), 4.

³⁴ Baker, *Medieval Women*, 90.

category of popular myth with fictional versions of King Arthur.³⁵ The biographical analyses of medieval noblewomen continued to expand because the approaches to the history of medieval noblewomen changed and new questions were asked of the primary sources.

Frances A. Underhill, Linda Mitchell, and Jennifer Ward wrote biographies that favoured a prosopographical approach. Underhill's study of Elizabeth de Burgh, published in 1999, provides an in-depth analysis of the lengthy widowhood of an English noblewoman. This biographical account of the Lady of Clare is based on sources such as wills, Calendar Rolls, and household accounts. Underhill returned to the primary sources to uncover details that prompted her to conclude Elizabeth did not allow her sex to limit her ambitions. Linda Mitchell also took a prosopographical approach to analyze the lives of medieval noblewomen in England. She produced a series of case studies of noblewomen from 1225 to 1350. Mitchell identified constructed social norms and applied them to chancery records, plea rolls, deeds, charters, letters, and exchequer documents to uncover the personality traits of individual women. She argues that women may be absent from chronicles that depict battles because the cultural norms of the period trained chroniclers to focus on the male protagonists who were likely their patrons.³⁶ Mitchell proposed that these lordly women might form a possible third gender when the evidence suggests a situation in which the woman was in charge.³⁷

³⁵ Nesta Pain, *Empress Matilda, Uncrowned Queen of England* (London, UK: Butler & Tanner Ltd., 1978), 21.

³⁶ Mitchell, *Portraits of Medieval Women, Family, Marriage and Politics in England 1225-1350*, 4.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 134–35.

Fitting with other works that distinguish medieval noblewomen as lords, a recent biography of Eleanor de Montfort (2012) by Louise J. Wilkinson builds on earlier studies and utilizes Eleanor's household rolls to support an examination of her political role through links to family and friends.³⁸ In addition to the household accounts, Wilkinson consulted chronicles, letters, charters, public records, and the Montfort family archives to explore the question of a medieval woman's political agency.³⁹

Jennifer Ward followed a prosopographical approach in two volumes that add to the scholarship about the importance of medieval women and widowhood. The first centres on the significance of the role of noblewomen in English society through the examination of wills and household accounts.⁴⁰ The second examines medieval women across various geographical regions and social structures. Ward maintains a conservative position that public power resided with men. She tempers this position with the caveat that, as it pertained to rank, noblewomen could exercise authority if it derived from their family's position of power.⁴¹ Ward's account agrees with other historians in this survey, that noble widows "were a power to be reckoned with."⁴² Ward relies on the household accounts of Elizabeth de Burgh in addition to other sources, including legal proceedings and tax records, to establish a complete portrait of medieval women's lives.⁴³ Ward's study is a textbook and consequently does not include the detailed arguments and supporting

³⁸ Louise J. Wilkinson, *Eleanor de Montfort* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2012), xii.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, xiii.

⁴⁰ Jennifer Ward, *English Noblewomen in the Later Middle Ages* (London: Longman Group UK Limited, 1992), 11.

⁴¹ Jennifer Ward, *Women in Medieval Europe: 1200-1500* (London, England: Pearson Education Limited, 2002), 110–11.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 119.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 10,120.

references that other scholarly analyses normally include. Nevertheless, both volumes contribute to our understanding of medieval noblewomen.

Joan Kelly and Judith Bennett added to the complexity of the study of medieval women's history when they questioned the politics of periodization in history. Kelly was among the first historians to question whether long-standing humanist notions about advances in the rights of individuals in the Renaissance applied equally to both sexes. Her essay, "Did women have a renaissance?" (1977) analyzed the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period to demonstrate that medieval women held power when their husbands were absent or when they were widows. Significantly, Kelly concludes that noblewomen had their power effectively excised during the Early Modern period with the development of the ideas separate public and private spheres. Women took over the private sphere while men occupied public arenas, where they wielded power.⁴⁴ In her analysis of Eleanor of Aquitaine's twelfth century administration, Kelly concludes, "she was the *lord*."⁴⁵

In 1992, Judith Bennett expanded on Joan Kelly's premise that women had not prospered from the Renaissance and challenged the "assumption of a dramatic change in women's lives between 1300 and 1700."⁴⁶ She wrote from an explicitly feminist perspective and attacked the assertion that the later middle Ages had been economically favourable for women.⁴⁷ Bennett's work argues that women's history is defined less by transformative events than by a refrain of similar events continuing to reoccur, particularly

⁴⁴ Joan Kelly, "Did women have a renaissance?," in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, ed. Renate Blumenthal and Claudia Koonz (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), 137–64.

⁴⁵ Joan Kelly, *Women, History & Theory: The Essays of Joan Kelly* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 27–28.

⁴⁶ Judith M. Bennett, "Medieval Women, Modern Women: Across the Great Divide," in *Culture and History 1350-1600 Essays on English Communities, Identities and Writing* (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), 149.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 163.; Bennett, "Medievalism and Feminism," 324.

when investigating gender parity. Rather than “women’s status getting better or getting worse [over periods of history] ...the overall effects of patriarchal power might have endured.”⁴⁸ Bennett’s work suggests that assumptions about progress over time, with respect to gender equality, require considerable re-examination.

The historiography of medieval women’s history reached a turning point when the category of gender was refined. Joan Wallach Scott’s article, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” influenced the field of women’s history because she pushed historians to move beyond recuperative studies that simply proved “women participated in the major political upheavals of Western civilization.”⁴⁹ Scott proposed that an analysis of gender should replace women’s history in order to de-politicize the genre and to integrate women’s history into mainstream research. She provided a definition of gender as a source of power among various social relationships and recommended it become a focus of scholarly study.⁵⁰ Most importantly, this article pointed out that, in 1986, historians of women’s history were

learning...that the writing of women into history necessarily involves redefining and enlarging traditional notions of historical significance, to encompass personal, subjective experience as well as public and political activities. ...such a methodology implies...a new history...to which gender could be developed as a category of analysis.⁵¹

Scott’s work suggests that woman be replaced with gender and that historians not examine one aspect of history in isolation. Her analysis also incorporates Joan Kelly’s

⁴⁸ Judith M. Bennett, “Theoretical Issues: Confronting Continuity,” *Journal of Women’s History* 9, no. 3 (Autumn 1997): 75.

⁴⁹ Joan W. Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *The American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (December 1986): 1055.

⁵⁰ Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis.”

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 1054.

recommendations that race and social connections ought to be included along with gender as foci for study.⁵² By suggesting this three-pronged approach of race, social structure, and gender, Scott helped to open the field of women's history, and especially medieval women's history, to a flood of new questions. Historians produced articles and collections of essays that discuss the renewed interest in medieval history and that focus on women and their ability to exercise agency.

Susan Mosher Stuard edited a collection of essays by a variety of historians on the historiography of medieval women across diverse geographical areas of Europe. Barbara Hanawalt's essay focuses on the scholarship about medieval English women. She agrees that the 1960s feminist movements created a renewed interest in the lives of women from the past.⁵³ An essay by Stuard discusses the contributions that North American scholars made in the field of medieval women's history in the 1960s and 1970s, citing the work of Suzanne Wemple, and Jo Ann McNamara. Stuard foretold, in 1987, that a "new dimension [of] American scholarship...provide[d] a valuable point of departure for the investigations that ... [lay] ahead."⁵⁴ This assessment is correct because utilizing gender to analyze historical documents has provided many new and important interpretations of medieval life such as examinations on widowhood and noblewomen acting as powerful lords.

In 2001, Jo Ann McNamara returned to a project she originally initiated in 1973. She decided to scrutinize and refine her initial findings about medieval women, in light of the changes in approaches to women's history. She arrived at a revised but far-reaching

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Stuard, *Women in Medieval History & Historiography*, 12.

⁵⁴ Susan Mosher Stuard, ed., *Women in Medieval History & Historiography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), 91, 95-96.

conclusion that “females as well as males were effectively masculine in gender.”⁵⁵

McNamara’s research uncovered medieval women performing tasks that had previously been deemed essentially male, such as leading armies, defending towns, making treaties and accumulating wealth.⁵⁶ Her essay “Women and Power through the Family Revisited” is an important juncture in medieval women’s history because it influenced other historians to interpret medieval noblewomen as powerful lords in partnership with their husbands, a power that they often retained as widows.⁵⁷

Linguistics, biography, and gender approaches combined to provide new understandings of medieval noblewomen acting with the authority of a lord. Christine Fell’s work examines the nuances of language concerning words for titles such as lord and child and she concludes that certain words could in fact denote either gender. Fell notes that noblewomen must have been competent and intellectually capable to receive the high-level roles and authority apparent in the sources.⁵⁸ Other scholarly works, for example Kimberly LoPrete’s study of Adela of Blois, reinforces Fell’s argument that medieval noblewomen were commanding individuals who held authoritative roles.

Kimberly LoPrete’s biography of Adela of Blois, benefiting from advances in feminist history, is a much more effective and informative work than the earlier study by Nesta Pain. LoPrete’s work clearly demonstrates that from pre-feminist scholarship to the 1990s a change occurred in medieval women’s history. “The Anglo-Norman Card of Adela

⁵⁵ Jo Ann McNamara, “Women and Power through the Family Revisited,” in *Gendering the Master Narrative: Women and Power in the Middle Ages* (London: Cornell University Press, 2003), 1. Jo Ann McNamara and Suzanne Wemple, “The Power of Women through the Family,” *Feminist Studies* 1, no. 3/4 (Winter-Spring 1973): 17. The paper she prepared was presented at a conference held at Fordham University in 2001.

⁵⁶ McNamara, “Women and Power through the Family Revisited,” 24–25.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁵⁸ Christine Fell, *Women in Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1984), 13,19.

of Blois” did not refer to whisperings in the dark but rather analyzed the actions of a widow determined to maintain and increase the power and influence of her family, specifically her own children. LoPrete makes excellent use of primary sources and uses an approach that weaves Adela’s life into that of the powerful men who were her contemporaries. LoPrete demonstrates that, in the thirty years of Adela’s widowhood, she was not a helpmate, subordinate to the men around her. Rather, Adela was a powerful ruler who took full advantage of her royal blood and operated in “a style befitting her princely status.”⁵⁹ This is not a recuperative history of a woman worthy, nor is it a sentimental musing of possible pillow talk, but a solid addition to the field of medieval women’s history.

The exploration of the notion of a noblewoman as a commander or overlord continues in a collection of essays, published in 2002. *Eleanor of Aquitaine, Lord and Lady*, collects essays about various aspects of Eleanor’s life, including the theme of rank and the power that came with it. These essays demonstrate that Eleanor was a strong, controlling personality who devoted her life to “protecting and preserving...the Angevin empire.”⁶⁰ Kimberly A. LoPrete also explores the noblewoman as a lord, she argues that noblewomen held positions of authority and effectively acted as lords without transgressing their gender identities as women.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Kimberly A. LoPrete, “The Anglo-Norman Card of Adela of Blois,” *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* 22, no. 4 (Winter 1990): 588.

⁶⁰ Marie Hirvergnaux, “Queen Eleanor and Aquitaine 1137-1189,” in *Eleanor of Aquitaine, Lord and Lady*, ed. John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002), 63–64.; Raph V. Turner, “Eleanor of Aquitaine in the Government of Her Sons Richard and John,” in *Eleanor of Aquitaine, Lord and Lady*, ed. John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002), 91.; RaGena DeAragon, “Wife, Widow and Mother: Some Comparisons between Eleanor of Aquitaine and Noblewomen of the Anglo-Norman and Angevin World,” in *Eleanor of Aquitaine, Lord and Lady*, ed. John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002), 97–114.

⁶¹ Kimberly A. LoPrete, “The Gender of Lordly Women: The Case of Adela of Blois,” in *Pawns or Players* (Bodwin, Cornwall: MPG Books, 2003), 91.

Noblewomen's ability to wield lordship and power is also the focus of Susan M. Johns.⁶² Johns' 2003 monograph, analyzed the position of noblewomen according to the topic of lordship and power. She based her research on the best and widest range of primary sources possible for a proper evaluation of the "dialogue between text, gender, and society."⁶³ Johns' work is clearly part of the genre of gender histories, her introduction critiquing "traditional male-dominated historiography [which had] led Paul Dalton [in 1994] to conclude a grant of land by Agnes de Arches during Stephen's reign signified a weak male lord rather than a strong...noblewoman."⁶⁴ A medieval woman's life cycle, that is the life stages moving from daughter, wife, mother, and widow, was important to calculate the scope of a noblewoman's power. Equally important was how land ownership factored into the wielding of power.⁶⁵ Johns' history aligns with the interpretation of other historians, for example John Carmi Parsons, Barbara Hanawalt, and Pauline Stafford, who have also studied the impact of life cycle on a medieval noblewoman's ability to wield power. Johns argues that the family unit provided women with the power of lordship and that medieval noblewomen in the twelfth-century were active participants in the area of tenurial lordship.⁶⁶

Mavis E. Mate and Margaret Wade Labarge each produced synthetic studies of medieval women that cut across social structures, gender, and community networks. Mate's study of medieval women expands upon Judith Bennett's analysis of continuity in

⁶² Susan M. Johns, *Noblewomen, Aristocracy and Power in the Twelfth-Century Anglo-Norman Realm* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 1.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 195.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 195–96.

women's history, by adopting an economic perspective on women at the parish level. She examines the Common Pleas, Plea rolls, and Assize Rolls in addition to other court records. Mate's monograph also builds on Rowena Archer's work on women as household managers, as well as Bennett's notion of historical continuity, Christopher Dyer's use of archeology, and John Hatcher's studies of the plague and the economy. Mate analyses the economic circumstances of medieval women across social hierarchies. While the plague created some opportunities for medieval women, overall their economic situation did not improve in relation to that of men in respective social spheres. Despite all these social and economic changes, women remained the primary care-givers for children and chiefly responsible for household tasks and administration.⁶⁷

Margaret Wade Labarge privileged social history spanning community networks and gender. Labarge consulted an array of primary sources including Oderic Vitalis, the letters of Abelard and Heloise, Froissart, William of Malmesbury and the household accounts of Elizabeth de Burgh. She produced a synthetic overview that moved past the biographies of notable women to study women across social groups. Using the three medieval orders to organize her work, Labarge reviews the power of queens and women of nobility, the lives of women who prayed, the mystics, nuns and beguines, and finally she recovered the histories of women who worked as healers, peasants, and townswomen. Labarge concludes that although medieval women were regarded as subordinate to men, their contributions to medieval society "should not be overlooked or undervalued."⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Mavis E. Mate, *Daughters, Wives and Widows after the Black Death* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: The Boydell Press, 1998), 193.

⁶⁸ Margaret Wade Labarge, *A Small Sound of the Trumpet, Women in Medieval Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 238.

Medieval widows particularly constituted a group with a distinct and important status according to their place in the life cycle.

As a specific stage in their lives, widowhood was important and therefore developed its own historiography. P.J.P. Goldberg, Rowena Archer, and Sue Sheridan Walker are among the historians who specialize in studying this area of research. Goldberg has stated that “until comparatively recently most history ...was about Great Events and Great Men.”⁶⁹ He edited a collection of essays that touched upon the medieval life cycle and concepts such as the impact of canon law on women in marriage and the noblewoman as a form of corporate manager of the family estate. Rowena E. Archer utilizes a variety of primary sources to examine the question of women as property managers. Archer uses an array of primary sources including the Paston letters, documents from Public Record Office, the Calendar of Patent Rolls, income tax returns, and the household rolls for Margaret Botherton, a fourteenth-century English noblewoman.⁷⁰ Archer’s research identifies a “gap between theory and practice” testifying to the fact that women were active participants in the management of the “mutual interests of the couple.”⁷¹ Archer states that the medieval women she studied, while resilient and tenacious, did not act independently of the men in their sphere, because “such notions were not characteristic of their society.”⁷² Archer’s conclusion that medieval noblewomen did not act separately from their male colleagues

⁶⁹ P.J.P. Goldberg, ed., *Woman Is Worthy Wight* (Great Britain: Alan Sutton Publishing Limited, 1992), ix.

⁷⁰ Linda Mitchell, “Maud Marshal and Margaret Marshal: Two Viragos Extraordinaire,” in *The Ties That Bind* (Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2011), 121–42.

⁷¹ Rowena E. Archer, “‘How Ladies...who Live on Their Manors Ought to Manage Their Households and Estates’: Women as Landholders and Administrators in the Later Middle Ages,” in *Woman Is a Worthy Wight* (Great Britain: Alan Sutton Publishing Limited, 1992), 173.

⁷² *Ibid.*

does not rule out the possibility that they acted with agency within the cultural constraints of their time.

Sue Sheridan Walker obviously does not share the same perspective as Archer. The topic of the independent widow is analyzed in an essay collection she edited, *Wife and Widow in Medieval England*. Eight essays examine the canon law and civil law of marriage and, widowhood and remarriage. The essays use civil and ecclesiastical court records, to investigate how medieval women successfully defended their legal rights. Walker states in the introduction that there is conclusive evidence that medieval women had a sound understanding of the complex laws of the period, and did not hesitate to pursue their rights in court.⁷³

Other works helpful for the study of medieval women's history include a biographical dictionary compiled by Echols and Williams.⁷⁴ This volume provides over four hundred pages of entries about medieval women. The entries are cross-referenced and indexed by date, countries, biographical categories, last names, titles, regions, and cities. An ambitious project, each entry provides a brief biography of each medieval woman along with relevant secondary source material. In 1995, Jennifer Ward published a collection of primary sources in translation covering the themes of marriage, family, land, wealth and lordship, the household, and religion. Ward notes in the introduction that women's concrete experiences in the Middle Ages were often demonstrably different from the ideology, and didactic writings of both secular and ecclesiastical authors. Treatises

⁷³ Sue Sheridan Walker, ed., *Wife and Widow in Medieval England* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1993), 1–10.

⁷⁴ Anne Echols and Marty Williams, *An Annotated Index of Medieval Women* (Oxford: Markus Weiner Publishing Inc, 1992), ix.

expounded the desirability of women being humble, subservient, and pious. These works did not portray the reality of many women who frequently voiced their opinions and claimed their rights.⁷⁵ Ward agrees about the importance to contextualize medieval women's history in order to comprehend the impact that changes in medieval law and the authority of the crown had on these women's individual lives.⁷⁶

This survey of the scholarship surrounding the topic of medieval noblewomen in England and Wales is by no means exhaustive. There are other excellent studies of this subject. The second wave feminist movements of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s influenced scholars to expand historical themes to include gender as a category of analysis. Arguably, medieval historical studies have benefitted from the inclusion of medieval women's studies.

Historians reread primary sources with new eyes, which resulted in new and different understandings of the past, in particular using the multi-disciplinary lenses of prosopography, anthropology, linguistics and other cross-disciplinary methods. Sources were read more critically, overturning the assumptions previously applied to these documents.⁷⁷ It became important for medievalists to read the scholarship of other disciplines in order to provide fresh insights into medieval history and to create multi-disciplinary approaches.⁷⁸ Some of the historians discussed in this analysis challenged the periodization of medieval history. Judith Bennett did so when she proposed that women's history does not turn on important events but rather unfolds on a continuum that compares

⁷⁵ Jennifer Ward, ed., *Women of the English Nobility and Gentry, 1066-1500*, trans. Jennifer Ward (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 5.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 6–9.

⁷⁷ Bennett, "Medievalism and Feminism," 327.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 329.

the distant past and modernity.⁷⁹ Joan Kelly, even earlier, questioned whether the division of history into the Middle Ages and Renaissance was even applicable to women's history. Her premise was that the developments of the modern nation state and dismantling of medieval society had negative consequences for women.⁸⁰

Medieval women's history has developed into a multi-disciplinary field, profiting from the innovative approaches of Joan Kelly, Joan Scott, Judith Bennett, Jo Ann McNamara, Mavis Mate, and Susan Johns. In 1993, Bennett wrote

feminist medievalists are doing much more than simply adding to the amount of material that constitutes the empirical corpus of medieval studies; we are also challenging old interpretations and providing new ways of seeing familiar things.⁸¹

Bennett's comments continued to be applicable and new interpretations were offered, for example, by Linda Mitchell. The work of LoPrete, Johns, and Fell suggests that strong medieval noblewomen did not need rescuing. Many new studies of the primary sources support this statement. The early recuperative histories fit with the "humanist assumptions and empiricist training" of historians of the 1970s. As more feminist historians began to publish a wave of new questions and interpretations appeared.⁸² The following analysis builds upon the work of these new, groundbreaking historians. Adopting the analytical tools and critical eyes of these earlier scholars, this project argues that medieval noblewomen, who lived in the Welsh and Scottish Marches, exercised agency. During

⁷⁹ Bennett, "Theoretical Issues: Confronting Continuity," 73–74.

⁸⁰ Kelly, "Did Women Have a Renaissance?"

⁸¹ Bennett, "Medievalism and Feminism," 326.

⁸² Helen Bowen Raddeker, *Sceptical History, Feminist and Postmodern Approaches in Practice* (London: Routledge, 2007), 12, 118.

periods of instability and unrest, women utilized their social capital to perform leadership roles and determine their own path in ways that transcended the prevailing gender ideology.

Chapter 3: *Uxor vel vidua*, Wife or Widow, and the sovereignty to choose

In the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, the queen grants a convicted knight his life if he can discover, before the end of a year and one day, “what is the thing that women most desire.” The knight spends the year travelling to learn the answer to the queen’s question and concludes that, “in general ...a woman wants the self-same sovereignty over her husband as over her lover, and ...he must not be above her.”⁸³ This statement, postulating fundamental gender equality, would resonate with post-modern feminists. The quotation suggests that medieval noblewomen could exercise agency in some of their decisions. Arguably, the term “sovereignty” indicates that Chaucer believed women sought to increase and leverage their social status, and in this way, they might rule over others. The social capital noblewomen did enjoy because of their rank in society provided them with opportunities to exercise agency and to have a degree of sovereignty in their decision about whether or not to remarry after having become a widow.

Medieval noblewomen had extensive personal networks comprised of family and close associates that constituted their social capital. Social capital is “a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition.”⁸⁴ It functions to build networks based on the exchange of information and forms of reciprocity.

⁸³ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, trans. Nevill Coghill (Scarborough: Prentice-Hall Canada, Inc., 1986), 172–74.

⁸⁴ Pierre Bourdieu and Loic J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 119.

Individuals who shared similar social and cultural backgrounds would develop a similar *habitus*.⁸⁵ Nobles expected, through the mechanisms of homage and feudalism, in addition to raising each other's children in wardships, that strong loyalties would develop. Because they were members of extended kinship groups and affinities, noblewomen relied on the social capital they commanded; counting on each other for support should they or their overlord require aid.

A noblewoman could draw upon her social capital in times of need. An example of this is found in the Countess of Surrey's letter to John Paston in 1485 seeking his help during the War of the Roses, and asking him to "recommend [her] to [her] lady Brews and to [her] cousin, [his] wife." Similarly, Lady Fitzhugh wrote to John Paston a year later seeking his help on behalf of her daughter and her husband. She addresses John Paston as "son" and ends "loving mother" as a close friend might write, although they were not blood relatives.⁸⁶ Letters written during periods of war and unrest demonstrate how great the necessity was for noblewomen to accumulate social capital and wealth. Their social capital empowered them to exercise agency when they made critical life decisions for themselves and their family members.

It is evident that noblewomen enjoyed their social capital. During the thirteenth century, Joan of Acre's social rank was very high because she was the daughter of a king and she played her hand well to orchestrate her second marriage. Joan of Acre married Gilbert de Clare in 1289 with the stipulation that they return all the Clare lands to Edward I, Joan's father so that the couple could receive them jointly. Gilbert died in 1295, and Joan

⁸⁵ Grenfell, *Pierre Bourdieu, Key Concepts*, 90–97.

⁸⁶ Anne Crawford, ed., *Letters of Medieval Women* (Thrupp, Stroud, Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 2002), 207–8.

secretly married a recently knighted squire from the Clare household. Interestingly, Joan had convinced Edward I to knight him before she announced their marriage. This second marriage was both below her station and made without the approval of the king. Joan of Acre might have fared quite differently without sufficient social capital to leverage her position.

Arguably, Joan's ability to exercise agency derived from the social capital she could muster, which in turn was dependent upon her social status. Edward was already in the process of negotiating a new marriage for his daughter to Amadeus V of Savoy when Joan disclosed her marriage in April of 1297 to Sir Ralph de Monthermer.⁸⁷ Edward confined his daughter's new husband to Bristol castle until August when Ralph paid the king homage at Eltham. Joan temporarily lost control of her estates, which she received back once she had regained the king's favour. Joan was twenty-five years of age at the time of her second marriage. A chronicle reports that most nobles respected her decision, although it is unclear whether it was because of her status as countess or because she was the daughter of the king. One noble, however, was bolder than the rest and "thundered in the king's ear that a marriage of this kind was contrary to his [the king's] honour." Joan, equally bold but tactful, met the man's criticism with her reply that it was

not ignominious or shameful for a great and powerful earl to marry a poor and weak woman; in the opposite case it is neither reprehensible nor difficult for a countess to promote a vigorous young man.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Ward, *Women of the English Nobility and Gentry, 1066-1500*, 43.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

Joan's retort placated Edward I, perhaps because it allowed him to preserve his dignity. It provides evidence of her ability to exercise agency to determine her path within the constraints of the period. Joan utilized her social capital and exercised agency to make her choice of marriage partner rather than have a husband imposed upon her. In making decisions concerning their lives, both the historical Joan of Acre and Chaucer's fictional queen faced a similar path in life, comparable to that of other medieval noblewomen fulfilling the roles of daughters, wives, and widows.

In many cases, noblewomen recommenced the wife to widow life stages if they remarried. A nobleman tended to marry a younger woman and die before his wife, simply because he was older or because of the mortal dangers of military service.⁸⁹ Eleanor de Montfort's first husband, William Marshall died in 1231 when Eleanor was approximately 16 years of age. Her marriage to Marshall when she was nine years old was clearly a political union because her husband was thirty-four at the time.⁹⁰ Although still relatively young, Eleanor's connections as the king's sister likely afforded her a degree of agency in the negotiations surrounding her dower in 1232. Her vow of chastity during the spring of 1234, offered her protection from a coerced second marriage.⁹¹ However, her status and wealth made her valuable for building alliances. Eleanor was convinced to revoke her vow of chastity and marry again, while there was still the possibility of bearing children. Her second marriage in 1236 to Simon de Montfort, also several years her senior, ostensibly

⁸⁹ Joel T. Rosenthal, "Fifteenth-Century Widows, and Widowhood: Bereavement, Reintegration, and Life Choices," in *Wife and Widow in Medieval England*, ed. Sue Sheridan Walker (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1993), 38., ⁸⁹ Linda E. Mitchell, ed., *Women in Medieval Western European Culture* (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1999), 10.

⁹⁰ Wilkinson, *Eleanor de Montfort*, 17.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 37–38.

received the approval of her brother, Henry III.⁹² Eleanor's marriage to Simon lasted for twenty-nine years, but the political strife that followed her husband to his death in 1265, and returned Eleanor to widowhood, overshadowed it.⁹³ Widowed a second time, Eleanor opted to remain a widow and renewed her vow of chastity. Living in exile, she relentlessly fought for her children's futures until her death in 1275.⁹⁴ Eleanor's choices provided her with the economic security to assist her children and the social capital to be able to exercise agency on her own and their behalf.

Remarriage did not always provide benefits. Margaret de Clare's ordeals during the period of the baronial opposition are illustrative of a noblewoman whose second marriage caused her both personal and economic harm. Margaret (1286-1333), married Gilbert d'Umfreville in 1303, and, widowed in the same year. Her subsequent marriage in 1308 to Bartholomew Badlesmere placed her on the side of the baronial opposition to Edward II and the Despensers.⁹⁵ Margaret held Leeds castle against a siege until forced to capitulate; her penalty was imprisonment in the Tower for a year until the rebels' loss at the Battle of Boroughbridge. In 1322, the king hung Badlesmere because he was a traitor and, freeing Margaret from the Tower, sent her to a convent with other noblewomen in similar circumstances. A letter Margaret wrote to Henry de Clyf in 1331 reveals that she delegated some of her affairs to attorneys. Margaret continued to be at a disadvantage in dealing with the king for control of her share of the family estates until her death in 1333.⁹⁶ Making the

⁹² Ibid., 5,11.

⁹³ Ibid., 122–23.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 135.

⁹⁵ J.R. Maddicott, "Badlesmere, Sir Bartholomew (c.1275–1322)," *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, accessed February 8, 2016, <http://www.oxforddnb.com.subzero.lib.uoguelph.ca/view/article/37140>.

⁹⁶ Crawford, *Letters of Medieval Women*, 194–96.

wrong sort of connections could be disastrous. Margaret's affiliations with the losing side of the rebellion caused her to be without the social capital she required to exercise agency and control her share of her family's wealth. The personal networks of some noblewomen could place them in jeopardy.

Support for a noblewoman's ability to exercise agency was available from ecclesiastical sources in addition to secular ones. The Church's requirement of free or individual consent in marriage and its encouragement for widows to enter a convent or take a vow of chastity could support a noblewoman's choice. The Church recognized that marriage was a sacrament requiring the consent of both individuals and interpreted it to be a sign of God's interaction with humankind.⁹⁷ In the eleventh century, Urban II had ruled that canon law did not uphold a marriage made without the consent of all parties.⁹⁸ It preferred that widows remained chaste but allowed that the requirements of daily life did not make it imperative. The Church also provided other options; some noblewomen took a vow of chastity in widowhood while others decided to enter a convent.⁹⁹ Taking a vow of chastity allowed a noblewoman to continue to manage her wealth while entering a convent entailed a loss of control of her property and a change in her social status.¹⁰⁰ In the late twelfth century, Pope Alexander III examined the issue of first and subsequent marriages

⁹⁷ Catherine Moriarty, ed., *The Voice of the Middle Ages in Personal Letters 1100-1500* (New York: Peter Bedrick Books, 1990), 160.

⁹⁸ Michael M. Sheehan, "Choice of Marriage Partner in the Middle Ages: Development and Mode of Application of a Theory of Marriage," in *Marriage, Family, and Law in Medieval Europe* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 94.

⁹⁹ Moriarty, *The Voice of the Middle Ages in Personal Letters 1100-1500*, 161.

¹⁰⁰ Margaret Wade Labarge, "Three Medieval Widows and a Second Career," in *Aging and the Aged in Medieval Europe: Selected Papers from the Annual Conference of the Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Toronto, Held 25-26 February and 11-12 November 1983*, ed. Michael M. Sheehan (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediavel Studies, 1990), 12.

recommending that priests celebrate marriage only once for each person.¹⁰¹ Many widows still sought a second marriage to attain a degree of economic and personal security.¹⁰² To survive and protect their assets and families such women needed to act in their own best interests. Widowhood thus became a stage of life that presented both problems and possibilities. To be sure, the luxury to entertain these choices was contingent upon a noblewoman having the social status that afforded her the ability to exercise agency in selecting from these options.

To avoid or interrupt the cycle of re-marriage and subsequent widowhood a noblewoman sometimes opted to profess a vow of chastity. Over the span of several centuries “various customs and institutions were developed to protect [a widow] and regulate her activity; in time, canon law included certain rules in her regard.”¹⁰³ These conventions provided a widow with “the defence of her free choice of state in either widowhood or remarriage... she could claim the special protection of both the bishop and the king.”¹⁰⁴ A wealthy widow was a target for noblemen seeking to advance in the social ranks. Taking a vow of chastity reduced the possibility of abduction by a nobleman wanting to advance his own financial and political status, secure titles, and land through a new wife. Following the death of her third husband in 1322, Elizabeth de Burgh took a vow of chastity and remained a widow until her death in 1360. Deciding upon a course such as this provided benefits to the widowed noblewoman as well as to the crown. A widow who professed a vow of chastity could obtain the protection of the Church and the

¹⁰¹ James A. Brundage, “Widows and Remarriage: Moral Conflicts and Their Resolution in Classical Canon Law,” in *Wife and Widow in Medieval England*, ed. Sue Sheridan Walker (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1993), 20.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁰³ Sheehan, “The Influence of Canon Law on the Property Rights of Married Women in England,” 18.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

king while still exercising agency by remaining in control of their wealth and keeping their social status.

The distinct status of widowhood placed some of the authority of lordship under the control of medieval noblewomen. Before the thirteenth century and the signing of the Magna Carta in 1215, a noblewoman had little choice whether to remain a widow or to remarry. An analysis of the Pipe Rolls from the reigns of Henry II, Richard I, and John has revealed that various pecuniary penalties imposed on widows.¹⁰⁵ After the signing of the Magna Carta, the legal landscape changed for widows. Entries from the Pipe and Plea Rolls demonstrate that Henry III's administration upheld the clauses about widows.¹⁰⁶ During most of their lives, these women fell under the legal control of a male relative. The legal rights of a widow to claim her property upon the death of her husband differed according to the type of property. A wife's dower received more protection from her husband's ability to dispose of her wealth than did her chattels or movable property.¹⁰⁷ Court documents, from 1272 to 1350, provides a picture of the agency widows exercised in litigating, either directly or through an attorney, to secure their rightful dower.¹⁰⁸ Thus, by

¹⁰⁵ Janet Senderowitz Loengard, "Rationabilis Dos: Magna Carta and the Widow's 'Fair Share' in the Earlier Thirteenth Century," in *Wife and Widow in Medieval England*, ed. Sue Sheridan Walker (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1993), 69., Walker, *Wife and Widow in Medieval England*, 3.

¹⁰⁶ Loengard, "Rationabilis Dos: Magna Carta and the Widow's 'Fair Share' in the Earlier Thirteenth Century," 69.

¹⁰⁷ Sheehan, "The Influence of Canon Law on the Property Rights of Married Women in England," 20.

¹⁰⁸ Sue Sheridan Walker, "Litigation as Personal Quest: Suing for Dower in the Royal Courts, circa 1272-1350," in *Wife and Widow in Medieval England*, ed. Sue Sheridan Walker (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1993), 81-84.

exercising agency and employing social capital, widowed noblewomen directed their tenants and, knights, and settled disputes among their vassals and officials.¹⁰⁹

While secular and ecclesiastical authorities supported a degree of choice in the decision to remarry or remain a widow, there is a question whether noblewomen received greater benefits as a widow or as a wife. A discussion of the life stage of widowhood notes that approximately fifty per cent of women opted for remarriage over remaining a widow.¹¹⁰ Secular law and religious restrictions prescribed that a widow could remarry if she allowed a period of one year of mourning to pass after her husband's death. This space of time ensured that there was no possibility of an heir from the previous marriage. Widows who were childless and had acquired control of land were valuable and had excellent prospects for another marriage. A widow who held lands from the king was moreover an asset as a loyal supporter of the crown. When a widowed noblewoman controlled lands in a politically unsettled area and owed her feudal support directly to her king, being free from the interference of a husband would benefit the monarch. Medieval noblewomen, therefore, exercised agency when they made informed decisions about whether to remarry or take a vow of chastity upon the death of a husband because these decisions influenced the distribution of wealth and power inside their family and beyond.

Land held the key to wealth and power in the Middle Ages and whoever controlled it was therefore of prime importance. Consequently, elite women hoped to avoid forced

¹⁰⁹ Amy Livingston, "Powerful Allies and Dangerous Adversaries, Noblewomen in Medieval Society," in *Women in Medieval Western European Culture*, ed. Linda E. Mitchell (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1999), 19.

¹¹⁰ Rosenthal, "Fifteenth-Century Widows, and Widowhood: Bereavement, Reintegration, and Life Choices," 36–37.

remarriages that might cause land to come under the command of an unfriendly faction.¹¹¹ Clauses 7 and 8 of the Magna Carta proclaimed that the widow should not have to “pay...for her dower, marriage portion, or any inheritance [and] No widow shall be compelled to remarry...But she must give security that she will not marry without royal consent, if she holds her lands of the Crown.”¹¹² These sections provided surety to widows that they had legal support for their claims to their dower lands and revenues. With control of the fees and other profits of her estates, a wealthy widow could live comfortably and pursue her interests. In 1215, the barons who drafted the Magna Carta included significant clauses directed specifically to the protection of widows, and their dower. From the baron’s perspective, this was likely to protect the land that widows controlled as much as it protected the widows themselves. Regardless of the motivation of the men who drafted the document, some English noblewomen did benefit from it. It provided certain economic advantages and additional security of their person.

Legislation allowed a widow to accumulate certain types of property if a second or a third marriage ended with the death of her husband. This applied to the property that a woman received in the form of her dower or *maritagium* [marriage portion], funds that came from her husband to her upon marriage. A noblewoman’s ability to assemble parcels of land from multiple marriages into large estates made an English widow a target in the eyes of potential suitors. This advantage over dower lands did not extend to land held by feudal tenure. While a widow assumed direct legal control over themselves and their

¹¹¹ Ward, *English Noblewomen in the Later Middle Ages*, 5.

¹¹² “Magna Carta,” *The British Library: Magna Carta*, accessed September 15, 2016, <https://www.bl.uk/magna-carta/articles/magna-carta-english-translation>.

property, employing agency in their choice of whether or not to remarry was difficult but not without paths to success.¹¹³

A widow who was loyal to the crown and in control of her property could be of strategic importance to the monarch in times of political instability. Periods of armed conflict for the crown often yielded higher levels of agency for noblewomen.¹¹⁴ Instability tended to decentralize power and women with extensive personal networks were able to channel opportunities towards themselves and their family members. The case of Isabella de Vescy demonstrates the importance of placing key military fortresses under the control of a widowed noblewoman. Isabella de Vescy married John de Vescy, a close friend of Edward I, and was a widow nine years later in 1289. Isabella received the protection of Edward I, and subsequently that of his son, Edward II. In 1304, Edward I granted Isabella Bamburgh castle and its related revenues provided she remained unmarried. Isabella's social capital assisted her in the preservation of her widowed status and supported her ability to exercise agency to further the prospects of her family.

Many noblewomen faced difficulties achieving the prosperity and personal security necessary to exercise agency and determine their path. Alice de Lacy's struggle to exert her agency attests to these obstacles. Alice was first married to Thomas, earl of Lancaster in 1292 and by 1316; the marriage was failing. Alice became embroiled in the turmoil between Thomas of Lancaster and the barons who supported him against Edward II and his adherents. A knight from the household of the earl of Surrey abducted Alice ostensibly at

¹¹³ Mitchell, *Portraits of Medieval Women, Family, Marriage and Politics in England 1225-1350*, 7.

¹¹⁴ Livingston, "Powerful Allies and Dangerous Adversaries, Noblewomen in Medieval Society," 10. Isabella de Vescy's ability to control Bamburgh castle will be explored more fully in the chapter that examines a medieval noblewoman's position as a castellan or quartermaster.

the instigation of Edward II to erode the earl of Lancaster's ability to attack the king. Several chroniclers claimed Alice was complicit in the abduction. Thomas of Walsingham and the Westminster chronicle are both harsh in their assessment of Alice's possible association with a feigned assault. Walsingham asserts that Alice "confessed it to be true...she was not abducted in fear" and the Westminster chronicle contends that her "heart's desire was bent favourably to their will."¹¹⁵ Whether the chroniclers embellished the events to entertain their patrons or Alice exercised a degree of agency in abandoning a husband who did not demand her return, she did ultimately become a widow in 1322. Her first husband, Thomas of Lancaster led a calamitous uprising against Edward II and his followers. A large number of those who had fought on the side of the Lords Ordainers died and the king beheaded Thomas on the charge of treason.¹¹⁶ Alone and in the midst of a rebellion against the crown, a second marriage provided Alice with security. Her marriage to Sir Ebulo Lestrage lasted from 1324 until his death in 1335 and was, arguably, one of her choosing.

Alice enjoyed the shelter of a comfortable income after Ebulo's death because she held the castle and honor of Buihth, Wales, and Bustlesham, Berkshire under a life tenure arrangement from the king.¹¹⁷ Alice's social capital grew during this period possibly benefitting from Ebulo's service to Edward III in the Scottish war because the king pardoned Ebulo posthumously on charges set against him by Edward II. Alice may have been among those widowed noblewomen that Edward III valued as loyal supporters. If this

¹¹⁵ Mitchell, *Portraits of Medieval Women, Family, Marriage and Politics in England 1225-1350*, 108–11.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 117.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 119.

were the case, Alice would have been provided with the protection of her social capital and economic security from the control of her estates.

Alice's connections with the court of Edward III proved helpful when, following Ebulo's death, events turned against her. Alice's wealth and social status made her a target of those who wanted to abduct her to obtain control of her lands. In 1336, Sir Hugh de Frene forced Alice to leave Bolingbroke castle, and although she had taken a vow of chastity in an attempt to prevent this, her abduction and rape resulted in a coerced marriage.¹¹⁸ This marriage was short-lived because Edward III conveniently dispatched Hugh to Scotland to serve in his army and in 1337 Hugh quickly became a causality of war. Thus Alice was left free to renew her vow of chastity. While her wealth had placed her in harm's way, her social capital, in the form of connections with the king, extricated her from a precarious situation.

Alice was one among other noblewomen who faced the ordeal of abduction. However, accounts suggest that not all abductions were necessarily against the will of the widow. The desire to avoid obtaining the requisite permission from the king to remarry may have led some medieval noblewomen to stage their own abduction in order to marry the partner of their choosing. Widows who attempted to select their second or third husbands were at risk if they proceeded to marry without the approval of the king. The requirement to have the king's consent prevented nobles from amassing large contiguous blocks of land and thus increasing their power even beyond that of the king. Eleanor Despenser (1292-1337), daughter of Joan of Acre, and granddaughter to Edward I, was married at fourteen to the younger Hugh Despenser. The death of her first husband in

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 120.

1326, led to Eleanor's brief imprisonment in the Tower of London. Upon her release, she did homage for her share of the Clare lands in the Welsh Marches and the south of Wales. Consequently, she was a wealthy widow in 1329 when William, Lord Zouche of Ashby abducted and married her.¹¹⁹ Some accounts suggest that Eleanor had followed the lead of her mother, Joan of Acre and had engineered her abduction in order to bypass the requirement to seek the king's approval for the marriage¹²⁰. After her second marriage, Edward III ordered both Eleanor and William to spend time in the Tower, the second period of incarceration for Eleanor. The couple was also required to pay a fine of £50,000 in order to have their lands restored. Illustrative of the importance of social capital during inconstant political circumstances, Eleanor petitioned the king and was able to have the fine reduced to £5,000.¹²¹ Eleanor's actions demonstrate that she exercised agency and utilized her social capital to avoid soliciting the crown for approval of her second marriage.

Eleanor was not alone on the list of high-profile abductions. Elizabeth de Burgh was born in 1295 near Tewkesbury in the Welsh Marches to the daughter of Edward I, Joan of Acre. Her father was Gilbert de Clare of Gloucester, an earl who traced his family back to those nobles who had been among William the Conqueror's companions.¹²² Elizabeth de Burgh married her first husband John de Burgh in 1308.¹²³ Family responsibilities for the de Burgh family sent John to Ireland, apparently to assist his father. There is speculation that the strife among the Irish and Anglo-Irish led to his death in 1313. Elizabeth was one

¹¹⁹ Crawford, *Letters of Medieval Women*, 169.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Frances A. Underhill, *For Her Good Estate, The Life of Elizabeth de Burgh* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 5.

¹²³ Ibid., 9.

of three surviving sisters when their only brother, Gilbert de Clare, died at Bannockburn in 1314. These events caused Elizabeth and her two sisters to become heirs to the Clare estates and they each received a significant share of the family's wealth. It was Elizabeth's wealth that made her vulnerable to abduction when Theobald de Verdon reportedly seized her in 1316.

Theoretically, the provisions of the Magna Carta and the canons and customs of the Church provided Elizabeth and all widows with protection. A widow was shielded from being married against her will, and if she married with her consent, the marriage was valid. Some accounts state that Theobald de Verdon forcefully removed Elizabeth from Bristol castle where Edward II's orders had confined her. Theobald asserted that he and Elizabeth were betrothed in Ireland before her departure for England, and she had voluntarily left the castle to meet him. Elizabeth's kidnapping occurring when it did, allowed her to sidestep Edward II's plans to marry her to one of his close collaborators. Edward II had no alternative but to recognize the marriage although Elizabeth had married without his approval. The abduction, real or staged, afforded Elizabeth the opportunity to appeal to the king on compassionate grounds and avoid penalties from the crown.

Elizabeth de Burgh's marital status quickly reverted once again to that of a wealthy widow, and Edward II suggested another marriage prospect, Roger Damory. Unfortunately, for Elizabeth, Theobald had died six months after their marriage in July of 1316, likely due to typhus. Elizabeth's options were to take the veil, opt for the defence of the Magna Carta, or marry Damory.¹²⁴ Taking the veil or refusing the marriage would have threatened her social status and her wealth. In this instance, she chose to marry Roger.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 18.

Disputes between Edward II and the baronial opposition ultimately engulfed the pair. Roger found himself attached to the opposition, defending his and his wife's Welsh lands. Forces loyal to the king captured Roger and hung him for treason, while Edward II confined Elizabeth and her children to Barking Abbey.¹²⁵ The remainder of the Despenser years depleted Elizabeth's wealth. It is probable that her association with Queen Isabella, godmother to her daughter by Theobald, allowed her to recoup her losses, both pecuniary and personal after Edward II was deposed.¹²⁶ Elizabeth spent the years from 1330 to her death in 1360 enjoying her social status and actively patronizing the Church as well as founding the Cambridge college that continues to bear her name.¹²⁷ Arguably, Elizabeth's ability to regain control of her lands and take command of the wealth of her estates was the result of the social capital she enjoyed and her ability to exercise agency in putting that social capital to good use.

Social status was an important factor for a medieval noblewoman because it facilitated her ability to amass social capital. Social capital derived from the extensive personal networks she formed and that allowed her to exercise agency in her choice of a marriage partner or when opting to remain a widow and not marry. The choices that a noblewoman made, either to remarry or to remain a widow provide evidence of the degree of agency she had in directing her life. Once widowed some noblewomen re-married, and some devised methods to determine their next husbands. Others avoided re-marriage entirely and remained widows opting to take a vow of chastity or enter a convent. Those noblewomen to whom control of land or titles passed on the death of a husband often found

¹²⁶ Underhill, *For Her Good Estate, The Life of Elizabeth de Burgh*, 41.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 44,149.

themselves in the position in which the king arranged their next marriage, or they were in danger of abduction and coerced marriage. While the Church provided medieval women with the right to a marriage by consent and supported a widow's choice to remain chaste, economic and legal constraints in the secular sphere, coupled with the threat and reality of abduction of wealthy widows, could lead to remarriage. The choice of whether or not to remarry, therefore, depended upon a complicated intersection of choices constrained by custom and convention, canon and common law, personal and financial security, and most importantly a noblewoman's social capital. The evidence that noblewomen actively employed their social capital and exercised agency concerning whether or not to marry illustrates the answer to Chaucer's queen's query to the knight about what medieval women sought. The same social capital that provided medieval noblewomen with the sovereignty to exercise a certain degree of agency in choosing their marriage partners also empowered them to fulfill leadership and administrative roles as estate managers and military quartermasters.

Chapter 4: *Moderatrix* or Estate Manager

The absence of her husband necessitated a noblewoman to take charge as an estate manager to ensure hers and her family's survival. In the late thirteenth century, Aline Despenser's actions executing a business venture provide an example of what was usual for a woman of her status who performed the role of a *moderatrix* or estate manager. The Countess of Norfolk, Aline Despenser, was the widow of Sir Hugh Despenser. Aline subsequently married the earl of Norfolk, Roger Bigod in 1271. The following year, Roger travelled to the continent to meet Edward I leaving Aline to oversee the family estates in his absence. Aline raised cash by exporting wool to send funds to Roger to cover his travelling expenses. In the early 1270s, trade disagreements in between England and Flanders made the simple transaction more difficult and she required a license to export.¹²⁸ Aline's letter to Walter de Merton, the Chancellor demonstrates that she deftly managed the entire transaction. In her letter, she requests "letters patent of safe conduct by land and sea to send abroad the wool."¹²⁹ Kathleen Neal's analysis of the Despenser letter argues that the document discloses the manner in which elite medieval women engaged in financial transactions of this nature.¹³⁰ Aline was not constrained by her gender as she worked, in her husband's absence, to oversee the joint assets of her family. Aline acted diligently with

¹²⁸ Crawford, *Letters of Medieval Women*, 191.

¹²⁹ Aline Despenser, "Aline Despenser, Countess of Norfolk, to Walter de Merton, Chancellor, c.1272-4," in *Letters of Medieval Women*, ed. Anne Crawford (Thrupp, Stroud, Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 2002), 192.

¹³⁰ Kathleen Neal, "From Letters to Loyalty: Aline La Despenser and the Meaning(s) of a Noblewoman's Correspondence in Thirteenth-Century England," in *Authority, Gender and Emotions in Late Medieval and Early Modern England*, ed. Susan Broomhall (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015), 18–33.

the skill of a competent business manager to guide the transaction through to its successful conclusion. Her status as a countess and her training provided her with the means to exercise agency to meet the needs of her family. Aline occupied the role of estate manager, previously understood to be masculine, because of the absence of a male alternative.

The predominantly male-gendered corporate boardrooms and the echelons of upper management, in the twenty-first century are similar in some ways to Aline Despenser's experience. Surveys conducted during 2005 demonstrate that women held under fifteen percent of the seats in the boardrooms of American Fortune 500 companies and Canadian Financial Post 500 companies.¹³¹ These statistics support the results of other more recent gender equality research from 2010 that concluded large accounting firms were male-dominated strongholds.¹³² While social structures have transformed since the Middle Ages, agency and social capital for twenty-first-century female executives remain the sphere of a limited number of women because certain professions are identified with specific genders. Twenty-first-century managerial positions, which have much in common with that of a medieval estate manager, are now positions of public power detached from private domains of power, the family household.¹³³ During the Middle Ages, these arenas of power functioned as a single unit and social status determined the leadership of the household.¹³⁴ The actual tasks of a modern manager, supervision, staffing, and financial stewardship

¹³¹ Paul Dunn, "Breaking the Boardroom Gender Barrier: The Human Capital of Female Corporate Directors," *Journal of Management & Governance* 16, no. 4 (2012): 558, doi:10.1007/s10997-010-9161-2.

¹³² Martin Kornberger, Chris Carter, and Anne Ross-Smith, "Changing Gender Domination in a Big Four Accounting Firm: Flexibility, Performance and Client Service in Practice," *Accounting, Organizations and Society* 35, no. 8 (2010): 775,789.

¹³³ Sarah Rutherford, *Women's Work Men's Culture, Overcoming Resistance and Changing Organizational Cultures* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 69.

¹³⁴ Mark Kishlansky, Patrick Geary, and Patricia O'Brien, *Civilization in the West* (New York: Longman, 2010), 357–58.

would be familiar to a medieval noblewoman such as Aline Despenser.¹³⁵ This chapter is an examination of the ability of Aline and other medieval noblewomen to fulfill the role of an estate or household manager, because of the expectations of social structures and need, rather than through definitions of gender. Indeed, it is arguable that in the Middle Ages, the role of estate or household manager belonged to a specific social rank rather than to a gendered identity.

The leadership of a medieval estate was a responsibility determined by noble birth not based on gender. Noblewomen frequently supervised estates while their husband was absent on business, attending the monarch, or even if he were dead.¹³⁶ In certain circumstances, medieval noblewomen exercised agency and spent their social capital in ways that constructed their individual identity within the cultural norms of the period. Medieval noblewomen were not free from outside influences. Nevertheless, they had the means to determine their path within certain constraints. As elite women, they had the connections and economic resources that allowed them agency. Evidence, including household accounts, letters, and government documents, demonstrate that medieval English noblewomen occupied the demanding role of an estate or household manager and did so effectively. In fact, the household of a noblewoman located in the Marcher areas of Wales or Scotland was not a simple prospect to oversee, its origins developed from the royal

¹³⁵ Robert N. Anthony, John Dearden, and Norton M. Bedford, *Management Control Systems Sixth Edition* (Homewood, Illinois: Irwin, 1989), 43.

¹³⁶ Catherine Moriarty, ed., *The Voice of the Middle Ages in Personal Letters 1100-1500* (New York: Peter Bedrick Books, 1990), 161,223.

system of government that managed personnel appointments, delegated authority, collected taxes, and oversaw various other responsibilities for the king.¹³⁷

The English nobility modelled their households, manors, and estates along similar lines to the king's household.¹³⁸ It was an organization comprised almost entirely of men. Female positions were limited to the laundress and a nurse or mistress of the nursery if the household contained young children. The number of female staff that the lady of the household would oversee was, therefore, limited. A livery roll belonging to Elizabeth de Burgh lists seven women, while Elizabeth Montague, countess of Salisbury listed in her will (1414) only three women out of a total staff of thirty-eight.¹³⁹ Both Elizabeth de Burgh and Elizabeth Montague oversaw large workforces, comprised mainly of men, who were their social inferiors. This evidence validates the argument that their standing in society supported the role that these two noblewomen performed. In particular, the estates of both noblewomen provide examples of the type of complex institutions they managed.

The noble household functioned as a multi-faceted organization of which one of these was its capacity to serve as a meeting place where the noblewoman could liaise with her private and public contacts. Entertaining friends and family, hers as well as her husband's, allowed a noblewoman to develop and maintain crucial interpersonal connections. Elizabeth de Burgh's record keepers were meticulous in noting when outlays were because of hosting guests. An example of this is evident from the entry for 23 December 1350 that describes "the expenses of William de Clopton and others at Bardfield

¹³⁷ James Conway Davies, *The Baronial Opposition to Edward II, Its Character and Policy* (London: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1967), 61.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹³⁹ Jennifer Ward, *English Noblewomen in the Later Middle Ages* (London: Longman Group UK Limited, 1992), 53.

hunting deer for 4 days.” Elizabeth’s clerk recorded the provisions consumed by the hunting party including the “2 pitchers of wine. And 48 gallons of ale from stock.”¹⁴⁰ It is reasonable to conclude that a four-day hunting excursion amply supplied with food and ale provided an excellent opportunity for Elizabeth to conduct business with her peers. To facilitate the upkeep of her estate and its ability to serve as a platform from which to conduct business an estate manager supervised the production of various goods and services.

Analogous to a modern vertically integrated manufacturing organization, a medieval estate could be self-sustaining by growing produce, raising livestock, taking game, and through revenues from rents and fines, all sourced among lands under the control of a single lord or lady.¹⁴¹ The estate manager needed to have the ability to engage in long-term planning and budgeting to prevent shortages of necessary supplies because of the seasonality of goods and produce.¹⁴² Elizabeth de Burgh sourced “peas, beans, vetch, and maslin from [her] manors” while another entry notes Geoffrey, the maltmaker, arrived at Clare to produce malt from “the last day of September until 30 October.”¹⁴³ Revenues from various rents and fines supplied the hard currency that was often required to purchase goods not available directly from a noble’s manors and estates. Elizabeth de Burgh received fees from the court of the honour of Clare, for example her receipt of two pounds and ten shillings for relief after “John de Boyland died seised of certain tenements of the Lady’s fee

¹⁴⁰ Jennifer Ward, ed., *Elizabeth de Burgh, Lady of Clare (1295-1360) : Household and Other Records*, trans. Jennifer Ward (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: The Boydell Press, 2014), 86.

¹⁴¹ Barbara Hanawalt, “Female Networks for Fostering Lady Lisle’s Daughters,” in *Medieval Mothering*, ed. John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1996), 241.

¹⁴² Moriarty, *The Voice of the Middle Ages in Personal Letters 1100-1500*, 223.

¹⁴³ Ward, *Elizabeth de Burgh, Lady of Clare (1295-1360) : Household and Other Records*, 12–14.

in Ringstead by service of ½ knight's fee.”¹⁴⁴ A source of hard currency was thus available by hosting the local court because a portion of any fines levied accrued to the estate manager through the pleasure of the king. In general, Elizabeth de Burgh's households are representative of the involved nature of a medieval estate and the manner by which they could be self-sustaining with the proper management. To be sure, the duties of a medieval estate manager extended beyond commodity and cash management to include the supervision of the individuals who lived there.

In addition to financial stewardship, a noblewoman's responsibilities surrounding household management often included the wardship of young or adolescent children. Families expended considerable resources to place their children in households where they would receive appropriate training, and develop contacts to further careers or marriages. A wardship was also important to the noblewoman managing the estate because of the cash payment associated with it. For instance, Elizabeth de Burgh received one pound, six shillings and eight pence “to have and hold the said wardship and marriage with their profits until Stephen [the ward] is of full age.” At the time of the entry, Stephen was a mere three years of age, consequently, if he survived to marriageable age Elizabeth stood to earn a profit on his marriage in addition to the sum from the wardship.¹⁴⁵ A noblewoman who exercised agency to manage an estate, therefore, was required to perform a varied number of tasks demonstrated by the entries from Elizabeth de Burgh's surviving household accounts.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 126.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

Household accounts and wills from the late twelfth through fourteenth centuries provide a significant amount of information about the size and complexity of households from small manors to large multi-estate conglomerates. These records attest to the sophisticated nature of this responsibility. As a noblewoman of high rank, Elizabeth de Burgh had amassed several properties. These properties sourced their provisions from related demesne lands according to purchases listed among her household records. The documents affirm her ability to manage several estates and manors regardless of her gender. This is similar to the high-ranking chief executive officer of a modern multi-level business organization. The modern position while normally attained through training alone provides an analogy for the role that a medieval noblewoman fulfilled when exercising agency as an estate manager. The medieval estate manager received their position because of their social status and training. Indeed, the household accounts that are available for several medieval noblewomen's estates illustrate the complexity of their task.

Elizabeth de Burgh's household accounts from 1326 to 1359 outline the administration of multiple residences. Elizabeth was a detail-oriented manager demonstrated by the specifics from her accounts that include postings about the "remuneration made to John Tebaud for weighing the Lady's wool at Clare" in addition to her purchase of various commodities.¹⁴⁶ Similarly, Elizabeth Stonor's household records provide additional evidence of the management of a medieval estate. While the Stonor household was smaller than that of the Lady of Clare, nevertheless, it demonstrates the agency exercised by the noblewoman who was in charge.¹⁴⁷ The fact that these women

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 105.

¹⁴⁷ Ward, *Women of the English Nobility and Gentry, 1066-1500*, 156-57.

controlled their finances confirms that they saw a need for this type of close oversight in the administration of their estates. More significantly, it illustrates that these noblewomen were powerful enough and had the skills to wield this type of mastery over their lands and revenues.

For a medieval noblewoman to function effectively as an estate manager, she required a level of competence in financial stewardship and leadership. Both areas would have necessitated a noblewoman to be literate. Many nobles were bilingual or multilingual, understanding, speaking, and to some extent reading and writing French, English, and Latin. English noblewomen learned their letters so that they could correspond with family members, rulers, ecclesiastics, and absent husbands.¹⁴⁸ There is evidence that noblewomen sent letters quite frequently for a variety of reasons because a significant number of these letters have survived and are now in the extant historical record. The ability to read and possibly write would have provided a noblewoman with an important skill she could employ to become a capable estate manager. She could have independently reviewed the household accounts of her estates and manors and have had personal knowledge of the correspondence sent to others under her seal. Indeed, being literate would have significantly influenced a noblewoman's ability to exercise agency in the management of her estate.

Historical records demonstrate that noblewomen received training to fulfill their duty as an estate manager when they were young. The preparation of a noblewoman to run a large household likely occurred in either her familial homes or those of her guardians if she were a ward. Eleanor de Montfort (1252-1282) evidently learned the role of manager at

¹⁴⁸ Newman, *The Anglo-Norman Nobility in the Reign of Henry I*, 22.

a young age because she was still in her teen years when she faced down her brother-in-law to retain the wardships assigned to her.¹⁴⁹ The training and informal education English medieval noblewomen provided them with a background upon which they drew as managers of large establishments. Noblewomen needed to act as estate managers overseeing large complex properties, and to be able to integrate the products and revenues from their estates and manors successfully. It follows, therefore, that noblewomen received guidance concerning the principles of management to be a capable and tenacious administrator.

Medieval writers do not discuss explicitly the education and training of individual noblewomen, but it most likely took place under the tutelage of a close female relative or guardian.¹⁵⁰ Few documents in the historical record describe the childhood years of medieval noblewomen. For example, there are no official accounts of the birth of Eleanor of Montfort despite her royal parentage, being the daughter of King John and Isabella of Angouleme, but estimates based on other events place it in 1215.¹⁵¹ Therefore, we should not interpret the missing information surrounding the early education of medieval noblewomen below the level of the royal family as unusual. Nevertheless, from an examination of other records about the lives of noblewomen, we can infer that they did receive training. Christine de Pisan's *Treasure of the City of Ladies*, written in the early fifteenth century, notes that a capable noblewoman must be prepared to step into her

¹⁴⁹ Louise J. Wilkinson, *Eleanor de Montfort* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2012), 52.

¹⁵⁰ Wilkinson, *Eleanor de Montfort*, 10.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

husband's role of an estate manager upon his death or absence.¹⁵² The fact that de Pisan wrote about a noblewoman's training indicates that it did occur and it most likely took place informally, in the home. This training provided noblewomen with the *habitus* to oversee a far-flung organization that carried them past gender restrictions. It points to a role that was determined more by social distinctions than by, gender.¹⁵³

Long before Christine de Pisan wrote the *Treasure of the City of Ladies*, Robert Grosseteste, bishop of Lincoln, composed a treatise on estate management during the mid-thirteenth century that he dedicated to Margaret de Lacy, a widowed countess. Grosseteste provided a set of guidelines that outlined many of the tasks an estate manager would be required to carry out. These tasks included a knowledge of her "parcels, all the rents, customs, usages, bond services, franchises, fees, and holdings" across all her manors and estates.¹⁵⁴ In addition, the treatise included direction on hiring and supervising capable personnel, and purchasing activities, as well as how to conduct an audit of the household records, and oversee a physical inventory count. *The Rules of Robert Grosseteste* is analogous to a modern corporate accounting textbook with its descriptions of individual management duties. Moreover, as bishop Grosseteste adhered to the importance of learning and knowledge, the intent of the treatise was to instruct a noblewoman in the broad range of tasks expected of her.

¹⁵² Jennifer Ward, ed., *Women of the English Nobility and Gentry, 1066-1500*, trans. Jennifer Ward (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 9.

¹⁵³ Bourdieu and Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, 16–17. *Habitus* is a term that describes a set of guidelines that an individual internalizes over time to draw upon as circumstances arise. The *habitus* allows future responses based on past training or conditioning. These reactions become outwardly automatic, and the individual reacts without appearing directed in their reactions.

¹⁵⁴ Dorothea Oschinsky, ed., "The Rules of Robert Grosseteste," in *Walter of Henley and Other Treatises on Estate Management and Accounting* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 389.

Grosseteste placed great store in teaching and record keeping. In his diocese, “he sought clerics whose knowledge, age and experience would lead them to demonstrate spiritual maturity in their lives and their teaching and preaching.”¹⁵⁵ Grosseteste’s letters describe an individual who considered the benefits of sound leadership among ecclesiastical and secular administrations to be important because competent leaders translated into the good governance of subordinates.¹⁵⁶ Grosseteste wrote his *Rules* in French and in Latin versions to facilitate their use in secular as well as ecclesiastical contexts.¹⁵⁷ Surviving household records demonstrate that most estate managers followed the *Rules* in some fashion. It is likely that his treatise passed between households because Grosseteste’s personal connections included Eleanor de Montfort’s family in addition to his ties to Margaret de Lacy.¹⁵⁸ This sharing of information demonstrates that the social capital medieval English noblewomen enjoyed and their level of literacy arguably led them to increase their understanding of management principles. A noblewoman’s knowledge of the good governance of her estates and manors, therefore, could have translated into an increase in the revenues that she received from her properties.

A noblewoman could amass a sizable amount of wealth by marrying well and competently managing her inheritance and dowry. Prosopographical interpretations suggest that during the twelfth to fifteenth centuries the affluence of many noblewomen did increase. Included among those noblewomen who benefited from the growth of their estates were Margaret de Lacy, Elizabeth de Burgh, and Isabella de Vescy. Financial assets

¹⁵⁵ Philippa M. Hoskin, ed., *Robert Grosseteste as Bishop of Lincoln, The Episcopal Rolls, 1235-1253* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: The Boydell Press, 2015), LXXIII.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, LI.

¹⁵⁷ Oschinsky, “The Rules of Robert Grosseteste,” 193-194.

¹⁵⁸ Lars Kjaer, “Food, Drink and Ritualised Communication in the Household of Eleanor de Montfort, February to August 1265,” *Journal of Medieval History* 37 (2011): 76.

in the Middle Ages took the form of lands, fees, and other holdings from which a noblewoman could receive a share of revenues. Margaret de Lacy was married, then widowed, and remarried and widowed again. These multiple marriages left her, as the Countess of Lincoln, with several manors and estates under her control because of her dowries and inheritances. Research into Elizabeth de Burgh's household accounts and other documents estimate that the revenues from the Clare estates, which she inherited in 1317, were 2,000 pounds per year, a sizable income for the period. Elizabeth's overlordship of these lands was the result of three marriages, which left her an increasingly wealthy widow.¹⁵⁹ Her income in 1317 was approximately 250 times the average revenue received by members of the gentry. Consequently, holding this level of wealth suggests Elizabeth had the need to oversee her estates and because of her social status and training, she possessed the expertise to manage her aggregated properties.¹⁶⁰

To maintain and increase the revenues from their holdings these women had to perform the role of a corporate manager "to guard and govern [their] lands and household."¹⁶¹ The medieval household formed the prime focus from which various operational tasks emanated. *The Rules of Robert Grosseteste* began by instructing the noblewoman to make it clear that her authority was paramount in the absence of her husband. Grosseteste's treatise advises the lady of the estate to hold an immediate audit or inquest into the extent of her estates as soon as she came into possession of them.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁹ Jennifer Ward, "English Noblewomen and the Local Community in the Later Middle Ages," in *Medieval Women in Their Communities* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 6.

¹⁶⁰ Ward, *Women of the English Nobility and Gentry, 1066-1500*, 5.

¹⁶¹ Dorothea Oschinsky, ed., "The Rules of Robert Grosseteste," in *Walter of Henley and Other Treatises on Estate Management and Accounting* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 389.

¹⁶² Oschinsky, "The Rules of Robert Grosseteste," 389-91.

Indeed, there was an expectation that the noblewoman would take immediate charge of her lands and exercise agency in its management.

In the thirteenth century, the role of a household manager was an appropriate occupation or duty for either lord or lady; it was not a gender specific one. Grosseteste dedicated his treatise to a noblewoman with the knowledge that she was already exercising this role. Grosseteste also directed his instructions to the lord and/or the lady of the estate further demonstrating the non-gender-specific nature of this role. By addressing his reader as lord or lady, Grosseteste also informs us that the estate manager was a person of noble rank. The language used by Grosseteste is evidence that when the appropriate man was absent, there was expectation that a woman of equivalent social standing could exercise agency and fulfill the role of an estate manager.

Grosseteste's usage of lord and lady in his treatise is in contrast to Walter of Henley's treatise on medieval accounting records. Henley's work follows a more familiar style and while also written in French, it does not rise above the level of basic manorial record keeping, and advice about farming.¹⁶³ At the outset, Walter admonishes his reader to put something away for a rainy day.

If youe may youre landes amende, eyther by tillage or by stock of cattaile or by any other provision above the yearly extente putte that overpluis into money, for if corne fayle or fier doe happen or any other mischaunce then wille that be somewhat woorth to you which you have in coyne.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶³ Ibid., 152–64.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 309.

The wording used by Walter indicates his audience was not as highly positioned in society as was Grosseteste's countess. Walter's readers appear concerned with basic agricultural practices rather than presenting a show of leadership, or auditing household records.

This linguistic analysis furthers the argument that an estate manager held their position because of rank, not gender. The position of a noblewoman as an estate manager was, therefore, one that she held because of her social status as a noble. Rather than Walter of Henley's lower ranks of estate managers, Grosseteste directed his guidelines to noblewomen such as the countess of Lincoln, a fact reflected in the differences of language and usage.

Grosseteste addressed his work to elites and included topics such as how a noblewoman should command the respect of her people. The following passage further demonstrates the need to display power, wealth, and control over those under the noblewoman's supervision.

The (seventeenth) rule teaches you how you ought to seat people at meals in your house.

Let your freemen and guests be seated at tables on either side together, as far as possible, not here four there three and when the free household are seated all the grooms shall enter, be seated, and rise together. Strictly forbid that there is loud noise during mealtime and you yourself be seated at all times in the middle of the high table, that your presence as lord or lady is made manifest to all and that you may see plainly on either side all the service and all the faults. And take care that you have every day at mealtime two men to supervise your household while you are at table and be sure that this will earn you great fear and reverence.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 403.

Grosseteste is describing a scene in which the noblewoman's gender is not the important consideration. Her visibility in maintaining discipline over her household is the foremost concern in her capacity as the head of the household. Grosseteste's directions to Margaret, and to other lords and ladies, reinforce the fact that the role of an estate manager relied primarily on the noblewoman's position and not her gender.

Elsewhere in the *Rules* instructed the noblewoman to make a public show of power through the livery or clothing that her staff wore. The sixteenth rule outlined the manner by which the noblewoman should direct her "knights and ...gentlemen" to wear the correct livery and that their clothing should not consist of "old surcoats, and soiled cloaks, and cut-off coats." Grosseteste advised that this was essential to endorse the noblewoman's prestige.¹⁶⁶ This section of the handbook illustrates that an estate manager needed to be observed maintaining power over the actions of others. The need for a noblewoman to direct her subordinates to wear certain articles of clothing communicated to others that she occupied a position of superiority over these individuals. The members of each noble house wore livery unique to that household. This was an identifying feature of the household regardless of whether a man or a woman commanded the estate. It was important for the members of a household to wear specific livery when directed to by their lord or lady. Consequently, it was the responsibility of the estate manager to ensure compliance to this requirement. To be sure, it was a noblewoman's social status that caused subordinates to follow her commands. The ability to exercise power over her staff was as important as her ability to communicate her authority to others outside the household.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

External communication primarily took the form of letters to spouses, as partners in the management of the enterprise, and to officials. Noblewomen exercised agency when their husbands were absent. Their letters are substantive evidence that the social rank and training of noblewomen were important factors that influenced husbands to authorize their wives to act in their stead. A letter sent from a noblewoman to her absent husband kept him apprised of activities on the estate and demonstrates the level of confidence he placed in his wife, who had been delegated authority over the couple's assets. Eleanor de Montfort exercised agency and employed her social capital to maintain the lands she had acquired upon the death of her husband, William Marshall, (d. 1231). She not only managed these lands but also increased her holdings when she obtained lands in Wiltshire in September of 1233.¹⁶⁷ A letter written by Margaret de Lacy reveals circumstances similar to that of Eleanor's as both noblewomen had been delegated the responsibility to manage the family's estates in their husband's absence. In the mid thirteenth century, Margaret de Lacy wrote a letter to Sir Robert de Vere noting that her husband was travelling "beyond the sea."¹⁶⁸ Likewise, Aline Despenser's actions outline the agency she exercised while functioning as her husband's partner during his time away from the family estate. Aline's letter to the chancellor and the letters of other noblewomen establishes that their positions were determined by social status and training, not gender.

Similar to the other noblewomen's letters, Margaret Paston wrote a letter to her absent husband that further demonstrates the trust placed in a noblewoman to handle adeptly the business affairs of the family. Margaret was a prolific letter writer. In March

¹⁶⁷ Wilkinson, *Eleanor de Montfort*, 52–53.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 113.

of 1451, she wrote to her husband about the numerous tasks she had completed while he was away in London.

I send yow the roll that ye sent for, in selyd, be the
brynger her of; it was fownd in your trussing cofor. As
for hering, I have bowt an horslode for iiiij^s. vj^d. I can
gett none ell [*eels*] yett; as for bever [*i.e. drinkables*],
ther is promysid me somme, but I myt not gete it yett.
I sent to Jone Petché to have an answer for the
wyndowis... as for all other eronds that ye have
commandid for to be do, thei shal be do als sone as thei
may be do.¹⁶⁹

Margaret's letter to John depicts a wife who earnestly managed the couple's estate while her husband earned a living as a lawyer in London. Margaret Paston worked diligently to exercise agency to acquire the social capital and wealth that could assist her and her family.

Another tenacious female member of the Paston family, Margery Paston, wrote to her absent husband in 1484. A portion of her letter discusses the need to replace the family's bookkeeper with a more suitable one who would maintain daily records according to Margery's instructions.

the mane that ye lefte with me woll not take upon hym
to breve dayly as ye commandyt. He seyth he hath not
usyd to geve a rekenyng [an adding up] nothyr of bred
nor alle [*ale*] tyll at the wekys end; and he seyth he wot
well that he shuld not condenyth [*give satisfaction*] and
therfor I soppose he shall not abyd, and I trow ye shall
be fayne to purveye another man for Symond, for ye har
never the nerer a wysse man for hym.¹⁷⁰

This letter demonstrates Margery's efforts to ensure her staff followed her directions because she was head of the household during her husband's absence. Margery's actions,

¹⁶⁹ James Gairdner, ed., *The Paston Letters*, vol. II (Project Gutenberg eBook, 2012), No. 183, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/40989/40989-h/40989-h.htm>.

¹⁷⁰ James Gairdner, ed., *The Paston Letters*, vol. VI (Project Gutenberg eBook, 2012), No. 999, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/42240/42240-h/42240-h.htm>.

as an active participant in the selection of capable employees who would adhere to her orders, demonstrate another attribute of a skilled corporate manager. Margery's letter does not suggest that locating someone who would follow her orders would be overly difficult. Therefore, it attests to the fact that the role of manager was an acceptable one for a noblewoman and was contingent upon rank rather than gender. Isabella de Vescy's tenure as warden of Bamburgh castle also illustrates the agency that a noblewoman exercised when she adroitly managed her social capital and personal connections.

Isabella de Vescy was a competent manager who employed her personal connections and utilized the revenues from her lands to guarantee hers and her brother's survival amidst a volatile, unsettled, and dangerous political climate. Isabella de Vescy commanded extensive land from 1300 onwards and became a successful manager of her family's economic and political fortunes. These lands included Bamburgh castle, assigned to her in 1304 by Edward I. Isabella's corporate abilities, her loyalty to the crown and her status as a widow convinced Edward I to install her as warden of Bamburgh castle.¹⁷¹ After the death of Edward I, Isabella continued to exert her influence at his son's court and the castle of Bamburgh, and other lands and fees, remained under her control as evidenced by the Calendar of Patent Roll entries (1310 to 1312). In 1310, she collected 112 pounds for the annual farm payments due to the sheriff of the castle of Bamburgh.¹⁷² This increased to include a further

40s yearly, the value of 13 acres of arable land with a separate pasturage lying between the demesne lands of

¹⁷¹ Mitchell, *Portraits of Medieval Women, Family, Marriage and Politics in England 1225-1350*, 96.

¹⁷² *Calendar of Patent Rolls Preserved in the Public Record Office*, Edward II. A.D. 1307-1313 (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1894), 225.

the castle lately held by Thomas Ligier for his life, provided that she shall maintain at her expense the houses, doors, bridges and walls of the castle, and also the watchmen¹⁷³

In 1311, Isabella again increased her holdings when the bishop of Durham died and his manor became available.¹⁷⁴ Isabella's ability to increase her wealth through her influence with the king caused her to be singled out by the Lords Ordainers.

During the reign of Edward II, a group of barons petitioned against the obvious patronage with which the king rewarded his court favourites. Isabella de Vescy stands out as the lone woman targeted by this group of noblemen apparently because of her successes. The Ordinances of 1311 mentions Isabella by name.

Because it is found by examination by the prelates, earls and barons that the lady de Vescy has caused the king to give to sir Henry de Beaumont, her brother, and to others, lands, liberties and bailiwicks to the loss and dishonour of the king and the evident disinheritation of the crown and also caused to be sent out letters under the urge' against the law and the intention of the king, We ordain that she go to her house — and that within the fortnight after next Michaelmas — without ever returning to the court to stay there, and that for all these aforesaid things and because it is understood that Bamburgh castle belongs to the crown, we also ordain that this castle be retaken from her into the hand of the king and that it be no more given to her or to another except at the king's pleasure.¹⁷⁵

Isabella's ability to manage her affairs adroitly and to exercise agency allowed her to extend her stay at Bamburgh for a final year, until 1312. The crown approved Isabella's mandate as "keeper of the castle of Baumburgh, to retain possession of the castle, the king

¹⁷³ Ibid., 236.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 332.

¹⁷⁵ "The Ordinances of 1311," *Documents in English History*, accessed September 15, 2016, http://historyofengland.typepad.com/documents_in_english_hist/2013/02/the-ordinances-of-1311.html.

being unwilling that Henry de Percy, to whom he has granted it, should have custody thereof.”¹⁷⁶ These documents do not indicate that Isabella’s efforts to control Bamburgh castle, and its associated revenues, were out of character or unusual for a woman. The discussion ignores the matter of her gender. Rather, in the opinion of the barons, Isabella’s abilities to misdirect funds and to be a poor influence towards the king were at issue. The Lords Ordainers targeted Isabella because, through her close ties to the queen, she could sway the king in her favour and that of her brother, Henry Beaumont. Isabella’s social capital provided her with the interpersonal connections to increase her holdings and extend her political influence. To reimburse Isabella for the ultimate loss of Bamburgh castle the king awarded her lands in Lincoln.

Writ de indentendo directed to the knights, freemen and tenants of the manors of Thoresweye, Stiveton, Lindwode and Carlesthorne, co. Lincoln, for Isabello de Bello Monte, lady of Vescy, to whom the king granted these manors together with a free court in the city of Lincoln to hold for her life, together with knights' fees, advowsons of churches, escheats, and all other appurtenances of the manors in recompences for the castle of Bamburgh with truncage there and a rent in the town of Warnemuth, together with 40 shillings a year, for the value of 13 acres of land with a separate pasture which she has surrendered to the king.¹⁷⁷

Isabella did not accept defeat at the loss of Bamburgh castle. A writ from the Calendar of Patent Rolls reveals that she exercised agency to secure an income for the balance of her life. Noting the significant schedule of fees she was to receive, in exchange for returning Bamburgh castle to the crown, she likely survived quite comfortably. Isabella and other

¹⁷⁶ *Calendar of Patent Rolls Preserved in the Public Record Office*, 427.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 460.

noblewomen in her position were required regularly to forward to the exchequer portions of their revenues, such as the farm rents they collected. Accordingly, it was necessary that noblewomen manage their estate and keep accounts and records of these transactions.

While the format of the recordkeeping varied among estates and households, the general purpose to track expenditures and maintain control over inflows and outflows of goods and monies remained the same. Grosseteste's *Rules* may have been a secularised version of a similar treatise for recordkeeping in a monastery. His *Rules* emphasise the calculation of average weekly consumption for "ale, meat, cheese, fuel, and other essentials."¹⁷⁸ A household account from Eleanor de Montfort's records in 1265 subdivides daily purchases from those made in large quantity on a periodic basis. These subdivisions of her household records are comparable to the balance sheet accounts that record the transactions of a modern business organization. Eleanor's records are similar to the extent that hers list the daily reductions from inventoried goods. For example, there were sections described as "items from stock (*de stauro*), from manors (*de manerio*) and accounted for previously (*precomputatus*)."¹⁷⁹ Eleanor's records demonstrate the efficient use of budgeting and planning that any good corporate manager would undertake.

Elizabeth de Burgh's household developed a set of books similar to those of the royal household while Joan of Valence, countess of Pembroke (1295-7) kept accounts along the lines of a daily journal. They detail the location of the countess on any given date and provide departmental details for wages, kitchen, marshalsea or stabling, alms, and other

¹⁷⁸ C.M. Woolgar, ed., *Household Accounts from Medieval England, Part 1* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 16.

¹⁷⁹ Woolgar, *Household Accounts from Medieval England, Part 1*, 19.

sundry expenditures.¹⁸⁰ The household accounts for Eleanor de Montfort in 1265, are not as detailed as Joan's and Elizabeth's, however, they are divided into kitchen and stabling expenses.¹⁸¹ Evidence of a separate hand tallying daily entries points to the review or auditing of the accounts by another individual, someone trusted by the lady to oversee the periodic inflows and outflows of goods. Clerks entered the word *quit* at the margin in some records to indicate the completion of an audit.¹⁸² Elizabeth de Burgh's household accounts are comprehensive and many of the entries have the word "audited" at the margin and the notation "and he is quit" following the summation of a posting.¹⁸³ We cannot know with certainty that the noblewoman herself personally approved the records. Nevertheless, the success of these elite women's various organizations suggests they were in command and monitored the accounts closely.

Estate administration expanded from the middle of the thirteenth century to the mid-fifteenth century and the addition of the diet account or daily journal impelled the development of more comprehensive systems of recordkeeping. One of the most detailed extant set of journals is that of Elizabeth de Burgh. Her records comprise twenty percent of the catalogued documents among this class of manuscripts and include specifics on livery rolls, marshalsea, or stabling expenses, as well as postings for corn, brewing, and the accounts of both her chamber clerk and wardrobe clerk.¹⁸⁴ An analysis of these accounts points to their use for planning and management purposes in the administration of manors and estates. These documents would have been necessary for the noblewoman in charge of

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 48–51.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 23.

¹⁸² Ibid., 33.

¹⁸³ Ward, *Elizabeth de Burgh, Lady of Clare (1295-1360: Household and Other Records)*, 113–18.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 18.

the household to follow Grosseteste's seventh rule that "teaches you how you may learn by the comparison of the accounts with the estimates the diligence or negligence of your servants and bailiffs of manors and lands."¹⁸⁵ Grosseteste indicates that he expected the estate manager, lord, or lady to keep detailed records and to periodically audit those records with a view to the preservation of their wealth. Obviously household accounts were becoming increasingly complex alongside a rise of the number and diversity of the lands and revenues persons of nobility might manage.

The increase in detailed recordkeeping after the thirteenth century was stimulated by the increase in the number of wealthy widows after the Magna Carta stipulated the right of widows to personal and economic security and increased agency. Section 7 of the Magna Carta lifted from widows the burden of payment for their dower.¹⁸⁶

(7) At her husband's death, a widow may have her marriage portion and inheritance at once and without trouble. She shall pay nothing for her dower, marriage portion, or any inheritance that she and her husband held jointly on the day of his death. She may remain in her husband's house for forty days after his death, and within this period her dower shall be assigned to her.¹⁸⁷

In 1217, and again in 1225, this section expanded to allow for comparable accommodations for the new widow, if her home had been her husband's castle.¹⁸⁸ This clause, together with clause 8, which prevented forced remarriage, altered the legal landscape regarding

¹⁸⁵ Oschinsky, "The Rules of Robert Grosseteste," 395.

¹⁸⁶ Janet Senderowitz Loengard, "Rationabilis Dos: Magna Carta and the Widow's 'Fair Share' in the Earlier Thirteenth Century," in *Wife and Widow in Medieval England*, ed. Sue Sheridan Walker (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1993), 61–62.

¹⁸⁷ "Magna Carta," *The British Library: Magna Carta*, accessed September 15, 2016, <https://www.bl.uk/magna-carta/articles/magna-carta-english-translation>.

¹⁸⁸ Loengard, "Rationabilis Dos: Magna Carta and the Widow's 'Fair Share' in the Earlier Thirteenth Century," 63.

property for many widows.¹⁸⁹ Prior to enactment of the Magna Carta, a claim of dower carried a cash penalty that could require a woman to accept another marriage to remain solvent.¹⁹⁰ The Articles of the Barons added article 37 to address fines payable by widows that pre-dated the Magna Carta. These amendments would have assisted widowed noblewomen to manage their estates because they would have had been able to exercise greater agency and enjoy increased security of their property and person.

Fines made for dowers, marriages, inheritances and amercements, unjustly and against the law of the land, are to be entirely remitted; or they are to be dealt with by judgment of the twenty-five barons, or by judgment of the greater part of them, together with the archbishop and others whom he wishes to convoke to act with him. On condition that if any or some of the twenty-five are in such an action, they are to be removed and others substituted in their place by the rest of the twenty-five.¹⁹¹

An analysis of the Pipe Rolls and Plea Rolls after 1215 concluded that court settlements usually upheld these clauses because the majority of court cases advantaged the female plaintiff.¹⁹² These legal developments added to the arsenal that noblewomen could employ to influence the actions of those around them and thus deploy their agency and social capital.

In summary, estate manager was clearly a role expected to be exercised equally by noblemen or noblewomen. To this end, noblewomen received training from a young age beginning when they were teenagers, as in the case of Eleanor de Montfort. These

¹⁸⁹ Sheehan, "The Influence of Canon Law on the Property Rights of Married Women in England," 23.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁹¹ H. Summerson and et al, trans., "The Articles of the Barons," *The Magna Carta Project*, accessed September 15, 2016, http://magnacarta.cmp.uea.ac.uk/read/articles_of_barons.

¹⁹² Loengard, "Rationabilis Dos: Magna Carta and the Widow's 'Fair Share' in the Earlier Thirteenth Century," 69.

noblewomen were literate and treatises outlining the principles of sound financial management, or as Grosseteste called it good governance were written for them so that they could improve their skills. Noblewomen such as Elizabeth de Burgh audited their household accounts and actively engaged in the management of their estates and manors. Margaret Paston independently hired and supervised her staff. These noblewomen performed leadership roles in the absence of husbands or sons, because that was the expectation for noblewoman who held positions of authority. Margaret de Lacy received guidance concerning how best to manifest her authority to those in her household and to others external to it. Most noblewomen successfully managed, and in several cases increased, their estates and manors to further their economic well-being and that of their households. Arguably, the role they performed rested on social status, and an individual noblewoman's ability as well as her social capital. The training noblewomen received and their familiarity with the supervision of an estate prepared them for a role comparable to a military quartermaster when called upon to render service to their king as required by their feudal obligations.

Chapter 5: *Quaestor* or Quartermaster

The dust had barely settled on the opening salvos of the Hundred Years War in 1343 when Petrarch wrote at length to Cardinal Giovanni Colonna about Maria, a woman whose “body [was] military rather than maidenly...who help[ed] wage an inherited local war.” Petrarch describes Maria as a warrior who was “first into battle, slow to withdraw, ...attacks aggressively, [and] practises skilful feints.”¹⁹³ It is evident that Petrarch respected this woman’s abilities because he informs Cardinal Giovanni early in the letter that Maria “to suit her name ...has the merit of virginity.” Petrarch commented that he had met Maria “a few years” prior and she “was then weaponless” and “her constant hardships” had transformed her. Petrarch’s letter does not indicate that Maria’s martial pursuits were contrary to her gender; rather he was clearly impressed by her strength and her ability to adapt to her changing circumstances.

Petrarch’s description of Maria reveals a woman behaving outside medieval gender stereotypes for women. Similarly, medieval noblewomen developed skills and altered their *habitus* to cope with a changing environment. Maria’s example demonstrates that she was not considered wrong-headed but rather transformative or as Petrarch wrote, “remarkable.” Medieval noblewomen who lived in the Marcher areas of Wales and Scotland were frequently involved in various civil wars and rebellions including the conflict between Stephen and Matilda, the border wars between Scotland and England, the strife of the Baronial Opposition, and the War of the Roses.

¹⁹³ Moriarty, *The Voice of the Middle Ages in Personal Letters 1100-1500*, 144–45.

Noblewomen trained in the management of a large medieval estate, were equipped with the skills necessary to garrison a castle and supervise a large, primarily male, staff. This is analogous to planning, and managing the logistical support for an army which is undertaken by the quartermaster corps in the modern military. Arguably, a noblewoman's social rank and experiences provided her with the agency necessary to perform a task conventionally gendered male. During politically turbulent and unstable times, medieval noblewomen, especially those located in the Marcher areas of Wales and Scotland, functioned as military leaders. They armed family fortresses to ensure the personal and financial security of their household members. These preparations entailed provisioning armies with weapons and food. In addition, it would have required organizing and directing all workers in the castle, including artificers, blacksmiths, carpenters, cooks, ditchers, marshals, watchmen, and others whose skills were necessary to resist attacks. Thus, noblewomen exercised agency and employed their social capital in various ways to provide military assistance to family members and other allies in times of need. By deploying their networks and connections and using their agency to make critical decisions, medieval noblewomen functioned in a way analogous to a quartermaster general or senior military staff officer.

The existence of noblewomen who could respond to a changing political environment with intelligence and ingenuity can be understood with help from Pierre Bourdieu's theories of the *habitus* and *field*. Bourdieu proposes that *habitus* is a form of training which an individual has incorporated into unconscious actions and reactions to

cultural and environmental stimuli.¹⁹⁴ His premise of *field* is analogous to the sphere of activity that surrounds an individual.¹⁹⁵ It is reasonable to hypothesize that these adaptable noblewomen drew on past experiences and training, their *habitus*, to adjust to changing political situations, the *field* in which they operated. Accordingly, noblewomen were expected to utilize their *habitus* and exercise agency when called upon to fulfill their obligations to provide military service to the king.

Military service to the king could take on various forms besides providing soldiers for the battlefield. The defense of a castle was another equally crucial type of military support. The responsibility to organize defenses fell to a noblewoman in the absence of her husband or male relative. In 1327, when Edward III was fifteen, he succeeded his father as king; when he was twenty-three when he ordered his vassals to prepare for war. Nobles were required to supply provisions including financial aid and, combatants, and to garrison castles in preparation for the impending Hundred Years War. Therefore, as Edward had ordered his noblemen to lead his forces on the continent, it was their wives, sisters, and daughters, who coordinated security in England.

When Edward required assistance in his growing dispute with the king of France, he did not hesitate to call on noblewomen who held lands of strategic importance. One of those noblewomen was Margaret, the widow of Edmund of Woodstock. Her husband Edmund was the younger brother of Edward II and the uncle of Edward III. Margaret had lived through the tumultuous period when Queen Isabella had rebelled against her husband, Edward II, and Margaret's brother-in-law. Margaret narrowly escaped being ruined by her

¹⁹⁴ Grenfell, *Pierre Bourdieu, Key Concepts*, 49–54.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 65–72.

husband's shifting alliances, first to his brother, then the baronial opposition and finally back to his brother. She was widowed in 1330 when the crown executed Edmund for treason. A posthumous pardon for Edmund from his uncle Edward III provided redemption for Margaret and her children who were favourites of Edward III.¹⁹⁶ Margaret's personal relationship with Edward III worked to her advantage and that of her children.

Correspondence between the king and noblewomen who controlled castles in militarily strategic regions illustrates the confidence the king placed in these women for defence of the realm. In particular, a letter from Edward III to Margaret, the widow of the earl of Kent illustrates the king's expectation that Margaret, because of her status and training as a noble, was fully capable to mount a defence against any imminent threat. The letter, dated in 1335, directs Margaret to ensure her castle was ready to provide assistance in the event of a foreign assault. Edward wrote to Margaret in Latin, an indication she had been educated to read official documents. Edward was confident that Margaret was capable of organizing the castle for a possible attack "of divers fleets of warships, strongly armed...from foreign parts." His letter ordered her to "provide for the salvation and defence of our ... people." Edward was explicit stating that he was "fully trusting in the maturity of [her] counsel...[to] arm and array [her] people for the defence of the realm and ...to repel powerfully and courageously...our same enemies."¹⁹⁷ The commanding language and tone of the letter leave no question that Margaret was to begin immediately to make preparations for war. Edward III trusted that this noblewoman had the wherewithal to undertake the garrisoning of a military installation.

¹⁹⁶ Maddicott, "Badlesmere, Sir Bartholomew (c.1275–1322)."'

¹⁹⁷ Ward, *Women of the English Nobility and Gentry, 1066-1500*, 146–47.

Other noblewomen such as Joan de Valence, undertook the function of castellan in the absence of a male alternative. Edward III likely took his cue in relying on Margaret, and other noblewomen from the trust William de Valence, earl of Pembroke placed in his wife, Joan. William's letter to his wife illustrates that he considered Joan able to assume the role of castellan during the final months of the Second Barons War . In 1267, the earl sent word to Joan to "command [the knights] ... on our behalf that they act in all things with one accord, and one counsel." William wrote that Joan should have "power over them all ...to ordain and arrange in all things according to that which you shall see to be best to do."¹⁹⁸ The letter reveals her ability to lead and direct her subordinates. Likewise, Edward III wrote to at least two other noblewomen, Marie, the step-daughter to Joan de Valence, and Joan, the widow of Thomas Botetourt. Ready for a French attack during 1335, the king placed the same confidence in these two noblewomen as he did in Margaret of Kent.¹⁹⁹ These women share social status and lived experience that unite them and account for the king's confidence. Rank and training are, therefore, significant factors that contributed to the agency that furnished these women with the experience and skills to step into a military role and exercise it successfully.

Medieval noblewomen received training that focused on the expectation that either as widows or as wives they would likely need to undertake the military leadership and protection of the family estate.²⁰⁰ Uncertain times required all members of a noble family, including women, to protect their assets and manage the defense of the household. The responsibilities of noblewomen in charge of castles included the provisioning and

¹⁹⁸ Moriarty, *The Voice of the Middle Ages in Personal Letters 1100-1500*, 138.

¹⁹⁹ Ward, *Women of the English Nobility and Gentry, 1066-1500*, 147.

²⁰⁰ Livingston, "Powerful Allies and Dangerous Adversaries, Noblewomen in Medieval Society," 10.

garrisoning of these military fortifications in times of war and rebellion. Noblewomen, who married into families with estates in politically unstable and violent areas would have conceivably been present at strategic planning sessions and military discussions and thus ready to fulfill the role of castellan when the need arose.

One such noblewoman, countess of Buchan, provides an example of how women exercised agency and fulfilled the role of castellan during the Scottish Wars of Independence. In the early fourteenth century, the countess of Buchan defended the castle of Berwick against an English siege. When the castle yielded, Edward I ordered her placed in a wooden cage on public view as an example for others of what happened to rebels.²⁰¹ The harsh punishment demonstrates Edward I had few reservations about her gender. Edward made an example of this woman who defied him to take on military leadership for his opponent. The countess's rank and social standing empowered her to lead others during the siege but led to the punishment for the failed attempt.

The Crusades, the Hundred Years War, and multiple rebellions all provided possibilities that a daughter, wife, or widow would provide over-lordship of a family estate or castle. Battlefield deaths of noblemen led to a high mortality rate, resulting in many noblewomen inheriting the titles of sheriff or castellan. Soon after she became a widow, Ela, the countess of Salisbury (1189-1261) actively petitioned to receive the title of sheriff of Wiltshire. Her husband, William Longespee, had held the title previously and her father had been sheriff before Ela's marriage in 1198. In 1226, Ela paid 500 marks to Henry III to obtain control of this title. The fact that Ela held the office of sheriff attests to the ability of

²⁰¹ Ibid., 23.

a noblewoman to exercise agency because of her social status.²⁰² Roger Mortimer's daughter, Isabel, was also a widow when she held the office of keeper of the castle and manor of Owestry in Wales during the late 1200s.²⁰³ Isabel commanded this castle in a militarily active region near the Marches of Wales during the period when Edward I moved to annex Wales. These women held their positions as castellans because of their social status and their ability to exercise agency in performing the role.

In addition to Ela and Isabel, Isabella de Vescy received the title of warden of Bamburgh castle and the responsibilities associated with it. Isabella was the first cousin to the queen, Eleanor of Castile, and one of her preferred ladies in waiting.²⁰⁴ Isabella assumed the title of warden and control of the castle of Bamburgh on November 23, 1307. Association with Eleanor of Castile enhanced her social capital because it was Eleanor's policy to contract influential marriages for as many of her family members as possible. To that end, Eleanor negotiated with eminent families who controlled baronial lands in the Marcher areas of Wales and Scotland. These regions were unsettled and provided opportunities for martial families to accumulate financial and social capital by conquering these regions and by providing their services to the king. Isabella's marriage to John de Vescy connected her to the Vescy and Lacy families in the northern Marches. Her talent for management and leadership coupled with her access to the royal court allowed her to advance her relationship with Edward I.²⁰⁵ During the early 1300s when Edward had

²⁰² Christine Owens, "Noblewomen and Political Activity," in *Women in Medieval Western European Culture*, ed. Linda E. Mitchell (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1999), 209–10.

²⁰³ Emma Cavell, "Intelligence and Intrigue in the March of Wales: Noblewomen and the Fall of Llwelyn Ap Gruffudd, 1274-82," *Historical Research* 88, no. 239 (February 2015): 4.

²⁰⁴ Mitchell, *Portraits of Medieval Women, Family, Marriage and Politics in England 1225-1350*, 93.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 93–96.

concluded one phase of the Anglo-Scottish conflict, he chose the dowager Isabella to replace the recently deceased John de Warenne as keeper of Bamburgh castle.

The fact that Isabella was a widow was important to her appointment to the castle because of the condition included that Isabella not remarry during her tenure as Bamburgh's warden. Such a clause guaranteed that the castle remained solely under Isabella's control. This stipulation would have likewise furnished Isabella with protection against the threat that her wealth and power be confiscated by abduction for the purpose of marriage.²⁰⁶ Edward I, therefore, ensured that a strategic military fortification remained under the command of a loyal supporter. Isabella exercised agency to govern the castle on Edward's behalf and in return reaped the benefits of controlling the lands surrounding it and maintaining her freedom from marriage.

After the death of Edward I, Isabella continued to exercise agency to the benefit of herself and her brother, Sir Henry Beaumont. Their combined power in Northumberland came at the expense of Thomas of Lancaster, a cousin of Edward II. The Patent Rolls records Edward II's affirmation of Isabella's status after the death of his father.

Appointment, for life, of Isabella de Bello Monte, late the wife of John de Vescy, to hold the custody of the castle of Baumburgh, together with truncage (truncagium) and a rent in the town of Warnemuth, subject to the yearly payment into the Exchequer of 110l[pounds].²⁰⁷

Lancaster viewed Isabella's connection to the queen to be a serious impediment to his mastery of the district. The Lords Ordainers attempted to have her removed from this

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 97.

²⁰⁷ *Calendar of Patent Rolls Preserved in the Public Record Office*, Edward II. A.D. 1307-1313 (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1894), 26.

position in 1311. Isabella is the only woman listed in the Ordinances. Article 22 required that she

go to her house — and that within the fortnight after next Michaelmas — without ever returning to the court to stay there, ... [and] that Bamburgh castle belongs to the crown, we also ordain that this castle be retaken from her into the hand of the king and that it be no more given to her or to another except at the king's pleasure.²⁰⁸

Isabella managed to stay on at Bamburgh after January 1312 because “the king being unwilling that Henry de Percy, to whom he has granted it, should have the custody thereof.”²⁰⁹ Finally, in May 1312, she agreed, likely under duress, to take lands in and around Lincoln as compensation for Bamburgh.²¹⁰ The Ordinances listed Isabella along with her brother; and ordered her removal from the court and that Bamburgh castle revert to the crown.²¹¹ Isabella was politically astute and enjoyed a strong relationship with the queen. These circumstances helped her to withstand the variable political winds of the time.²¹² Isabella survived three successive politically unstable and murderous royal administrations. Isabella may have lost Bamburgh castle, but she ensured that she received financial compensation for a comfortable and secure life until her death in 1334.²¹³ She led her life in the pursuit of her goals, employing a high degree of personal agency and taking

²⁰⁸ “The Ordinances of 1311,” *Documents in English History*, accessed September 15, 2016, http://historyofengland.typepad.com/documents_in_english_hist/2013/02/the-ordinances-of-1311.html.

²⁰⁹ *Calendar of Patent Rolls Preserved in the Public Record Office*, 427.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 460.

²¹¹ James Conway Davies, *The Baronial Opposition to Edward II, Its Character and Policy* (London: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1967), 370.

²¹² Mitchell, *Portraits of Medieval Women, Family, Marriage and Politics in England 1225-1350*, 102–3.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 103.

advantage of nearly unparalleled social capital. Undoubtedly, the benefits she enjoyed were conditional on supporting the king in his military endeavours when called upon.

Holding land from the king carried with it a requirement to provide armed support when requested. Medieval noblewomen, as holders of land, were under oath to supply troops when commanded. Their gender did not exempt them from fulfilling the duties of their offices to aid the king. Isabella de Fortibus, countess of Devon and Aumale (1237-1293), sided with the barons against Henry III in the 1260s.²¹⁴ There was a temporary estrangement between the countess and her mother because they chose to provide financial backing to opposite sides. Isabella supported the barons while her mother, Amicia supported the king.²¹⁵ Similarly, according to feudal custom, Elizabeth de Burgh provided Edward III with archers and men-at-arms during the Hundred Years War.²¹⁶ A letter from the king to John de Sutton confirms that Elizabeth would “sustain the toil and excessive costs daily for that cause.”²¹⁷ These examples are illustrative how medieval noblewomen could function in a military capacity because of their rank and training. Therefore, their feudal obligations necessitate that noblewomen would provide assistance when commanded to do so. To be sure, not all support was in the form of directly providing men-at-arms.

Noblewomen exercised agency in devising solutions to the procurement of hard currency for the purchase of arms and payment of troops. Matthew Paris’ chronicle records Joan de Valence’s innovative approach to circumvent obstacles that blocked critical financial resources from reaching her husband, William. In 1259, William was in exile on

²¹⁴ Owens, “Noblewomen and Political Activity,” 213.

²¹⁵ Maddicott, “Badlesmere, Sir Bartholomew (c.1275–1322).”

²¹⁶ Owens, “Noblewomen and Political Activity,” 213.

²¹⁷ Ward, *Elizabeth de Burgh, Lady of Clare (1295-1360) : Household and Other Records*, 139–40.

the continent, and he needed money to continue his support of Henry III.²¹⁸ Joan de Valence masterminded a smuggling scheme to transfer substantial sums of money across the Channel to her husband in Poitou.

with womanly ingenuity, [she] procured a large quantity of wool, ...and amongst this wool she hid a large sum of money...placing the sacks in some strong carts, as though it was only pure wool, she sent it into Poitou.²¹⁹

Joan's improvisation was apparently discovered, but the chronicle states that likely not all of the money was intercepted. Some of the wool shipments containing hidden sums may have arrived at their destination. Joan indirectly performed a role similar to that of a military quartermaster, providing the funds to procure arms and soldiers.²²⁰ Matthew Paris suggests that Joan even attempted to apply for her dowry to "send the greater part of it to her husband...a public enemy of the kingdom."²²¹ To receive her dowry she had to undertake a legal strategy that would have required her to state that her husband was in effect dead. Apparently, the crown had to traverse a fine line between the exile of William and not penalizing his abandoned wife. Joan was able to gain a portion of her dowry because "they did not wish to take it all away from her, lest an innocent woman ...be punished for another's fault."²²² Joan exercised agency and her method of transporting currency to her husband was resourceful and imaginative. Joan's assistance on behalf of

²¹⁸ Linda E. Mitchell, *Joan de Valence, The Life and Influence of a Thirteenth-Century Noblewoman* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), 37.

²¹⁹ J.A. Giles, trans., *Matthew Paris's English History from the Year 1235 to 1273*, vol. III (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1854), 314–15.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, III:315.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, III:307.

²²² *Ibid.*

her husband and her allies did not lead to personal danger but this was not the case for all noblewomen who exercised agency to perform a military role.

Margaret de Clare's interpersonal networks led her to side with the barons during the rebellion against Edward II. Her refusal to grant Queen Isabella admittance to Leeds castle (1321) was a tactic designed to avoid recognizing Isabella's claim to the castle. Edward II ordered the castle placed under siege. Margaret led the resistance from the summer of 1321 until November when she was compelled to yield and turn the castle over to crown.²²³ She did not suffer the brutal punishment that Edward I ordered for the countess of Buchan after the fall of Berwick castle. However, Margaret was confined in the Tower, and she lost her ability to act on behalf of her allies and family. Her military actions had repercussions and she endured the consequences. There were noblewomen whose attempts to exercise agency fell far short of the prosperity enjoyed by Elizabeth de Burgh and Isabella de Vescy.

Maud de Ufford, countess of Oxford experiences a similar unfortunate outcome as Margaret de Clare. Maud exercised agency in her support for Richard II's military efforts in 1404. She prepared and distributed "many silver and gilt harts, ...badges that King Richard [had] used to confer on his knights, esquires and friends" in order to persuade the powerful local magnates to side with the king. The countess was not successful because she acted against the more powerful Queen Isabella. She was placed in custody and her property was seized.²²⁴ Maud's personal and financial security was compromised because her tactic failed. Although ill-fated the strategy demonstrates that she embarked on a task

²²³ Crawford, *Letters of Medieval Women*, 195.

²²⁴ Ward, *Women of the English Nobility and Gentry, 1066-1500*, 154.

that had political and military repercussions. Maud's efforts provide additional evidence that English medieval noblewomen exercised agency and employed social capital to influence the outcomes of military campaigns. The countess' struggles also illustrate that, similar to Margaret de Clare's outcome, not all noblewomen achieved wealth and personal security. The countess' efforts also evince one of the various ways that noblewomen could employ their social capital to influence the outcome of a military campaign.

Related to their other non-combat roles, noblewomen used their personal networks to conduct espionage. Information gathering was, and remains, an important component of maintaining the upper hand during a war. Letters sent between noblewomen and their husbands or, in the case of widows, to other allies or family members were a source of intelligence essential to plan a military campaign across considerable distances. In 1254, Eleanor, the queen-regent wrote a lengthy letter to Henry III containing news and insights about the war in Castile. Issues that the letter discusses include how the clergy were responding to requests for aid in Gascony, as well as the form of support Henry could expect to receive from his barons.²²⁵ In 1274, a letter sent to Maud Mortimer, wife of Roger Mortimer, one of the leading Marcher lords, disclosed the movements of their adversary, Llywelyn ap Gruffud. Maud received information about where Llwelyn was staying and the state of his supplies. The letter urges Maud to "send to my lord all the news, and that you have Clun readied, and that in every respect we are well warned and

²²⁵ Moriarty, *The Voice of the Middle Ages in Personal Letters 1100-1500*, 130–32.

served.”²²⁶ Maud functioned as an intermediary when she passed along details concerning the escalating hostilities between England and Wales.

A similar letter was addressed to John of Gaunt in 1376. He was not popular as regent for a young Richard II because of his support of the Lollards was contentious and in some circles considered to be heretical. The lady Philippa, a former member of Gaunt’s household and still loyal to him, wrote to “warn [him] of ...enemies...perceived by [her] own experience.” Two Franciscan monks had “wickedly and treacherously spoken” about Gaunt. The lady Philippa’s intent was that John be forewarned so that he could “protect” himself.²²⁷ Rather than being deferential and passive, lady Philippa exercised agency when she passed on critical news to her former lord concerning threats to his person.

Writing for a different purpose, noblewomen could also use their rank and connections to mediate on behalf of family and allies. Eleanor of Montfort’s daughter and namesake, Eleanor wrote to her cousin, Edward I, in October of 1280 seeking leniency in the case of her brother Amauri. Returning from exile in France, Eleanor and Amauri were captured off the coast of Wales when Eleanor was attempting to return to marry Llywelyn ap Gruffydd. She was eventually released after three years of conflict that ended with Llywelyn submitting to Edward I. Eleanor’s and Llywelyn’s marriage was allowed to proceed however Eleanor’s brother, Amauri, remained a captive. Eleanor’s diplomatic efforts in “relieving... the ...condition of our very dear brother” ultimately convinced

²²⁶ Cavell, “Intelligence and Intrigue in the March of Wales: Noblewomen and the Fall of Llywelyn Ap Gruffudd, 1274-82,” 2–3.

²²⁷ Crawford, *Letters of Medieval Women*, 227–29.

Edward to allow Amauri to leave England.²²⁸ Eleanor's letter demonstrates her ability to exercise agency and employ social capital and thus provide aid to a family member.

Cecily Neville, the Duchess of York was of higher social status than John of Gaunt's former nurse, and likely had a substantial amount of social capital upon which to draw. On the eve of the War of the Roses, Cecily wrote to Queen Margaret of Anjou on behalf of her husband, Richard, Duke of York. The duke had been forced out of the court and Cecily attempted to influence the queen to have Richard reinstated. The letter is that of a supplicant pleading to a higher authority. Cecily's letter continues over two pages, entreating the queen to use her influence to assist Richard who was "estranged from the grace and benevolent favour of ... most merciful prince."²²⁹ In the letter Cecily mentions that she is recovering from childbirth. She likely included the information to enlist an empathetic response from the queen. We know that this would have been the birth of the future Richard III. Cecily's letter writing may have assisted her husband's bid for power because he claimed the crown in 1459 with the support of the Neville family's wealth. Her husband did not hold the position for long, and the War of the Roses carried on. Nevertheless, her son Richard did manage to rule for two years until he was finally unhorsed and de-throned.

The manner in which noblewomen could influence the outcome of a military campaign varied. Medieval noblewomen in the Marches of Wales and Scotland worked within the cultural constraints of the period to exercise agency and support their family members and allies in various ways. They exploited the training they had received to

²²⁸ Ibid., 137–39.

²²⁹ Ibid., 232–35.

become household managers and took advantage of their extensive personal networks. They gathered and relayed critical information about troop movements and the manner and degree to which opponents were supplied. They were responsible for raising funds and for finding ingenious methods to move these financial resources into the hands of the men in their affinities. These funds were the hard currency that was used to purchase arms and pay troops. Similar to a modern quartermaster, they stocked castles with supplies and garrisoned these fortifications with troops. They commanded armed knights in their employ in order to be ready to fulfill their duty as a feudal landholder to supply troops when called upon. They rarely filled an active battlefield position but they did exercise agency, and employ social and financial capital in a multitude of ways to act as intelligence gatherers, logistics officers, and quartermasters. Indeed, Edward III, a capable military leader in his own right, depended on these women to defend “the kingdom against hostile invasions.”²³⁰ Accordingly, noblewomen positioned in the politically unsettled and militarily active regions of the Marches not only took on these roles but the evidence suggests that they were trained to do so. Consequently, this supports the conclusion that the social status and lived experiences of these women empowered them to exercise agency in fulfilling these duties.

²³⁰ Ward, *Women of the English Nobility and Gentry, 1066-1500*, 147., Hans Delbruck, *Medieval Warfare, History of the Art of War*, trans. Walter J. Renfro Jr., vol. III (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 454–61.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Joan of Acre was adamant that it was “neither reprehensible nor difficult for a countess to promote a vigorous young man.”²³¹ Joan was a medieval noblewoman who amassed sufficient social capital to exercise her agency to decide about her own marriage rather than accepting the marriage that her father, Edward I, had been arranging.

Historians, prior to the 1970s and 1980s, studied the high Middle Ages utilizing approaches that produced male-centred interpretations and assuming that medieval women occupied secondary roles in all aspects of life. Leadership and power was assumed to reside only in the male sex. These assumptions were challenged by the ground-breaking work of Jo Ann MacNamara, Joan Kelly, Judith Bennett and others when they re-examined the historical documents and arrived at different conclusions. Using a new periodization for history with the addition of gender as a category of historical analysis, medieval women’s history turned an important corner. These historians concluded that the documentary evidence existed to describe the activities of medieval noblewomen in many areas of life.

This study demonstrates that medieval noblewomen in the marches of Wales and Scotland, exercised agency and employed their social capital to perform the leadership roles of estate manager and military quartermaster. Letters, household accounts, government documents, and treatises detail the various ways that a medieval noblewoman fulfilled these roles by employing her social capital.

²³¹ Ward, *Women of the English Nobility and Gentry, 1066-1500*, 43.

Social status was important for a medieval noblewoman because her ability to accumulate social capital depended upon it. Her social capital resulted from the wide-ranging and important personal networks she established. These networks provided a medieval noblewoman with the ability to exercise agency in her choice of marriage partner or when deciding to remain a widow. The choices that a noblewoman made, to remarry or to remain a widow, illustrate her degree of agency and autonomy in managing her life. Once widowed some noblewomen re-married and some, such as Joan of Acre, may have staged their abduction to determine for themselves their next husband. Some noblewomen, similar to Elizabeth de Burgh, avoided re-marriage entirely and remained widows, choosing instead to take a vow of chastity or enter a convent. Noblewomen who had control of substantial wealth, because of the death of a husband, often found themselves in the position in which the king arranged their next marriage, or they were in danger of abduction and coerced marriage. The Church stipulated that medieval women had the right to give their consent to marriage and supported a widow's choice to remain chaste. Economic and legal constraints in the secular sphere, however, together with the possibility of the abduction of wealthy widows, could lead to an unwanted remarriage. The choice of whether or not to remarry, therefore, depended upon an intricate conjunction of possibilities governed by custom and convention, canon and common law, personal and financial security, and significantly by the extent of a noblewoman's social capital. Historical documents reveal that noblewomen actively employed their social capital and exercised agency concerning marriage. Indeed, the evidence demonstrates that the answer Chaucer's fictional knight brought back to the queen has a distinct thread of reality. Medieval noblewomen utilized their social capital to exercise a certain degree of agency in the choice

of their marriage partner. In addition, this same social capital empowered them to fulfill leadership and administrative roles as estate managers and military quartermasters.

Estate manager was a role noblewomen were trained to undertake. Indeed, there is evidence that Eleanor de Montfort began her training when she was a teenager. The majority of these noblewomen were literate and it is clear that they read and shared treatises such as the *Rules of Robert Grosseteste*, detailing the principles of estate management, or to use Grosseteste's own words, "good governance." Grosseteste wrote and dedicated his treatise on estate management to the countess of Lincoln so that she could improve her skills. Margaret de Lacy received advice from Grosseteste about the best approach to use to exert her authority over her household members and along with those outside her household. Noblewomen such as Elizabeth de Burgh, Margaret de Lacy and Margaret Paston audited their household accounts, hired and supervised workers on their estates, and oversaw purchasing activities. In general, they were involved in the management and leadership activities of their estates and manors. These noblewomen performed leadership roles in the absence of husbands or sons, because that was the expectation for a noblewoman who held a position of authority. Most noblewomen competently controlled, and in several cases increased, their estates and manors to enhance the wealth and security of their families and households. To be sure, the role they commanded depended on their social status, which in turn was a determinant of the social capital they were able to employ. The training noblewomen received, and their experience directing the activities of an estate, qualified them for a role resembling that of a military quartermaster when obliged to do so to fulfill feudal service to their king.

Medieval English noblewomen engaged in activities that influenced the outcome of a military campaign, as demonstrated by letters sent by the king and others. Exploiting their training as household managers, women occupied roles similar to that of a military quartermaster. They raised funds to secure arms and armies and, as demonstrated by Joan de Valence's smuggling, they were resourceful to ensure the funds reached their allies. Medieval noblewomen utilized their personal networks to send and receive information about the enemy. Analogous to a modern quartermaster, they were responsible for stocking castles with supplies and garrisoning these fortifications with men-at-arms. They rarely filled an active battlefield position but they did exercise agency and employ their social capital and wealth to fulfill roles not dissimilar to spy, logistics officer, and quartermaster. Indeed, Edward III was sufficiently confident in these women and their training and ability to safeguard his "kingdom against hostile invasions."²³² Thus, Edward's reliance on the noblewomen under his command demonstrates that they were empowered to exercise agency in fulfilling these leadership roles and meeting the challenges of military service.

Medieval English noblewomen faced challenges that many of turned into opportunities. During the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries, in the Welsh and Scottish Marches, a series of border wars and conflicts occurred between the nobility and the English monarchs. While their male counterparts worked to form valuable alliances, noblewomen also engaged in enriching their families by developing and maintaining their own networks based on social and kinship ties. Political and economic disruption often required the head of the household to delegate their authority to a wife, a sister, or, in the event of their death, to their widow. Noblewomen, therefore, acted with agency when they

²³² Ibid., 147., Delbruck, *Medieval Warfare, History of the Art of War*, III:454–61.

took advantage of the legislation of the time to protect their personal and financial rights and the rights of their heirs.

This study focusses on a specific geographic area; future research might expand on to include the experiences of noblewomen in other areas of Europe during the same time period. In addition, the women's ability to amass and employ social capital was such an important factor in their success that it would be interesting to investigate how they maintained and developed the interpersonal networks that comprised their social capital.

The goal of this project is to provide an additional voice to those that have demonstrated that medieval noblewomen did indeed hold significant leadership roles, commanding others and controlling aspects of their lives. The fact that medieval noblewomen were competent leaders and successful managers of large multi-level organizations should empower modern women to reclaim this ground. Medieval noblewomen understood the importance of personal support networks, in addition to being versed in legal and financial issues. Their life experiences and training was critical to safeguarding their personal and economic security and that of their families. This is a topic as relevant today as when noblewomen of the Middle Ages held important leadership roles. As Judith Bennett notes "working for transformation in the present, we are often encouraged and informed by histories of transformation in the past."²³³

²³³ Bennett, "Theoretical Issues: Confronting Continuity," 80.

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