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# Women in Medieval English Society



Mavis E. Mate

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*Prepared for the Economic History Society by*

**Mavis E. Mate**

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## Women in Medieval English Society

Written primarily for undergraduates, this book judiciously weighs the evidence for and against the various theories relating to the position of women at different time periods. Professor Mate examines the evidence relating to the major issues deciding the position of women in medieval English society, and asks questions such as, did women enjoy a rough equality in the Anglo-Saxon period that they subsequently lost? Did queens at certain periods exercise real political clout or was their power limited to questions of patronage? Did women's participation in the economy grant them considerable independence and allow them to postpone or delay marriage? Professor Mate also demonstrates that class as well as gender was very important in determining age at marriage and opportunities for power and influence. Although some women at some time periods did make short-term gains, Professor Mate challenges the dominant view that major transformations in women's position occurred in the century after the Black Death.

MAVIS E. MATE is Professor of Medieval History at the University of Oregon. She has written many articles for major journals and is the author of *Daughters, Wives and Widows after the Black Death: Women in Sussex 1350–1530* (1998).

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## Contents

1	Introduction	page 1
2	Early medieval society (c. 600–1250)	5
	Religious and political life	6
	Women in the economy	13
	The legal rights of women	16
3	The late Middle Ages (1250–1530)	27
	Economic activities of women	27
	Political power, education and religious experience	61
	The legal position of late medieval women	78
	Conclusion	96
	References	101
	Index	112

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# 1

## Introduction

More has been written about medieval women in the last fifteen years than in the previous one hundred and fifty. Female authors, like the Frenchwoman Christine de Pisan, and the Englishwomen Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe, have been re-discovered and new editions and translations of their works have been produced. Queens are no longer seen as mere appendages of their husbands and have merited their own biographies. Tax records and manorial court-rolls have revealed the names of thousands of women while fascinating human insights can be gained from women's wills and letters. Yet administrative records, whether those of the central government or local manorial accounts were compiled for financial and jurisdictional reasons and the women who appear in them represent just a small fraction of the total female population. Thus historians know a great deal more about widows who held property and who enjoyed legal autonomy than they know about wives whose legal identity was subsumed within that of their husbands. So, too, much more is known about women as ale-brewers, because for much of the Middle Ages brewers were regularly fined, but much less is known about women's work as laundresses and seamstresses, since they were never formally regulated. Any record, read in isolation, gives but one facet of the total picture. Wills, written by women, reveal fascinating insights about female piety and personal relationships towards the end of life, but say nothing about their attitudes and situation at other points in their life-cycle.

With the vast explosion in the material dealing with medieval women's history and the imperfections of many of the sources, considerable debate has arisen about the position of women. Is



gender, for example, more important than class? Gender determines that wives were primarily responsible for household management and child-care and that this work, precisely because it was women's work, was less highly regarded than the work carried out by men. Women, of all social classes, were depicted not only as weaker physically, but weaker rationally and morally. Women generally had a more restricted choice of occupation, and fewer opportunities for education and the acquisition of property than males in their social group. On the other hand, the material well-being of women was clearly determined by their social class. Housing, diet and clothing all varied significantly across the social scale. Furthermore, although aristocratic women enjoyed fewer rights than their brothers, they had far greater access to education, property and political power than did any peasant woman.

The opportunities available to a woman varied not only according to her social class, but also to the stage that she had reached in her life-cycle. Daughters, whatever their rank in society, were legally under the control and authority of their fathers. Wives were also subjected to the power and authority of their husbands. Generally only widows had any measure of legal autonomy. Examples of power and independence wielded by wealthy, aristocratic, widows cannot be extrapolated into a high status enjoyed by all women in that society or indeed for all women in that social class. So too a woman might enjoy more or less *de facto* freedom according to the different stages of her life. By the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the daughters of labourers and artisans frequently left home at the age of twelve or thirteen to work for others as servants. Away from direct parental control, they were freer to choose their own marriage partner than a young aristocratic girl whose parents saw her marriage as a means to consolidate their property or expand their network of allies. Wives, in both countryside and town, who supplemented the family income through brewing, spinning or the sale of produce, could sometimes spend their earnings as they wished, despite their husbands' legal authority. Yet the same women as widows might choose or be required to live with a married son or daughter, thus relinquishing some of their former independence. So, in talking about women, it is important to distinguish both what social class is being discussed and whether the women concerned were



daughters, wives or widows. The legal autonomy that widowhood brought was of little value if the widow herself had few, if any, resources at her disposal.

One reason for debate is that historians use different criteria to assess women's power, authority and status. For some, legal rights – the ability to make a will and to control and alienate land – is the most important factor: for others what matters is economic power – the ability to participate in the workforce and to contribute to the family income. Even more significant, perhaps, is the lens through which women are viewed. Those historians who are aware of the power of patriarchy and the limitations that it imposes on women tend to stress what women cannot do, whereas historians who emphasize women as capable and independent beings, able to cope with difficult circumstances, stress what rights and opportunities women did enjoy. Thus, whereas the first group tend to see the glass as half empty, the second group see it as half full.

Regional variation in economic development and legal custom also had a profound influence on women's lives throughout the Middle Ages. Taking care of animals, and above all work in the dairy, was always seen as suitable employment for women, but the opportunities for women to work outside the home for extended periods were obviously greater in pastoral than arable areas. Likewise, widows might have an easier time managing on their own if they could engage in pastoral husbandry which was not labour intensive. On the other hand, women were expected to help with the harvest on their own land, if not for others. In arable areas in particular the late summer months were extremely busy times for women as they juggled family and household demands with agricultural tasks.

In the century following the Norman Conquest the rules under which freeholders held their land became well defined and common to the whole country. In contrast, land held 'at the will of the lord' was subject to a bewildering variety of customs. Over much of the country, customary land followed the same practices as freehold land and went to the eldest son, but in some places land was either inherited by the youngest son, or divided equally among all sons. Provisions for widows ranged from half the holding until the heir came of age to the whole holding for life, irrespective of any remarriage. In some places tenants had the

right to sell the odd acre or half acre as family circumstances changed, whereas elsewhere lords insisted that any alienation had to be in the form of the entire holding. Such customs affected family structure and kinship ties as well as economic well-being. Life for women in the west Midlands was not identical with that for women in East Anglia.

Sources are more abundant for one class at one time period and another class at another time. This makes comparisons across classes and across centuries difficult. None the less, some historians do believe that Anglo-Saxon women enjoyed more rights than their Anglo-Norman successors. Indeed, the Anglo-Saxon period has been portrayed as a kind of 'golden age' in which men and women lived on terms of rough equality. Other historians, while accepting the notion that women enjoyed greater opportunities at one time than another, place the 'golden age' in the later Middle Ages, when, after the population losses of the Black Death, women were recruited into the labour force in large numbers. The debate on Anglo-Saxon versus Anglo-Norman women, however, focuses almost exclusively on the nobility, since the sources are not available for women in other social classes. In contrast, the discussion on the late medieval golden age revolves around the position of peasant and urban women. The whole notion of a golden age, moreover, has been challenged by historians such as Pauline Stafford and Judith Bennett who stress the continuities across time.

In the following pages I shall look at the ways in which historians have seen the position of women in medieval society from the beginning of the Anglo-Saxon period to the end of the fifteenth century within two broadly defined time periods. Within each the discussion will centre on the legal rights enjoyed by women, their contribution to the economy, and their political and religious power, such as influence wielded by queens and abbesses. Attention will also be given to discussions about the existence or otherwise of a 'golden age' and to changes over time, since these are questions that have sparked considerable debate.

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## 2

### **Early medieval society (c. 600 to 1250)**

The view that Anglo-Saxon women enjoyed rights and privileges that they subsequently lost at the time of the Norman Conquest has a long history. In the 1890s the American historian Florence Buckstaff pointed to the deterioration of women's legal position with the introduction of Norman, feudal law (Buckstaff, 1893). In the 1950s, in her influential book *The English Woman in History*, Doris Mary Stenton stressed the 'rough equality' that Anglo-Saxon women enjoyed with men, but added that this partnership was subsequently ended with the imposition of a Norman, military, society (Stenton, 1957: 28, 348). In the 1960s and 1970s when the new study of women's history began to take hold, female historians were delighted to find examples of powerful, independent women to set alongside the stories of male leaders that had dominated so much historical writing. Stenton's insistence on the rough equality of Anglo-Saxon women was picked up and repeated together with the view of the negative impact of the Norman Conquest. Historians such as Sheila Dietrich, in her introductory survey of women in Anglo-Saxon society, emphasized their control over property and the active and respected role of abbesses and missionaries in the church. Although denying that it was a golden age for women, Dietrich does suggest that future research into the period might produce examples of 'women's influence and freedom of action that would make aspects of even the twentieth century appear dark' (Dietrich, 1979: 44).

## Religious and political life

Did Anglo-Saxon women have influence on public affairs? They were evidently not lost in their husbands' public identity. The women themselves remained responsible for their own crimes and actions, and marriage did not end the obligation of a woman's natal kin to help her in the payment of compensation. Women regularly appeared in recorded legal disputes, although only as defendants and, when a case involved a woman, other women might act as oath-helpers. On the other hand no Anglo-Saxon woman received royal office as reeve or ealdorman. The only women who held any kind of administrative positions were those who had been to some extent degendered. Abbesses and female religious, by their virginity and the abandonment of the female reproductive role, had become more like men. Above all, the queen in her capacity as king's spouse could fill a special role. After the early tenth century she alone might be listed among witnesses to royal charters (Stafford, 1989). None the less, both abbesses and queens operated within and accepted the norms of a patriarchal society, in which the activities of males were accorded more value than the activities of women. Thus abbesses served a male God and never questioned their inability to become priests, and queens used what power they had to further the careers of their sons, not their daughters. Yet if one accepts the definition of power put forward by Pauline Stafford – the ability to act effectively, to take part in events with some chance of success – then both abbesses and queens exercised power (Stafford, 1997: 11).

Historians who believe in the equality and high status of Anglo-Saxon women point to the prestige and influence of abbesses in the seventh-century double monasteries, which housed communities of both men and women. Female religious participated in theological debates, church synods and missionary activity. Lady Stenton, writing of Abbess Hild of Whitby, states 'Few English women have ever exercised a more far-reaching influence on the world they knew' (Stenton, 1957: 13). The major source for Hild's life – Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* – in fact under-represented her contribution. In Bede's account of the synod that was held at Whitby to determine on what date to celebrate Easter, Hild herself

was not seen or heard. So, too, Bede mentions that her monastery produced five future bishops of the Anglo-Saxon church, but says nothing about her learning, or whether she or other nuns taught the future bishops, or whether they educated other women who went on to become abbesses elsewhere (Hollis, 1992: 243–70). Hild, however, is credited with recognizing the poetic talent of Caedmon, converting him to the monastic life and encouraging him to write religious, vernacular verse. Yet, as has been pointed out, in appropriating Caedmon's poetic talent in the service of patriarchal Christianity, Hild was also reproducing patriarchy (Lees and Overing, 1994: 45). Hild and other abbesses, such as her niece Aelfled, were able to exercise such influence as they did partly because of their office and partly because of their wealth and birth, especially their association with one of the royal houses. Christian office was enhanced by the fact of royal origins and although they sometimes witnessed charters as abbesses, they also did so as members of the royal family (Stafford, 1997: 15). Their lives tell us nothing about the influence and opportunities for non-aristocratic women.

None the less, for a brief period, at a time when very few people, either male or female, were literate, some noblewomen were able to receive an academic, literary education comparable to that of male religious. Excavations of the monastery of Whitby and other sites have uncovered plentiful evidence of busy *scriptoria* where the nuns would have copied manuscripts. Aldhelm's treatise, *On Virginity*, written at the request of the nuns of Barking, indicates that they studied the scriptures, exegetical commentaries and grammar, together with 'old stories of the historians and entries of the chroniclers' (Leyser, 1995: 19–39; Hollis, 1992: 75–111). This work, like that of the early correspondence of the missionary Boniface, attests to the respect that men within the church had for the learning and activities of these nuns. In the seventh century the church within the various English kingdoms had no organized, parochial or educational structure. Female houses, like male houses, were able to become the focus of religious and social activity for their regions. They aided in the work of conversion; their schools served both men and women and they were responsible for the pastoral care of the whole area, including the giving of help and advice to ordinary lay men and women. Even though

Archbishop Theodore, who came to Canterbury in 669, openly disapproved of double monasteries, he had little option but to tolerate them. It was not until after the Viking invasions had destroyed a considerable number of female houses (including double foundations) that their pastoral responsibilities were taken over by episcopal minsters (Schulenburg, 1989).

Although royal and aristocratic women were active supporters of the movement for monastic reform that began in the tenth century, female institutions outside Wessex did not recover their former influence. In their zeal for clerical celibacy, the reformers eschewed all contact with women. The double houses for women and men disappeared and women were confined to single-sexed houses that were strictly cloistered. Far more land was given to refounded male institutions than female ones. Nunneries in Kent that had flourished in the heyday of the Kentish monarchy found little support under the rule of powerful West Saxon kings. After the Viking invasions their lands were absorbed back into the West Saxon royal fisc and so were not available for the establishment of new convents (Yorke, 1989). When, in the 970s the task of protecting and patronizing English nunneries was given to the queen, female houses became dependent on the interests and ambition of individual queens. Under Aelfthryth (the wife of Edgar and the mother of Aethelred II) some monasteries suffered, as she used royal patronage to increase her own power and influence. She dislodged the abbess of Barking, for example, in order to control its strategic estates along the Thames. On the other hand she did use some of the land she had obtained by virtue of her status as queen to found two major new nunneries at Amesbury and Wherwell. At neither the new foundations nor the older houses did conventual learning attain the earlier levels of scholarship. However, continued grants of land to the six West Saxon nunneries made them far wealthier than other surviving nunneries and in 1066 they held estates in fourteen shires. Two of them – Shaftesbury and Wilton – were among the richest monastic houses in England (Meyer, 1991; Halpin, 1994). Their abbesses not only managed the internal affairs of the houses, but on their vast estates controlled the affairs of dependent tenants.

During the eleventh century male and female aristocratic donors primarily gave their land and money to male communities



or recently established parish churches rather than to women's houses (Meyer, 1977; Schulenburg 1989). Thus, outside of Wessex, nunneries were poorly endowed, or, in the north of England, virtually non-existent. Why did this decline occur? Schulenburg points to a new atmosphere of 'heightened fear and suspicion of female sexuality' in the wake of the reform movement (Schulenburg, 1989: 239). But other factors were clearly at work. Donors were generally hoping to reap some spiritual benefits for their gifts. Women could not celebrate mass, whereas secular canons and monks who were also priests, could offer perpetual intercessory prayers for the benefit of the souls of donors. So too an eleventh-century parish or manorial church brought its proprietors substantial financial advantages. It could be sold or bequeathed and the patrons retained advowson – the right to appoint the church's priests – and part of the revenues coming from oblations and dues such as tithes. Such churches became centres for familial devotion and burial and allowed female benefactors an opportunity to influence local affairs in ways not otherwise open to them (Halpin, 1994).

Furthermore, despite the overall contraction in the number of female institutions, religious life for women did continue to thrive in the late tenth and eleventh centuries, albeit in a less regular guise. Widows who wanted to lead a religious life, but who may have been reluctant to submit to the authority of an abbess, affiliated in some informal way with a nearby male foundation and lived either as independent anchoresses or with a small group of other like-minded women, often on their own estates. Their lifestyle did not differ greatly from that of later, better-known anchoresses such as the early twelfth-century recluse, Christina of Markyate. Patricia Halpin, therefore, sees considerable continuity in women's religious life in pre- and post-Conquest England (Halpin, 1994). No major change occurred until the mid-twelfth century, when both the number and variety of female houses multiplied dramatically. Small groups of women who had been surviving as nuns in ruined priories, old cells or poorly endowed churches, were provided with additional land and resources so that a priory could be established. In addition, laymen founded totally new houses: Gilbert of Sempringham was responsible for nine new monasteries and Premonstratensian canons aided the



foundation of three houses for women. Finally, laypeople established Cistercian houses. Although these houses were not fully incorporated into the Cistercian order, the women adopted Cistercian customs, used Cistercian missals, and dressed in habits of a Cistercian type. In 1130, in all of England, there were about twenty religious communities for women: in 1165 England had more than a hundred houses, nearly half of them springing up in the north of England where women had had few options for a religious life. Approximately a quarter of these new foundations were actually for women and men. Gilbertine monasteries, for example, included not only nuns and lay sisters, but canons and lay brothers. Few of the nuns who joined the new foundations came from either royal or noble families and abbesses were generally willing to accept control exercised by the canons and monks. Not one of the new abbesses enjoyed the same independence as her seventh-century predecessors. On the other hand, by the end of the twelfth century women from a much broader social spectrum did have the opportunity to choose a religious life.

In contrast to the position of the powerful abbess, seventh- and eighth-century queens did not have a recognized role. That situation changed in the tenth century as queens acquired a significant landed estate both from their own kinsmen and from the king. In addition, the practice of serial monogamy meant that the rules of succession to the crown were not clear-cut. Sons by successive wives and concubines formed a group of throne-worthy males who competed with each other. A dowager queen who did her utmost to advance her son at the expense of his half-brothers might reap her reward if her son did become king. Her position as 'mother of the king' was further strengthened if she had powerful kinsmen who could throw their support behind the young monarch. Finally, the anointing of Edgar's wife, Aelfthryth, in 973 gave her, and all subsequent anointed queens, a new status as a consecrated person. A queen during her lifetime might thus fill many roles, either consecutively or concurrently. She was a consecrated and crowned wife, an anointed queen, and, on the death of her husband, the mother of the next king, but she was also *conlaterana regis* – the person who stands beside and aids the king (Stafford, 1997a; 1997b).

The influence of any queen, however, was very dependent on the support of her husband or her son and could disappear as circumstances altered. In the early eleventh century, after Emma, the daughter of the Duke of Normandy, married the Danish ruler, Cnut, she was able to capitalize on her role as peace-weaver between English, Norman and Dane. Her patronage paralleled that of her husband and she gained support with her gifts of textiles, precious metalwork and relics. Her influence was sought and acknowledged in a range of transactions from land purchases, and the confirmation of episcopal appointments, to the making of wills. On Cnut's death she seized the royal treasury and seems to have taken control of Cnut's mercenary forces in her struggle to secure the throne for one of her sons. The accession of Harthacnute (her son by Cnut) saw her influence peak. But, after his early death, and the granting of the crown to Edward the Confessor (her son by her first husband, Aethelred), Emma lost everything, not only influence but much of her wealth and land as well (Stafford, 1989; 1997b).

Eleventh-century queens exercised power partly through their office but partly as a result of their control over their own household and over vast landed estates. Emma, until the loss of her power in 1043, was the richest woman in England. Her daughter-in-law Edith (the wife of Edward the Confessor) was the richest woman in 1066. The lands assigned to her in Domesday were worth between £1,570 and £2,000 per annum and included towns and their revenues, as well as churches and religious communities and the profits of justice (Stafford, 1997b: 123). Likewise both Matilda and Maud, the wives respectively of both William the Conqueror and Henry I, had been able to enter the lands assigned for their dower during their lifetimes. Not only did they have control over tenants who might be great lords, but they could use these resources in support of patronage and their households. Service in the queen's household became a useful springboard for subsequent episcopal office. Yet by the end of Henry I's reign queenly power was being eroded as professional administrators began to take over some of the tasks of government. Maud, who early in her husband's reign participated in meetings of the king's court, had less opportunity to wield public authority. What was left was the role of intercessor. Lois Honeycott has shown how