

# GENDER, NATION AND CONQUEST IN THE HIGH MIDDLE AGES

NEST OF DEHEUBARTH



⇐ Susan M. Johns ⇐

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✚ Susan M. Johns ✚

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For my family

# Preface

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This book has its origins in my work on Anglo-Norman women when I became intrigued by the lack of scholarly research on medieval Welsh women, particularly at a stage when my daughter was obsessed with princesses. Time has moved on, and whilst both of the former contentions are no longer true, Princess Nest of Deheubarth has remained for me a tempting figure, both because what we know of her is coloured by a dramatic and symbolic episode and because of what she represents about the rhythms and currents of medieval history and historiography. On a family visit to west Wales which included visits to Pembroke, Manorbier, Carew and Cilgerran castles, all of them distinct, dramatic ruins, I was even more convinced that the narrative of Nest's past, as represented in the popular literature of those castles, was a subject which would have much to tell historians about the place and meaning of gender in the medieval past. The focus is not therefore limited to medieval Wales, but is inspired by scholarship and study of the medieval past more generally. I had become intrigued by these ideas whilst writing on Anglo-Norman women, and was able, whilst having a career-break looking after my young children, to think about these themes and ideas more broadly. I stepped back into academic life as a part-time tutor at Sheffield University where I had the good fortune to work with Ed King and Daniel Power, whose friendly interest in the project helped to sustain it through those early years of blending teaching, writing and childcare.

I was appointed to a post as a Lecturer in Medieval History at Bangor University in 2007 and progress on Nest slowed. Living in north Wales and working at Bangor University is a great privilege: the university supports its staff in excellent teaching and facilitates research and writing. My thanks are due to the university for a sabbatical which facilitated the later research and writing which led to the completion of the book, and to my friends and colleagues in the School of History, Welsh History and Archaeology for their support. One of the benefits of working at Bangor University, apart from the glorious beauty of its location, is its long tradition of support for medievalists and for teachers, writers and researchers in medieval history and the history of Wales. I am especially grateful for the advice freely and generously given by Professor Huw Pryce. I am also grateful for the questions and comments of those who have heard various aspects of this book at numerous conferences and research seminars as my ideas developed, particularly those who attended the 2008 biannual conference held at Bangor on Medieval Wales, who heard a paper based on some aspects of this book. Parts of chapter 7 were read as a paper at the Harvard Celtic Colloquium in 2010 and aspects of chapters 1 and 2 were read at the conference in honour of Ifor Rowlands, Swansea University and at a colloquium held in honour of Professor Pauline Stafford at King's College London, both in June 2009. My thanks to all those who generously commented and whose insights enriched my understanding. The



efficiency of the staff at the National Library of Wales and the archives and library of Bangor University smoothed the process of research and writing. I am very grateful for the support of Susan Reynolds, Pauline Stafford, David Bates and David Crouch and for their advice and encouragement. Any inaccuracies and defects are, of course, my own. My thanks also to the two anonymous referees for Manchester University Press: their helpful and encouraging comments and insights are much appreciated. The Press were a marvellous publisher for my first monograph, and the same has been true of this one: in particular Emma Brennan has been a supportive and highly efficient editor.

Finally, my thanks to my family for their support and encouragement, especially Carys and Gwyn who have put up with Nest hovering in the background of their early childhood, and who have supported me throughout the project. Further, without the love and support of my husband the book would not have been completed and it is to my family, my mother, in memory of my father and Lucy, that I dedicate this book.

# List of abbreviations

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<i>ANS</i>	<i>Anglo-Norman Studies</i>
<i>BBCS</i>	<i>Bulletin of the Board for Celtic Studies</i>
<i>JMH</i>	<i>Journal of Medieval History</i>
<i>NLW</i>	Aberystwyth, Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru/The National Library of Wales
<i>ODNB</i>	<i>Oxford Dictionary of National Biography</i> , Oxford University Press, 2004
<i>TRHS</i>	<i>Transactions of the Royal Historical Society</i>
<i>WHR</i>	<i>Welsh History Review</i>

# Contents

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PREFACE	<i>page</i> x
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	xii
 Introduction	 1
1 Abduction, conquest and gender	19
2 Gerald of Wales, Nest, gender and power	49
3 Charters and contexts: gender, women and power	83
4 Rediscovering Nest in the early modern period	115
5 Remaking Nest: eighteenth- and nineteenth-century views	146
6 Constructing Nest in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries	185
7 Constructing beauty, constructing gender	209
 CONCLUSION	 229
BIBLIOGRAPHY	241
INDEX	266

# Introduction

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The twelfth century was a period of political instabilities and cultural change in medieval Europe. Twelfth-century Wales similarly underwent social, cultural, political and economic changes and was subject to an ongoing process of conquest and assimilation by the Normans following the Norman conquest of England in 1066. Historians have long debated the complexities of the fragile and fragmentary nature of Welsh political affairs in the high middle ages and this has led to the characterisation of the period *c.* 900–1282 as the ‘Age of the Princes’, as conceptualised by T. Jones Pierce.<sup>1</sup> The concept embraces the complex developments which occurred within Wales and takes account of the pre-eminence of the political affinities, dynasties and ruling elites within Wales, and the dynamic role of war. While British medieval historiography has developed interesting and new areas of historical enquiry, such as considerations of ethnicity, gender and masculinity, this book is necessary because it fills a significant gap in the historiography of medieval Wales – while women’s power has been one of the most vibrant areas of historical scholarship for nearly twenty years, scholars of medieval Wales have been slow to respond.<sup>2</sup> It also represents a considerable opportunity to develop understandings of the interactions of gender with conquest and imperialism, and with the social and cultural transformations of the high middle ages, from a new perspective. Many studies have reconsidered these relationships, but few if any have taken women and gender as a core theme, although more recently work on ethnicity and gender has demonstrated that attention to such analytical categories can open up new questions about the way that contemporary writers constructed views on men and women which could, in some instances, be predicated on ideas about ethnicity.<sup>3</sup>

It is the contention of this book that the characterisation of Wales in the high middle ages as the ‘Age of the Princes’ is a fundamentally gendered approach which has privileged male power and action as the significant forces which shaped the history of the country: we do not have ‘The Age of the Princes and Princesses’. Given that this gendered unspoken assumption about the political history of Wales underpins much of the historiography of Wales it is unsurprising that complex questions concerning the interactions between gender, power and historiography have not been addressed. This book is located within the historiographies of conquest and imperialism. Nationalist perspectives

tend to emphasise conquest rather than influence, and violent and destructive conquest at that. More recently, there has been a significant tendency towards revisionism, seen in the specific context of south Wales in work on the Margam charters and work on Marcher lordships, for example.<sup>4</sup> This view suggests that there was no complete displacement or obliteration of existing power structures, but rather these were absorbed into new honorial structures. More broadly, in Wales and especially in Ireland, revisionists have looked at influence as being more important than brute force in the arrival of new elites.<sup>5</sup> More recently there has been an attempt by John Gillingham to restate the relevance of domineering and destructive conquest, if only by reconceptualising English activity as 'imperialism' and giving it a cultural context in which destructive actions were given legitimacy by the replacement of concepts of difference with those of inferiority and of non-human status for Irish (and Welsh).<sup>6</sup> The approach here will be to challenge this latter interpretation for Wales in the late eleventh and twelfth centuries; and to put women as actors back into the sort of exchanges described by Davies, that is to see women's roles in strategies of negotiation and integration realised through, for example, marriage. In doing so, there is the opportunity to add further to the interpretation of interaction as driven from many perspectives and not necessarily resulting in dominance and subordination. The example of Nest of Deheubarth, the core of this study, can be complemented with other examples which will be examined in more detail. One of the better known is that of Joan, bastard daughter of King John, of whom there are already some interpretations as an independent and powerful actor in Welsh politics. These tend to rely on the idea that her English royal status gave her a unique role, but this will be questioned, with other examples to suggest the extensive ways in which women were involved in power structures.<sup>7</sup>

Certainly the history of Wales has been written within a framework which emphasises war, conquest, resistance and change. The characterisation of the high middle ages as the 'Age of the Princes' emphasises the centrality of the ruling elite to the political, religious, social and cultural developments of Wales. It has been argued that because of the achievements of the Welsh princes, Wales enjoyed the chance to develop linguistically, culturally and socially and that the Welsh princes provided a link between two cultures – that of Welsh Wales and Anglo-Norman society.<sup>8</sup> Turvey accepts that the achievements of the Welsh princes must be set in context and he acknowledges that the issues surrounding the idea of Welsh nationhood are contentious. Yet this analysis is ultimately a rather old-fashioned form of writing history where men are the key

players and women appear little if at all. It is unsatisfying because the significant forces shaping Wales included family feuds, at the heart of which lay dynastic links and gender roles and expectations. Further, Turvey does little to address the question of legitimacy: a question which underpins much of the disunity of the Welsh polity in the face of a strong Anglo-Norman and later English monarchy. Turvey comes close to an analysis which argues that the Welsh were in the process of becoming more Welsh. The danger of such an analysis was succinctly addressed in David Cannadine's eloquent appraisal of the 'new British history'. Cannadine argued against historical interpretations which fall into the trap of sociological teleology – that is historians must beware seeing historical developments in the British Isles as a process by which the 'British became more British'.<sup>9</sup>

Of course the phrase 'Age of the Princes' implies a history concerned with the political development of Wales during the crucial period in the middle ages before native ambition for territorial segregation was extinguished. Yet as a catch-all for the history of Wales in this period it is essentially unsatisfying because although it explains the history of male-centred politics, it does little to explain the wider dynamics of that power within society in a way that can provide fresh insights. For example, women are seen as the pawns in male marriage strategies, rather than as active participants in the complex world of the high political elite. The emergence of the new British History which has viewed Wales within the four nations approach is similarly gender-blind. However, there is an acknowledgement that the 'Age of the Princes' should be viewed in context, and the controversial views of Gwyn Williams that the Wales of the Princes had to 'die before a Welsh nation could be born' are unsatisfactory.<sup>10</sup> These approaches are an attempt to understand why Wales did not develop as a nation in the way that Scotland and England did with a polity which dominated its people through institutional, political, cultural mechanisms. This idea of the difficulties faced by Wales in its development as a nation is the key conclusion of J. Beverley Smith in a relatively recent study of Llywelyn ap Gruffudd.<sup>11</sup> A new interpretation is needed, which takes account of these but also properly considers the history of Wales in the light of recent historiographical developments, for example the now well-accepted view that women had significant cultural roles in areas such as the formation and transmission of oral memory, religious benefaction and literary patronage throughout the medieval period.

Gwyn Williams is one of the few historians to mention female agency: a brief mention of Nest of Deheubarth who, he argues, 'could

play the role of Helen of Troy, precipitating wars over her person'.<sup>12</sup> Nest's significance is also that of progenitor of dynasts; in this version, for Williams, it is the ecclesiastical descendants who are significant. The role of Welsh princesses or powerful noblewomen is rarely acknowledged by any commentators of Wales in the high middle ages, while the vast cultural changes in literature, and the ethnic changes due to the impact of Norman settlements within Wales – ranging from castle building, organised religion with the monastic movement, and the economy, and placed by Williams into a European context – are generally acknowledged to be significant.<sup>13</sup> The implications of the immigration and settlements within Wales are discussed by R. R. Davies. Davies argued that the period 1100–1400 was characterised by ethnic tensions between Welsh people, or *Cymry* or compatriots of Wales, and the English in Wales, and that the thirteenth century was more 'ethnically vicious' than the twelfth century.<sup>14</sup> This work suggests the importance of ethnicity to the configuration of twelfth-century politics. Given these strands of cultural and ethnic changes it is important to consider how ethnic tensions were characterised. It is possible to explore the dynamics of these tensions through a consideration of the way ideas about gender served to create or reinforce ideas about ethnic identity. Thus, an analysis of the development of such ideas could facilitate a discussion of the ways, and the reasons behind, the portrayals of high-status women such as Nest.

Historians such as Davies have argued that the accepted role of women in Wales was as transmitters of inheritance rights and as progenitors of dynasties. Thus women's role is seen to be primarily within marriage alliances and for procreation. Genealogies in Wales and Ireland were organised around patrilineal descent groups in the high middle ages and were thus systems which privileged men. Thus Davies suggests that the predominant title to status was the 'blood . . . of men'.<sup>15</sup> How such ties were created, however, may have facilitated the participation of women within the often, no doubt, delicate political negotiations, as Davies, despite himself, concedes that in the native tale *Culhwch and Olwen*, Olwen had to discuss *her* marriage with 'her four great-grandfathers and great-grandmothers!'.<sup>16</sup> Further, he implicitly acknowledges that women did have a role to play in the transmission of cultural memories when, in the eighteenth-century account of Daniel Defoe, 'stories of Vortigern and Roger of Mortimer were in every old woman's mouth'.<sup>17</sup> Although the comment serves to dismiss the significance of the stories, it is nevertheless a tacit admission that women were active in the oral transmission or propagation of these traditions. The formation of social memory was gendered in Wales from its inception: Gwyn

Williams, discussing the renaissance in Welsh literature and culture following the Norman conquest of Wales, noted that during the age of the *gogynfeirdd* (court poets) many courts and sub-courts (although there is no definition of what a sub-court might comprise) had their official *pencerdd* (master-poet) and every household had its *bardd teulu*, the household poet (who was a bit simpler, for the benefit of 'little fellows' and women!).<sup>18</sup> In his excellent study of Llywelyn ap Gruffudd Beverley Smith notes that genealogists 'forgot' the name of Llywelyn's mother, an indication surely that at its inception, the way that social memory was recorded was gendered.<sup>19</sup>

Domination and conquest has been seen as the key dynamic which shaped the development of medieval Wales, and nationalists tend to emphasise destructive, violent conquest. Professor Rees Davies saw the history of Wales within a British context and ably demonstrated the centrality of social, religious and economic changes within a framework centred on the unfolding of the political chronology. His use of the concept 'Age of the Princes' nevertheless recognised that the political history of Wales required contextualisation. Few would disagree that the experience of conquest was fundamentally a transformative experience, but this is not unusual in a medieval European context. The evolution of the 'four nations approach' – which argues that the four nations evolved, yet interacted, in different ways at different speeds – has led to a reappraisal of the history of Wales. There are two key problems with the four nations approach. First, as Cannadine has pointed out, the four nations methodology does not pay enough attention to the important variations between and within these developments. At the heart of the new British history lie tensions concerned with identity. Even though the historiography of the new British History is a vibrant and important area of scholarship, it is nevertheless still a male-dominated historiography which has yet to incorporate an awareness of the significance of gender. For example, Hugh Kearney argues that the history of the British Isles, the 'Four Nations' of England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland, should be understood in a broad framework which considers the interactions, the commonalities, between nations in broad social, cultural, economic and political terms. In his consideration of the impact of the Norman conquest he states that English historians have 'domesticated' the Norman conquest since Stubbs saw the Normans as a 'masculine' race which educated a 'feminine' race.<sup>20</sup> This of course echoes the comments of twelfth-century Anglo-Norman writers such as William of Malmesbury who saw the Norman conquest as punishment for the weakness and femininity of the debauched English race.<sup>21</sup> Stubbs unwittingly reinforced



gendered categories of analysis when he noticed the elision between gender and ethnicity. Such categories of analysis need inclusion in an overall explanatory framework. As Cannadine argues, the creation of a British identity did not entail abandonment of other identities, whether Welsh, Scottish, Irish or English. Yet it is worth noting that Kearney argued that, despite strong Normanisation by the political elite through the high middle ages, local loyalties could be strong and there was cultural diversity at a local level.<sup>22</sup> The incorporation of gender into such an analysis facilitates an exploration of commonalities and differences in such localities. Thus a study of, for example, the memory and identity of a Welsh princess, who functioned as a focus for 'local' loyalties in the twelfth century, has much to tell us about how ideas about gender were formed in the context of the broader transformative changes wrought by conquest and political development in Wales. The way that ideas about Nest developed is a map of how ideologies were themselves developing.

Even historians who have begun to address the complexities of political relationships and developments of ideologies of empire have been willing to follow the imperialist propaganda of twelfth-century sources. For example Gillingham argues that there was a 'crucial fragility at the heart of the English empire' and the reign of Henry II is the critical turning point.<sup>23</sup> His view is predicated upon three suppositions. First, that the 'English invaded Ireland' – yet we know from Gerald of Wales that his relatives, 'the Geraldines', however much they had begun to identify themselves in part as English, were significant. Second, that ideological justifications for English domination were exerted through bureaucratic and administrative developments, yet there is no examination of how bureaucracy is a method of domination in itself. Third, notions of 'barbarity' had become deeply entrenched in English thought as evidenced by the appalling treatment of victims of war following the Battle of the Standard in 1138. Gillingham accepts the depiction of the enslavement of women and children by Scottish raiders and sees such activity as evidence of war as slave-hunt.<sup>24</sup> It would be interesting to consider the importance of gender in these portrayals of victims of male aggression to address deeper questions concerning the meanings behind the portrayal. For example, the way that ideas about gender roles informed the portrayal could be analysed for the way that they interacted with assumptions concerning ethnicity and victimhood.

Historians of women's power have shaped the debate about the historicity of women as a category of analysis so that it has moved on considerably from a view which saw women as victims of patriarchal power. Studies of queenship, women and sovereignty, gender and female