



Women in Medieval Western European Culture

Edited by
Linda E. Mitchell

WOMEN IN MEDIEVAL
WESTERN EUROPEAN
CULTURE

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WOMEN IN MEDIEVAL WESTERN EUROPEAN CULTURE

EDITED BY
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Publisher's Note

The publisher has gone to great lengths to ensure the quality of this reprint but points out that some imperfections in the original may be apparent.

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Introduction

Sources for the History of Medieval Women

Linda E. Mitchell

Women's history is a fairly new field; most of the major works have been written within the last twenty years. The sources for such history, however, have existed in various forms for hundreds of years. Sometimes it is hard to find female voices in the documents and literatures of past eras. Sometimes the voices are overlaid with male voices or hemmed in by the structures of male discourse. But those voices exist and they can be heard. The authors of this volume of essays have unearthed, uncovered, and revealed the voices of medieval women from the wilds of northern England to the luxuries of medieval Constantinople. They have articulated the activities and ambitions of women from all walks of life—queen, noblewoman, urban matron, and peasant. They have also revealed the ways in which male authors and masculine social systems subtly (and not so subtly) limited and restricted female expression during the Middle Ages. This pressure to remain silent and private has led some historians of the medieval world to claim that women are invisible in the records of European culture. The authors of this volume show that women were far from invisible as long as one knows where to look.

The sources for women's history are many and varied. There are the sources used by the political and the legal historian: works of theory, legal treatises and teaching texts, documents of litigation and court cases, contracts, and so on. There are the sources used by the cultural historian: works of literature, letters, works of art, and the like. And there are the sources used by the social and the economic historian: baptismal registers, financial lists, tax rolls, recipe books, manuals for housewives and for estate managers, household accounts,

wills, and public fiscal documents. This volume contains essays which have made use of all of these kinds of sources and more. The purpose of this essay is to introduce the reader to the kinds of sources encountered by the medieval historian and to suggest what the researcher might find in them.

PUBLIC DOCUMENTS

As mentioned in several of the articles that follow, the presence of women's activities in public documents is often tangential, even hidden, because women's names are often excised from the record. Many women appear, but they are often referred to as "daughter of X" or "wife of Y" or even "widow of Z." Often, the only named women in public records are noblewomen: women whose wealth and social standing made them different from the rank and file and, thus, deserving of a name.

Even though many, if not most, women are anonymous in these documents, they are not invisible. Although the variety and quantity of public documents changes both with time and with place in the medieval world, there is not a region in Europe that did not preserve some documentary evidence from the past—and in all of it women appear.

What are public documents? They are the physical evidence amassed by governments and administrations, treasuries, courts of law, and notarial offices. Public documents include sealed letters (usually called "writs") written by, or dictated by, kings and noblemen to their retainers and followers. Documents which describe the litigation of the medieval courts of law are also public documents as are chancery and financial records of debt, litigation over debt, money payments made to kings and lords, and other financial transactions of medieval administration. Public documents are not only those which passed through the hands of a king's chancery clerk, however. They are also the documents which describe the goings-on of the local, county, and manorial courts and the financial records of these local administrations.

What does the researcher find in such documents? In fact, public documents comprise a significant arsenal of material for the historian of medieval women. Although incomplete, even sketchy, these documents reveal aspects of individual women's interactions with the central government, with their families, with their neighbors, and with their local governments. Public documents make it possible for historians to

study not only noblewomen but also women of the urban classes and peasant women, thus presenting a perspective on medieval society that can be more inclusive than that found in more literary sources.

A single example suffices: a student of mine wanted to study the incidence of violent criminal activity just before, during, and just after the outbreak of the Black Death in England (1347-1349). This student chose to read the *petitions for commissions of oyer and terminer* which appear on the *dorse* (the reverse side) of the rolls of Letters Patent. The Patent Rolls are translated into English and published by the Public Record Office in London. Thus, this student was able to use medieval chancery records to trace the prevalence of criminal violence in the period under study, even though the student did not read Latin. Such sources are invaluable for the student reader because they are readily available, are usually indexed, and provide significant information on a great variety of issues.

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC SOURCES

Most public documents tell us a great deal about the everyday dealings of members of the social elite—the nobility, the knightly class, and the free peasants. Other kinds of documentary sources can expand our understanding of those social classes, but they can also tell us something about the people who did not appear before the king or the royal courts—the bonded peasantry, the poor urban laborer, the underclass of the medieval world. Such sources are incredibly varied, and their accessibility and availability is also vastly different depending on the time, place, and circumstances. Nonetheless, these sources, even as scattered as they sometimes are, can give us a view of medieval women's lives that no other source can provide.

Manorial accounts, urban tax rolls, parish registers, and similar sources provide the researcher with information on the financial circumstances of medieval people of all social classes. These kinds of sources range from the yearly tallies of isolated manors in England to the detailed tax records of the Florentine *catasto*. Domesday Book falls into this category, since it is a record of landownership which included not only the nobility in its assessment but the peasants who lived and worked on the land as well.

Collections of letters appear for the later Middle Ages, among them the letters of the Paston family and the Lisle family in England and the letters of Italian merchant families during the Renaissance.

While specifically focused on particular times and places, these letters preserve some of the most authentic descriptions of female activity available. As such, these kinds of collections provide important and unique information for the researcher, especially those whose work focuses on the late medieval urban elite and the lower nobility.

Another group of documents begins to appear in the late Middle Ages: enrollments of births or baptisms, marriages, and deaths in parish and county registry offices in England and on the continent. Although usually not translated, compiled, and printed as are many public documents, these sources are nonetheless often accessible (if one is willing to travel) and are, in fact, used widely among people who today are trying to trace their family genealogies.

THEORETICAL SOURCES

The medieval intellectual world was overwhelmingly male, but the subjects of their discourse—law, religion, philosophy, science, and society—included issues relating to women. From the legal treatises such as the *Corpus Iuris Civilis* (The Body of Roman Civil Law compiled by jurists in the late sixth century) and the works of English common law known as Glanville and Bracton, to political theory, to philosophical texts, to works of theology, all reflected (predominantly male) medieval social attitudes toward women and toward their activities, rights, privileges, personalities, and physical natures. These sources provide the researcher with important and significant information on how the intelligentsia viewed women. While theoretical in focus, these attitudes were very influential in later periods in forming more common social attitudes toward women as public figures, as members of society, and as family members.

In most cases, these texts are hostile to the idea of female activity in public life but sympathetic to and respectful of women's private and family functions. For example, the important legal treatise written in England in the thirteenth century (attributed to Henry de Bracton, chief justice of the King's Bench in the reign of Henry III) stipulates that women should be concerned with maintaining the household and with raising their children, which prevents them from participating in politics in a direct fashion, but that responsibility toward home and hearth also justifies women's access to property and the right to inherit and hold land. In religious texts, women are bitterly denounced if they engage in public activity but applauded if they assiduously apply

themselves to their household and family duties, which included the early religious teaching of the children. Although the ideal woman is a virgin, the wife and the widow are respected persons in religious texts as long as they do not try to break free from their assigned place in the social world.

Thus, theoretical texts can provide an important perspective on the debate about women, but it is a perspective that is predominantly male centered, patriarchal, and to some extent elitist. Theoretical texts tell us how the intellectual elite felt about women's roles and position in society, but they do not necessarily reflect the "reality" of the medieval world, in which many women were publicly active through informal and unofficial networks. Used in combination with other kinds of sources, such as public documents, a more complete picture of medieval male attitudes toward women emerges.

LITERARY SOURCES

The literature of the medieval period is rich, varied, and abundant. Ranging from histories, sagas, and epics describing early Germanic culture, to romances, Arthurian stories, and heroic tales, to folk literature and popular stories, the literature of medieval Europe describes and depicts women of all walks of life and in many different circumstances. Like theoretical sources, however, the views of women depicted in medieval literature are usually those of male "eyes." While there were female authors in the Middle Ages, such as Marie de France and Christine de Pizan, and while noblewomen of the High Middle Ages acted as patrons for such male authors as Chretien de Troyes and, perhaps, shaped the development of the romance genre, the vast majority of literary texts were written by men, and largely for a male—or a mixed-audience. As such, they reflect masculine themes, male-dominated discourse, and male perspectives.

While many male authors are seen as somewhat sympathetic to women, such as Chaucer and Chretien, many of the depictions of women reflect the ambivalence of the medieval intellectual world toward female participation. Women are frequently silent or unnamed in these texts or they are stereotyped—the lusty widow, the greedy and acquisitive peasant woman, the submissive and courtly noblewoman. These texts tend to reflect negative social attitudes toward women even when they extoll the (again, traditional) virtues of particular types, such as the innocent virgin, the devoted mother, and the devout nun.

The exceptions to this are in the literature written by women. In these texts, women tend to be depicted heroically, whether it is in the religious dramas of *Hrotsvit of Gandersheim* or in the biographies of women who dwell in *Christine de Pizan's City of Ladies*. Although the conventional virtues of motherhood, virginity, and duty to the family are emphasized in these texts, they are not contrasted with other, equally conventional, satirical views of female activity which appear in male-authored texts. The differences are striking, as the two essays appearing later in this volume attest.

Nevertheless, literary sources are invaluable for the things they say—and do not say—about medieval women. Popular views of later periods were often shaped by the literature of the medieval period. While not necessarily a reliable depiction of reality (the debate about Chaucer's *Wife of Bath*, for example, continues to this day), the depictions of women in literary texts nonetheless give the researcher a much broader perspective of the range of (predominantly male) views on women than can be found in the texts of the intellectual elite.

Thus, the sources for the history of medieval women are many and varied. Some are easily available to the modern-day student or the general interested reader; others are less easily accessed. All, however, reveal women in numerous guises: as noble householders pursuing litigation in courts of law; as wives and mothers caring for their families and their lands; as nuns, abbesses, and anchorites engaged in praying for their own souls and those of their patrons; as queens, landlords, brewers, seamstresses, prostitutes, and laborers. In short, the lives of medieval women, as revealed by contemporary sources, were as rich and complex as the lives of women today.

WOMEN IN MEDIEVAL
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PART I

Women in Medieval Society

INTRODUCTION

The essays in this section focus on the position of women in medieval society. From between roughly 500 C.E. and 1550 C.E., European society was dominated by competing political and social perspectives. On the one hand was the vision of the unified Church, expressed in the concept of Christendom which included not only the Latin but also the Byzantine Christians in its orbit. On the other hand was the developing vision within the varied and fragmented political systems of Europe of a sense of secular sovereignty divorced from religious considerations and, eventually, focused on the ideal of the nation-state (although this idea was in its infancy for the entire length of the medieval period). Just as there was conflict between the centralizing emphasis of the Church and the growing sense of sovereign difference on the part of the State, so, too was there conflict between senses of cultural unity and the very real separateness and specificity of the class construction of medieval society. The different social classes were not only aware of the nature of social stratification; they usually upheld such social distinctions as appropriate and rational. Underpinned by the Church's own pyramidal structure, the class structure of medieval Europe—the nobility, the urban classes, and the peasantry—sustained itself despite political upheavals, war, and plague. Only in isolated circumstances did a revolutionary thinker decry the stratification of medieval society: “when Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?” John Ball asked in the late fourteenth century, but he was executed as a traitor and his concept of equality under the law of nature was not voiced again until the writings of John Locke and the Scientific Revolution.

In the twelfth century, several intellectuals of the cathedral schools of France posited that medieval society was divided into three "orders": those who pray, those who fight, and those who labor. These distinctions, while perhaps having some political meaning, had little economic relevance. Those who pray—the clergy and the monastic community—were made up almost entirely of the aristocracy, who also comprised the category "those who fight." Those who labor encompassed an enormous and diverse population, ranging from the peasant bonded in semi-slavery to the land to the wealthy merchant who could command more moveable wealth even than the nobility. Moreover, the distinctions made by the "three orders" were not entirely accurate in fact. By the end of the Middle Ages, most of the armies contained infantry drawn from the peasant classes and from the urban populations of Europe, and the role of the mounted knight, while still important, was soon eclipsed by the role of the professional soldier and the mercenary, drawn from every walk of life and not bound by the traditional structure of the "three orders." In addition, this design for medieval society failed to include an essential component of the medieval world: the women of each social class, who prayed but could not become priests, who ruled over land but could not become knights, and who worked alongside their husbands, fathers, and brothers but could not hold official positions of mastery on the manor or in the guild. Finally, such distinctions entirely left out the non-Christian populations of medieval Europe, both Jews, who comprised a significant and important minority in all parts of Europe, and Muslims, who had assumed control over most of the Byzantine Empire, North Africa, and Spain by the end of the eighth century.

Thus, it is necessary to redesign the image of medieval society so that it encompasses a wider and more diverse group of people. The essays which follow do just that: outline in broad terms the positions and roles of women from various parts of the medieval world and in various social circumstances. Amy Livingstone focuses on noblewomen, predominantly in northern Europe and England during the High Middle Ages. She outlines the many roles which noblewomen played as they moved from the status of daughter to that of wife and, perhaps, widow in the course of their lives. Barbara Hanawalt and Anna Dronzek outline the position of women in the urban communities of high medieval Europe and discuss the remarkable variety of urban women's experiences in the economic, familial, and social roles which they played. Madonna Hettinger gives a glimpse of the peasant

woman's day and suggests that the many duties which devolved onto women of the peasant classes required them to "strategize" in order to get everything accomplished that needed doing. Judith Baskin presents a view of Jewish women in Europe, in both Sephardic (southern) and Ashkenazic (eastern) communities. Angeliki Laiou outlines the position of women in the Byzantine Empire, from royal women to working women. Finally, Jonathan Berkey discusses the roles and activities of women in the Islamic communities of the Near East.

CHAPTER 1

Powerful Allies and Dangerous Adversaries

Noblewomen in Medieval Society

Amy Livingstone

He [Erec] could not keep from kissing her; eagerly he drew near to her. Looking at her restored and delighted him; he kept looking at her blonde hair, her laughing eyes and unclouded brow, her nose and face and mouth; and from this a great affection touched his heart. He admired everything, down to her hips: her chin and her white throat, her flanks and sides, her arms and hands.

But the damsel [Enide], for her part, looked at the knight no less than he looked at her, with favorable eye and loyal heart, in eager emulation. They would not have accepted a ransom to leave off looking at one another. *They were very well and evenly matched in courtliness, in beauty, and in great nobility. They were so similar, of one character and of one essence, that no one wanting to speak truly could have chosen the better one or the more beautiful or the wiser. They were very equal in spirit and very well suited to one another.*¹ [emphasis mine]

The quotation above is from *Erec and Enide*, an early Arthurian romance written in the second half of the twelfth century. The stories in this literary genre sung the praises of knights and their fair ladies and wove tales of bravery, valor, and love. Chrétien de Troyes, the author of this romance, clearly believed that these two nobles were equal in beauty, wisdom, and nobility. Indeed, based solely on this passage, one might be tempted to assume noblewomen were the “equals” of their husbands, fathers, brothers, and sons. But equality is a modern

construct with little applicability to the people of the medieval period, although it is clear from this passage that this twelfth-century poet believed that Erec and Enide enjoyed some sort of parity. Was such parity an artifice of medieval literature or did the “real” Enides of the High Middle Ages (1000-1300) enjoy status and power in their society? Many historians believe that the latter was indeed the case. The renowned medievalist Eileen Power characterized women’s position in medieval society as one of “rough and ready equality.” Similarly, the French medieval historian, Robert Fossier, has described the Central Middle Ages as a “matriarchal phase” in the history of Europe.²

What sorts of powers and responsibilities did noblewomen exercise that has led two such esteemed scholars to describe the experience of women in the “dark ages” so positively? In this essay I will examine the stages of a noblewoman’s life in the Middle Ages. What relationships were important to her? What rights and responsibilities did noblewomen have during the course of their lives? What did they do for fun? By analyzing the life experience of women throughout western Europe over several centuries, I hope that the richness of their lives and their powerful and fundamentally crucial role in medieval society will become apparent.

Before discussing the life experiences of noblewomen, it is necessary to summarize the developments of the medieval period and how they affected women’s lives. Was the parity between Erec and Enide, as described by Chrétien de Troyes, the first time women had enjoyed such status? The answer is no. The High Middle Ages did not see an abrupt increase or expansion in the rights, position, and activities of noblewomen but saw rather a continuation of an earlier pattern and practice. In many ways the women of this period owed a debt to these earlier centuries, for without certain legal, social, economic, and political developments, their experience might have been drastically different.

After the collapse of the Roman Empire, western Europe devolved into a series of successor states of Germanic kingdoms. The Germans valued women and set heavy fines and *wergelds* (the monetary value put on a person’s life) for the death, abduction, or violation of daughters, wives, and sisters. In the sixth century, the kingdom of the Franks began to emerge as one of the most powerful of these successor states. At the same time, Christianity was making inroads among the previously pagan Germans, and, in many cases, royal spouses were the channel through which Christianity came to these Germanic tribes.

Noblewomen also found many opportunities within the church as well, acting as patronesses of new monastic foundations and, in some cases, even as the abbesses of these houses. But the tenuous unity forged among the Franks did not last very long, and the Frankish kingdom broke apart and became subject to violent and often brutal infighting among the royal and noble families. Women took their place among the bloody annals of this period. The slave and concubine Fredgond used her wiles to have King Chilperic murder his wife. The Queens Brunhilda and Bathilda acted as powerful regents for their sons and often engaged in violence to secure or promote their sons' positions. While historians of this period record the contributions of many royal women in these affairs of state, their inclusion was based upon their sometimes tenuous relationship with husbands or sons. In short, their power and status was not formally recognized by early medieval society.

The period of the eighth and ninth centuries represented an important time for noblewomen. On the continent, Charlemagne established order and forged an empire where the western reaches of the Roman Empire had once existed. Accompanying the creation of this empire were certain important legal reforms, among them the recognition of women's legal rights to land. Daughters could now share in the family inheritance and widows could control their husband's or son's property. Another development that increased noblewomen's status was the recognition of the queen as head of the royal household. In this role, a queen administered the royal lands and treasury—a considerable responsibility that entailed many different kinds of powers. This position was formally acknowledged when queens underwent the ceremony of anointing along with their royal husbands and sons. Certain changes in government worked to the detriment of noblewomen's power, however. As part of his attempt to rule his empire effectively, Charlemagne delegated certain responsibilities to officials such as *missi dominici* and counts. Although the queen ran the royal household, women were not candidates for these official positions. Perhaps fortunately for noblewomen, this formalization of government did not last much past the death of Charlemagne himself.

During the late ninth and tenth centuries and for most of the eleventh, the centralized system of government that Charlemagne envisaged crumbled. In its place local strongmen, who may have been counts and dukes under Charlemagne, or their descendants, assumed responsibility for providing stability, protection, and justice for a

dependent population. Those not descended from counts or dukes (often called *castellans* because of their control of castles) established alliances with powerful lords. Counts, dukes, and *castellans* alike bound warriors of a lesser status through the process of granting out fiefs. As power localized and central authority weakened, distinctions between private and public power blurred. Families who controlled fiefs came to provide services, such as justice, that in modern times are associated with public authority. Noble families established powerful dynasties that ruled western continental Europe for generations, and women, as members of these families, shared in this power and prestige. The contributions of the Carolingian period assured them a right to inherit a portion of their family estate and accorded them the position of estate manager. Since husbands were often away on military campaign in such turbulent times, the management and defense of the family home was left in the capable hands of their wives.

The experience of noblewomen in Anglo-Saxon England was somewhat different from that of their continental counterparts. In the early Middle Ages, England was made up of a series of kingdoms that coalesced into one royal house only in the tenth century. Anglo-Saxon queens were extremely influential and, like continental queens, played an important part in the spread of Christianity in England. Noblewomen enjoyed many of the same rights to property that Charlemagne's reforms ensured for women in his empire, although they gained them somewhat earlier. A survey of Anglo-Saxon wills reveals that noblewomen controlled significant portions of property and that there was no apparent preference shown to males as heirs. One important difference between the women of the continent and Anglo-Saxon women was that the latter could rule territory in their own right. While there were many highly visible Frankish queens, they ruled usually in the name of their sons or as counterparts to their husbands. In contrast, Ethelflaed, the daughter of Alfred the Great, king of Wessex, became the "lady of the Mercians" upon the death of her husband, the lord of Mercia. Ethelflaed ruled for many years and was succeeded, albeit briefly, by her daughter. Anglo-Saxon women continued to be recognized as powerful members of aristocratic society through the eleventh century. With the coming of the Normans, however, Anglo-Saxon women were dispossessed of their lands, and their rights of inheritance were sharply curtailed.

In the late eleventh and twelfth centuries, medieval society underwent a series of important transformations. Chief among them

was the resurrection on the continent of effective monarchical leadership and the co-opting of noblemen into the royal household and into appointed offices such as seneschal to the king. In some cases, dynastic control over these offices was established. Noblewomen, however, were not considered viable candidates for such positions. Nevertheless, women still remained vital to noble families as managers of estates, as fellow investors in the economic expansion of the high medieval cities, and as consumers and patrons of cultural and artistic movements that developed with the expansion of moveable wealth.

Like secular society, the church also underwent a period of renewal during the High Middle Ages. Dedicated churchmen attempted to expunge the corrupt secular elements from the church and to elevate the power of the pope. While many of the church's changes were detrimental to women, particularly the insistence on clerical celibacy, reform also offered opportunities for noblewomen. For example, noblewomen were inspired by reformers to establish and support new ecclesiastical foundations aimed at instituting the new reformist zeal.

Central to the question of a noblewoman's station and power was her family. If born into a powerful family, a noblewoman could expect great wealth, a share of the inheritance, and many opportunities for herself and any children she might have. If not so lucky, a noblewoman's quest for power might have been considerably more difficult, but it was still not without possibilities. When the centralizing power of the monarchy was at a low point and noble families held more or less sovereign authority, women achieved the most formal power. As medieval society became more organized and bureaucratic, women's access to authority was more difficult. Yet while their access to some sorts of authority may have been curtailed, noblewomen continued to exercise influence through other channels.

STAGES OF LIFE: DAUGHTER, WIFE AND MOTHER, WIDOW

What was it like to be an aristocratic woman growing up in the Middle Ages? A girl's immediate environment would consist of a small room adjacent to the great hall in her family's castle. Castles of this period were designed for their military advantages rather than for creature comforts. As a consequence, the bailey, keep, or dungeon in which the family resided was likely square or perhaps round in shape. The ground level was used for storage of food stuffs and household necessities or

perhaps for billeting warriors. The second level consisted of a great hall that served many functions. It was here that the family, servants, dependents, and any visitors would eat. The lord of the castle would convene his law court here and oversee cases involving various disputes. The great hall was also where many of the family servants and retainers would sleep. The children of the noble family slept with their parents and kin in a chamber off the main hall or perhaps in a separate chamber with their nurse once they were old enough. The castle itself, likely made of wood, or perhaps stone, was cold and very drafty.

The needs of noble daughters were met by mother and nurse. If there was an older sister in residence, she, too, might help supervise the child. Infants tended to be nursed by a wet nurse rather than the mother. The relationship between wet nurse and charge was vital to the well-being of the child, and wills and other testaments indicate that the bond was a strong and affectionate one. The immediate noble family was nuclear, consisting of a mother, father, and siblings. The number of children varied between four and six, and child mortality was very high. It has been estimated that 29 percent of female noble children and 36 percent of males died before the age of five. Although absent from the household, extended kin played an important role in the life of a noble child. An aunt, uncle or cousin might act as god-parent. In addition to the immediate family and nurse, the child would be surrounded by the *familia*. While similar to the modern "family," the *familia* was a broader term which included servants, extended kin, and dependents.

If a daughter survived childhood, she could expect to be trained in the skills and arts that would befit her position and be useful in her life as a member of a noble family. Mothers were responsible for educating their young children. A noble daughter would be introduced to sewing as well as to the skills necessary for the effective management of an estate. In order to accomplish such varied tasks, a noblewoman needed to be literate, at least in her vernacular tongue, and girls learned how to read and write either from the resident priest or their mothers or they might be sent to a local convent. While few nobles were probably educated extensively in the "liberal arts," most probably did have rudimentary literacy. Because of her role as estate manager, it was more likely for a noblewoman to be literate than a nobleman throughout the Middle Ages. The example of Heloise, who was tutored by the great teacher Abelard, indicates that some young women did

enjoy access to a more complete education in the classics of Antiquity and the Christian past.

Daughters could expect to inherit a portion of the family land. In some cases a girl's share of the patrimony took the form of a dowry, a gift made by her family at her marriage. Other daughters received both a dowry and a share of their family's property. As mentioned above, Anglo-Saxon parents did not prefer sons to daughters in their testamentary bequests. At the end of the thirteenth century, the inheritance custom of the county of Champagne in northeastern France stated: "If there are sisters, each will have one-half a brother's share of the plain land, but if there are more houses than brothers, the sisters will take their share of the houses in addition to plain land [so that each child would have a residence]. If there are only sisters, they will share the inheritance equally."³ In addition to sharing the property that their families controlled outright, noble daughters also inherited fiefs. Like noble sons, daughters assumed responsibility for vassals and participated in the ceremonies of homage and fealty associated with receiving a fief and becoming a vassal. In the duchy of Austria in the middle of the twelfth century, for example, daughters and sons would both inherit the duchy held in fief by the duke and duchess. In Champagne, noblewomen received fiefs and did homage to the count or countess for them.

As a daughter, a noblewoman was initiated into a complex family network. While a child, her world was somewhat confined to that of her immediate family and servants. Yet a daughter was undoubtedly aware of the bonds of blood, vassalage, and shared interests which tied her immediate family to her extended kin, other noble families, local lords, and the church. She was also aware of the wider world around her as she traveled with her family from estate to estate and to local monasteries to visit kin and assent to donations. As she reached maturity, marital arrangements were made or initiated and she began the next stage of her life as a wife and mother.

A young noblewoman would probably live with her natal family until she was in her early or late teens, at which time she either married or joined the church. Some noble daughters were betrothed at quite young ages and would be sent to live with their prospective in-laws. Elizabeth of Hungary was betrothed at the age of four to the duke of Thuringia and was sent to live with her affinal family in Germany until she married ten years later. However, this example of a betrothal and marriage at so young an age was the exception rather than the rule.

Most noble daughters were married in their late teens, unlike their brothers who tended to marry a bit later.

Neither noble son nor daughter had much say in determining their future spouse. Marriages were arranged by mothers, fathers, and other senior family members. Marriage was an important life passage for the newlyweds, but it was also of vital interest to their families as a tool for building political alliances, elevating their social status, and improving their economic standing. Modern concerns of “love” were of little consequence to the creation of such matches, although families were concerned that the couple be compatible to avoid any future trouble. In addition, the birth of children insured that the family would continue into the next generation. Noble families recognized and valued the lines and relatives of both husbands and wives. As a consequence, grandchildren could expect to exercise some right or claim to the property of their maternal family. Thus, although most noble wives moved to their husbands’ homes, they still maintained important and close contact with their own families.

Becoming a wife marked a vital transition in the life of a medieval noblewoman. No longer was she a daughter of the house; rather she became the mistress of the household. Moreover, for the first time in her life, a noblewoman was granted property specifically for her support. At marriage, brides were granted a dowry and/or a dower. The dowry was provided by the bride’s family, while the dower was given by the groom. In some cases, aristocratic women might receive both. Dowries and dowers consisted of various types of property and revenue, and in France the wife’s authority over these properties remained constant in the High Middle Ages. However, in England, women had no control over their dowers during marriage. Only as a widow could a woman expect to have any active role in managing or determining the fate of this property. In Italy, too, women had no control over their dowries while their husbands were still alive. Yet Italian women did have the right to protect the property that had been given to them in dowry if their husbands died insolvent. In other words, a woman had the right to reclaim her dowry, or its equivalent, from her husband’s estate, and it was not to be attached by her late husband’s creditors.

After marriage, a woman would most likely move into her husband’s place of residence where she would assume responsibility for overseeing the estates of her husband and keeping track of the revenue and income generated by these properties. One can imagine

that a new bride charged with considerable responsibilities was thankful for the lessons on budgets and household finance instilled by her mother. In her advice booklet to noblewomen, Christine de Pizan encourages noble wives to be well versed in monetary matters and experienced in creating and following a budget, because frugal women run their estates more efficiently and are less vulnerable to unscrupulous stewards or businessmen. Medieval noblewomen were in charge, in some cases, of vast properties, often scattered all over the country. They oversaw the collection of dues, tolls, and taxes from their dependents. They were responsible for making sure other investments, such as mills, were built and maintained and that they paid their fair share to the lord's household. They had to insure that their land was cultivated properly. Even queens were concerned with the mundane realities of estate management. Queen Edith of the Anglo-Saxons complained of a certain Wudumann, "to whom I entrusted my horses and who has withheld from me for six years my rent both in honey and in cash" and petitioned that a "just judgment" be passed on this tardy tenant.⁴

Although a wife became intricately involved in the supervision of her own estates as well as those of her husband, close contact with her natal family was maintained. Married daughters continued to participate in transactions with their natal kin and appear as codonors, consenters, signers, and witnesses in family documents. Frequently, her husband and children would also act in these capacities. The charters from north-central France indicate that the nobility traveled frequently, which is apparent in their participation at feudal courts, ecclesiastical courts, and their possession of estates scattered throughout the region. Travel was a reality of noble life, and a noblewoman might likely visit her natal kin as she moved about the countryside. Moreover, the fostering of sons and the arranging of marriage alliances and of ecclesiastical placements for her children provided avenues of contact between a noblewoman and her family.

Marriage brought another important role to noblewomen, that of mother. Whether an actual birth mother or a second wife taking on supervision of any young stepchildren, noblewomen had a profound impact upon the next generation. While most mothers engaged a wet-nurse, some noblewomen did nurse their children. The influential cleric, Bernard of Clairvaux, was proud of the fact that his mother did not let anyone else nurse her children. Countess Ida of Boulougne was supposedly so outraged when one of her sons was nursed by another

woman that she shook her child until he vomited up the other woman's milk. Noble mothers were neither absent nor detached. The Carolingian noblewomen Dhuoda was so concerned for the proper upbringing of her son that she composed a manual that provided him with instruction on everything from religion to the proper relationship with his lord to family dynamics. While some medieval mother-child relationships may have been characterized by "tough love," there can be no doubt of the affection and care—if somewhat removed from twentieth-century parenting aesthetics—that these women bestowed upon their children. Perhaps this affection is best revealed in the following account of a young noble mother leaving her infant son:

She had an infant in the cradle and she wanted to see him before she left home. When she beheld him she kissed him and the babe began to smile. She moved away from the cradle in order to leave the room, but retraced her footsteps again and approached the babe. He again smiled and this happened several times more. She could not leave him.⁵

Mothers were vital in determining the futures of their children. They were responsible for inculcating proper virtues and manners in their children, much as mothers continue to be today, and participated in arranging advantageous marriages or religious careers for their daughters and sons. Guibert of Nogent, a twelfth-century French monk, felt indebted to his mother for placing him in the church. He believed that, had his father lived, he would have been forced into knighthood—an occupation for which he was unsuited. Other male ecclesiastics also found a champion in their mothers. St. Hugh, the abbot of Cluny, was the son of a very prominent noble family and his father had determined that Hugh was to become a knight even though young Hugh had no interest in the life of a warrior. His mother realized this and placed him in the church.

As mothers, noblewomen played important and influential roles in medieval noble society. Did wives enjoy a similar status? In his romance *Erec and Enide*, Chrétien de Troyes indicates that his hero and heroine were "very equal in spirit." Other evidence suggests that indeed noble husbands and wives were "evenly matched . . . in great nobility."

Wives ran medieval households and estates, a position which accorded them significant influence. In addition to managing family properties, wives were also involved in matters concerning the control

and disposition of family fiefs as well as legal issues pertaining to them. During the Middle Ages the distinction between private and public power was often blurred. Because noble families controlled the *ban*, a constellation of what might in the modern world would be termed “public” powers, family dynamics often involved intersection with the “public” world. The issue of succession and division of family property from one generation to another would, at first glance, appear to be a strictly “family” matter. But it was a far more complicated matter in the medieval world. Fathers were lords and provided public services, such as justice and protection, to their dependents. Hence, the question of who would become the next lord was of public concern. As a consequence, “private” matters such as marriage, succession and inheritance overlapped with public duties.

Noble husbands were often away on Crusade, royal and other business, or war. During their absence, their wives assumed control of the family offices, lands, and responsibilities. As wives, aristocratic women commanded a wide range of powers and were involved in many different facets of medieval life. In addition to such responsibilities, women also shaped and influenced the culture of their time. Marie de Champagne, the daughter of Eleanor of Aquitaine and Louis VII of France, was vital to the development and spread of the romance and the idea of courtly love throughout Europe. Chrètien de Troyes dedicated his works to Marie and stated that she had been instrumental in supporting his efforts. The romance represented a departure from previous literary genres, most of which were *chansons de geste* or songs of deeds that sung the praises of warriors and were concerned solely with military feats. Such material may not have held much appeal for women and the more genteel nobility of the twelfth century. The romance continued to include warriors and battles, but the object of such action became the pursuit of honor and loyalty to one’s lady *and* lord. Other noblewomen became directly involved in culture as poets, writers, and artists. Marie de France, for instance, wrote a series of short poems called *lais*. As sponsors and as active participants, noblewomen played an important role in shaping and determining cultural expressions in the Middle Ages.

Because noblemen were warriors and thus subject to violent death, women could expect to be married more than once. This was compounded by the difference in ages between husband and wife. Some women found themselves married to men much older than themselves, although the literature of the time suggests that such

marriages were frowned upon. In addition to the death of a spouse, noble marriages could be dissolved by repudiating a wife or by petitioning for an annulment or divorce. Noble families tended to view marriages as “disposable” and might take action to dissolve a union if a better opportunity or match surfaced; hence, a noblewoman could find herself in the precarious position of being put aside by her husband. The church attempted to restrict men from easily discarding their wives but had limited success in enforcing its will upon the medieval nobility. At the end of the eleventh century, Count Galeran of Meulan put aside his wife, perhaps to pursue a more advantageous match. His wife took refuge in the church, and Galeran attempted to remarry. Bishop Fulbert of Chartres, however, kept advising Galeran that he could not take another wife while the first one was still living. Galeran replied that his wife had run away and asked Fulbert to help to return her to him. Galeran’s wife refused to go back to her husband, most likely out of fear for her safety, and Bishop Fulbert refused to force her to reconcile with Galeran. The count of Meulan was not the only noble of the period to view marriage as a political convenience. Count Geoffrey Martel of Anjou married and repudiated five wives during this same period.

Marriage could thus be an impermanent state for noblewomen, either through repudiation or widowhood. Noble families actively resisted the clergy’s attempts to regulate marriage and to impose certain canonical regulations on whom they could marry. Nevertheless, the church was eventually successful in asserting its will over the nobility and made marriages more difficult to dissolve.

Although most daughters, as mentioned above, had little influence in the choice of a marriage partner, some women, usually widows or divorced wives, did manage to exert their will over the selection of subsequent spouses. In the eleventh century, Countess Mathilda of Tuscany personally chose her future mate, the Duke of Bavaria, who was many years her junior. Eleanor of Aquitaine, two months after her divorce from King Louis VII of France, decided to marry Henry of Anjou, who would eventually become Henry II of England. Constance, the granddaughter of King Baldwin II of Jerusalem, similarly selected her own mate. Although advised by her father to remarry, Constance refused since she “dreaded the yoke of marriage.” Eventually, however, Constance did select another husband, a common knight, which prompted William of Tyre, a twelfth-century historian, to remark: “Many there were . . . who marveled that a woman so eminent, so

distinguished and powerful, who had been the wife of a very illustrious man, should stoop to marry an ordinary knight.”⁶

During their married lives, most noble ladies enjoyed considerable influence over hearth, home, and family. Except in England, noble wives were prominent in the control of public powers as well. They controlled knights, held courts to settle legal disputes, and engaged in military defense of their homes; some even were extremely violent and disruptive elements of medieval society. Did women’s life experience a change once their marriage ended? The experience of widowed women depended to a large extent on time and place. In some cases they did not experience a dramatic change in the powers and responsibilities that they enjoyed as wives, while in others widowhood was the first time a noblewoman enjoyed independence.

Widowhood represented a crucial life stage, particularly for English aristocratic women. As unmarried daughters, English noblewomen were under the control of their fathers or guardian. Once married, their experience did not appreciably improve, since a wife’s property became part of her husband’s possessions. Widows, in contrast, enjoyed a different legal status. After the death of her husband, a woman received her dower, which consisted of one-third of her husband’s holdings. Her control of this property was autonomous and did not require a guardian to help her manage her estates. Dower portions could consist of considerable lands and estates, depending upon the wealth of the husband. Power over land gave medieval English widows access to the political realm and control over family matters.⁷ These women acted as lords and enjoyed the responsibilities that lordship entailed. They controlled tenants and even knights, litigated disputes that arose among their dependents, and appointed estate officials. In other words they enjoyed the same prerogatives as a male lord.

Relations between widows and family members varied from benevolence to acrimony. The basis for conflict among a widow and her children, stepchildren, and in-laws was her dower property. Joan de la Pole had her dower lands besieged by her mother-in-law, Hawise. William de Breouse attempted to force his stepmother to take care of debts incurred by his father out of the property she had received from her husband. In both cases, only the intervention of the king resolved these conflicts between widows and their affinal families. Not all women had such a difficult time with their relatives. Widows often were granted the wardship of their children’s lands. Alice de Lacy

enjoyed a warm relationship with her son, who eventually became the earl of Lincoln. When absent, he entrusted his mother with overseeing the earldom, an indication of his esteem for her.

In other regions of Europe, noblewomen enjoyed somewhat different experiences as widows. In Italy, widows remained disadvantaged and were regarded by families with a great deal of suspicion. Widows in Catalonia experienced no such restriction. Countess Ermessend reigned over the county of Barcelona as the guardian of her son and, later, of her grandson. Like their counterparts to the south, French widows maintained the prominent position they had enjoyed in both family and society as married women. In the region of Blois-Chartres, several important lordships were controlled by widows during the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries. Indeed, the county itself was capably governed by Countess Adela for a decade. Even when her son Thibaut came of age and became count, Adela continued to play a vital role as his advisor and mentor. Like Adela, Mahild of Alluyes, Philippa of Courville, and Helisend of Chartres became the guardians of their minor children and ruled as lords. A charter datable to 1094 makes it clear that Philippa had taken on her husband's duties and responsibilities. She states in this act that she and her son give the *ban* over the village of Pomeræ, which their predecessors Lord Ivo and Lord Gerogius had passed down to them. This document makes explicit that Philippa exercised the same rights and prerogatives that all other previous lords of Courville had enjoyed. Even though Gerogius had four brothers who could have easily assumed responsibility for the lordship, Philippa's right to act as lord and guardian went unchallenged.

Another responsibility that often fell to widows was arranging the futures of their children or, in some cases, grandchildren. There were essentially two futures open to children of the aristocracy: marriage or the church. If left with minor children, a widow would be responsible for arranging a marriage alliance. As part of the noble family complex, a widow was sensitive to the political ramifications of marriage as well as the current status of power in the region and sought to create alliances that would serve the best interest of her immediate family. Unlike widows in England who had to purchase the right of wardship for their children or those in Italy who were denied this right, French noble widows assumed control of their children, family lands, honors, and offices seemingly without opposition from their natal or affinal families or their lords.

After running a lordship or county and raising and marrying off several children, many noblewomen retired to convents at the end of their lives. They also made arrangements to leave their property to their heirs and loved ones through wills or testaments. Anglo-Saxon England is perhaps unusual for the number of wills that have survived. Of these extant documents, more than a quarter were issued by noblewomen. A certain Aeoflaed was granted "the estate at Ebbesborne and the tithedeed as a perpetual inheritance to dispose of as she pleases."⁸ The ability to dispose of their property as they saw fit is borne out in the experience of women in France as well. Women of various social status arranged that portions of their property be granted to the church upon their deaths. In arranging these transactions, their relatives—sons, daughters, in-laws, husbands and siblings—frequently consented to the arrangements made by their kinswomen. While the approval of such kin was necessary, these women still disposed of their property as they liked. In the thirteenth century, several aristocratic women made testaments that included pious bequests to the church. In 1228 Lady Elizabeth of Broyes-Commercy made a very generous gift to the abbey of Clairvaux to benefit the poor of the community. Specifically she gave the revenue from a tollgate, which was to be used to provide clothing for the poor. Like Anglo-Saxon noblewomen, those of France in the High Middle Ages were able to determine the future and disposition of their property.

Even when their sons or daughters succeeded them to the lordship, widows continued to act in family transactions and to play a vital role in the politics of the region. Widowhood did not mean forced retirement or being placed under the control of a male guardian. Instead they remained active and important members of their family and commanded the same powers and respect that they had as married women.

NOBLEWOMEN AND LAND

Daughters, wives, and widows played an integral part in the control of fiefs, evidenced by their participation in judgments concerning the disposition of such "feudal" properties. Lady Eustachia of Brou, the wife of William Gouet II, often acted with her husband in affirming and consenting to gifts made by their vassals. She also joined with him in hearing matters brought to their court. When Hilduin of Alluyes quitclaimed land and tithes at their court, Eustachia witnessed this act

with William. During her husband's absence on crusade, Eustachia frequently held court and dispensed justice. Her two grown sons witnessed her acts but did not attempt to usurp their mother's authority as feudal lord. When William returned around 1115 he found the family fiefs in good shape and order maintained. Countess Adela of Blois, Chartres, and Meaux, who was a contemporary of Eustachia, also acted with her husband Count Stephen in determining and administering justice and she, too, assumed control of these counties while he was on crusade. Count Stephen, however, died in the East, and Adela remained in control of these counties for well over a decade.

In addition to managing the counties and administering justice, Adela also dictated the political agenda and alliances of her family. During the early twelfth century, the political situation in western central France was complicated and dangerous. Two threats to Adela's power were the neighboring Counts of Anjou and the revitalized monarchy of Louis VI. To remain secure and to counter these threats, Adela pursued political alliances with her natal family, the Anglo-Norman royal house. Not only did these alliances benefit the comital house of Chartres, but they were also important for the power of the Norman monarchs, particularly Henry I (Adela's brother). Henry trusted Adela and she was instrumental in arranging a meeting between him and his estranged Archbishop of Canterbury, Anselm of Bec. When their husbands were on crusade or campaign, noblewomen were powerful lords and participated fully in the political life of medieval Europe.

Noblewomen also controlled property independently. Even when married, French aristocratic women maintained independent control of their retainers. The land in question could pertain to dowry or dower or could be her inheritance from her natal family. This independent control of land is evident in women's donations to the church, made on behalf of their souls and those of their loved ones. *Vicedomina* Helisend, for example, made several gifts to the abbey of St. Jean-en-Vallée for the souls of her two husbands and her sons. In the eleventh century, Lady Ermengard of Fréteval gave the church of St. Lubin and pertaining lands to the church. The donation grant states that the gift was made for Ermengard's soul alone and that the church and its appurtenances came from "her patrimony," in other words the land that she had inherited from her natal family. Along with making pious gifts, women arranged distributions of property in other ways. Early in the twelfth century, for example, Mary of Ulmo arranged a mortgage with

the monks of the abbey of St. Père of Chartres. She and the monks agreed that she would give them two measures of her best land in return for sixty shillings.

As well as ruling lands, noblewomen were called upon to defend their property. In the early thirteenth century, Nicolaa de la Haye defended the castle of Lincoln from French invaders. Defending castles and towns was a dangerous business and could have severe consequences if the defender was not successful. For much of his reign, King Edward I of England was at war with the Scots. The countess of Buchan attempted to defend Berwick Castle from the onslaught of the English. She, however, was not successful. To humiliate his vanquished enemy, Edward had the countess placed in a cage that was hung over the walls. The Countess of Brittany was somewhat more successful. In the fourteenth century, she actually led men into battle when Charles of Blois claimed the county. While most noblewomen ruled their lands in peace, on occasion they were forced to defend their holdings. Like their male counterparts, some met with success while others were not so fortunate.

As participants in feudal tenure, women were required to do homage to their lord but also to receive homage from their vassals. In the county of Champagne in the late thirteenth century an inquest was held to determine at what age it was customary for a noblewoman to participate in acts of homage.

They were asked whether it was the custom of Champagne that a woman who completes her eleventh year and begins her twelfth may do homage, and receive homage from her vassals. Monsieur Gilo of Bricon, knight, speaking for all the sworn and in their presence, said that it is the custom of the region of Champagne, and for the county itself, that a woman who has completed her eleventh year and begins her twelfth may do homage to her lords (seigneurs) and may receive homage [from her vassals]. So it has been in many cases without challenge even though the woman has not completed her twelfth year.⁹

The question of homage to women was of vital interest for the nobles of Champagne, for the county was ruled by countesses for nearly two-thirds of the thirteenth century. Noblewomen in Flanders, France, and parts of Germany did homage for the lands that they inherited and those that made up their dowries and dowers. Only in Norman England were

the rights of heiresses restricted. Here, husbands exercised the rights of their wives to property. Aristocratic women's participation in these matters was, thus, precluded. Only as widows could English noblewomen expect to participate in the control of warriors or the provision of homage.

The use of titles is a further indicator of women's exercise of political power. As wife and as widow, women were often denominated by titles such as *domina*, the female counterpart of lord or *dominus*, and *vicedomina*, the female counterpart of the title held by a secular official appointed by the bishop to help him in administering and protecting his land. Although feminized, these titles embodied the same powers, privileges, and honors as those of their male counterparts. The use of seals also denotes noblewomen's participation in the political realm. Seals were used by lords, both secular and sacred, as a way of indicating their consent and approval of transactions. While queens were the first women to use seals, the practice eventually trickled down to women of the nobility. For example, Countess Blanche of Champagne used seals to verify and affirm her official comital acts. In 1245, when Lady Beatrice of Marnay could not find the letter of credit which she had extended to a local monastery, she sent a letter and "affixed [her] seal to this letter at the request of the abbot and chapter of Saint-Urbain."¹⁰ Women from all over Europe used seals, and their authority through the seal was recognized as appropriate expression of their power. Aristocratic women's participation in the world of vassals and fiefs, the employment of titles, and the use of seals indicate that through most of medieval Europe they were active and recognized participants in the power relationships that defined the medieval world. Because they controlled knights and the resources of lordship, a noblewoman could be either a powerful ally or a dangerous adversary.

NOBLEWOMEN AND THE CHURCH

In the course of a noblewoman's life many forces and relationships were important to her. Connections with family (natal and affinal), lords, and vassals were vital in shaping a woman's life experience. Another important relationship was that between aristocratic women and the church. For some women, the church became a way of life as they became nuns. For others, contact with local ecclesiastical foundations took many forms. Some had aunts, uncles, siblings, or children who were members of the clergy. Others engaged in litigation with the

monks over the possession of property. Still others were important patrons and supporters of the church and zealous advocates of church reform. During a lifetime, the relationship between a woman and a church could include all of the above possibilities.

Noblewomen were often generous patrons of local ecclesiastical foundations and gave land, revenues, and other resources vital to the interest of the monks and nuns. Such women frequently enjoyed cordial—indeed warm—relationships with the clerics of the region which, on occasion, compelled them to act as intercessors between their families and the local ecclesiastical institutions. In these cases, the intersection between private and public powers becomes particularly apparent. During the eleventh century, Adelaide of Le Puiset, the daughter of Viscount Evrard I of Chartres, attempted to cultivate a friendly relationship between her husband Roger Montgomery and the church. The eleventh-century Norman historian Orderic Vitalis says that she was “remarkable in her gentleness and piety, and continued to encourage her husband to befriend the monks and protect the poor.”¹¹ Twelfth-century noblewomen from the families of lords and viscounts in the French counties of Blois and Chartres also played the role of mediator between their families and the church. For instance, in 1145 the bishop of Chartres excommunicated the viscount of Chateaudun, his sons, and their “castle” for their actions against the monks of Tiron. After the viscount died, his widow Heloise and his son appealed to the monks for peace. They promised to restore all that had been usurped by the viscount, with the *proviso* that if any later claims were made, the sentence of excommunication would be reinstated. While this act of excommunication had grave consequences for Heloise’s immediate family, there were also public ramifications. Not only was the vicecomital family denied church offices but so, too, were their dependents. Heloise interceded between the church and her family, which testifies to her concern for her family but also the more public influence that she exercised both within her family and medieval society.

Along with their role of intermediary and patron of the church, noblewomen were also vital allies in the attempts to reform the church. During the second half of the eleventh century and much of the twelfth, western Europe was consumed by a wave of reform within the Church which attempted to restore the authority of the papacy and to expunge secular influence. Countess Mathilda of Tuscany was instrumental in supporting the reform popes of the eleventh century in their battle

against the Holy Roman Emperor. On her death in 1102 she left the papacy her extensive holdings. As part of this increased commitment to reform, pious ecclesiastics attempted to establish communities far away from the corrupting influences of secular society. This message of reform found a supportive and enthusiastic audience among the land-owning elite of western Europe. Newly reformed foundations sprang up all over Europe. Noblewomen were instrumental in gaining their family's support for these newly founded or reformed foundations. In the region of the Chartrain, the abbey of St. Jean-en-Vallée, while founded in the eleventh century, was reformed in the early twelfth through the joint cooperation of Bishop Ivo of Chartres and Countess Adela and was supported generously by other noble families of the region as well.

A lack of support or enthusiasm by powerful women could also obstruct a foundation. In the first third of the twelfth century the ascetic Bernard of Tiron ventured into the wilds of the Perche to found a community of reformed monks. Count Rotrou of Perche was impressed by Bernard and gave him and his followers generous portions of land close to his comital seat. This plan was soon scuttled, however, by Count Rotrou's mother, Beatrice. The Countess strenuously objected to the location of this new religious center. She claimed it was too close to St. Denis of Nogent-le-Rotrou, the abbey that the comital family had traditionally favored and supported. Beatrice feared that Bernard's new foundation would provide undue competition for the monks of St. Denis and, hence, work to their disadvantage. Rotrou was persuaded by his mother to move the proposed foundation to the forest of Tiron, where he gave Bernard and his disciples generous lands. Beatrice's intervention reflects the powerful role that noblewomen played as fierce protectors of their favored ecclesiastical foundations. The community of Tiron was undoubtedly distressed by her opposition, but the monks of St. Denis were surely grateful for the countess's support and protection.

Noblewomen could also be counted upon to intervene in disputes between the monks and their children. Sometime in the first third of the twelfth century, Ivo of Courville refused to abandon certain customs that his father and mother had levied on the abbey of St. Père. As she was dying, his mother, Philippa, called Ivo to her side and exhorted him to cease these customs. She confessed that the customs had not been granted either to herself or to her husband and admitted that they had usurped them, making the family's possession of them unjust. Ivo,

however, had a “heart of a youth” and did not follow his mother’s advice. Although Ivo ignored Philippa’s counsel, it is clear that Philippa tried to intercede between her son and the church. That Ivo did not take his mother’s advice was due not to its lack of value but to his own bad judgment. Indeed Ivo’s self-criticism is apparent in the charter, and it is later made clear that he wished he had followed his mother’s counsel.

As well as being powerful allies of the monks, noblewomen could also be dangerous adversaries. Throughout the eleventh and twelfth centuries, women became involved in altercations with the church over the dispersal of ecclesiastical offices and the control of property. In the eleventh century, a violent conflict erupted between the bishop of Chartres and the family of the bishop of Senlis over the office of subdeacon of the cathedral. The bishop of Senlis’s family had proposed that the bishop’s younger brother assume this office, but Bishop Fulbert of Chartres rejected him as a candidate and the office went to another cleric. The family was so incensed by this action that mother and sons began planning a violent revenge upon the new subdeacon. They conspired and arranged to have some of their henchmen go to Chartres and “during the day they remained in hiding; going out in the dark of night, they butchered in the very forecourt of the cathedral that holy priest, who was coming to the church as usual, with spears, falcons and swords as if he were a fierce wolf.”¹² Yet another woman from the north of France caused trouble for Bishop Fulbert. In 1023 the bishop of Paris wrote to Fulbert asking him to excommunicate a certain “noblewoman of Lâon” who was ravaging the church’s possessions. Fulbert was reluctant to pronounce this sentence, his primary reservation being that no one would dare notify this woman that she had been excommunicated.¹³ English noblewomen were also, especially as widows, active in both the support of and opposition to, ecclesiastical foundations. In 1238, for example, Lady Agnes de Vescy went to war with the priory at Malton. The dispute between Agnes and the monks involved several acts of violence committed by her and her retainers. First, her men attacked brothers of the priory while they were traveling on a public road; next she and her male followers attacked the priory itself, where they stole livestock from the abbey. Finally, she had her men stop the monks from working their fields. Agnes’ attack, the prior of Malton Priory asserted, was completely unprovoked and without justification.¹⁴ These women were all powerful adversaries who used violence, cunning, and brute force (just as their male counterparts did) to gain land, offices, and power. Their actions disrupted medieval society and caused the church no end of trouble.

While most daughters of noble houses married, others found careers in the church. If a family decided that a daughter was destined to be a nun, they would provide her with a gift when she entered the convent. These daughters were sent to convents at a young age and were raised by the nuns. Opportunities for advancement within the church abounded for young noblewomen. In many cases, daughters were placed in religious houses with which their families had a long tradition; in some cases, the convent itself may have been founded or constructed through family patronage. The office of abbot or abbess was often filled by a child of the founding family. Many a novice had her aunt as abbess. In fact, parents might place a daughter in a convent with the intention that she eventually succeed her aunt as abbess. Although a member of the church, a nun maintained contact with her natal family and could expect to see them when they came to the abbey to make donations, settle disputes, and celebrate religious holidays.

The decision of where to place a child oblate—male or female—was an important one for the family. Selection of a particular monastery or nunnery had important political, social, and economic implications for the family. Usually if a child were placed in a monastery or nunnery, the family would continue to give generously to the foundation. Patronage patterns changed over the course of a family's history and noblewomen were instrumental in determining which houses would receive family support. Moreover, as mentioned above, the development of new or reformed monastic houses might change a noble family's donation practices or provide competition for the more established foundations in the region. Pious donations were vitally important to both secular and sacred interests. Determining where a child would be placed had significant long-term repercussions for the noble family and monastery alike.

Medieval noblewomen lived active, rich, and sometimes tragic lives. While it is impossible to determine the exact age of most noblewomen at death, it appears that many lived into their sixties and others into their seventies and even eighties. During their lives, they were important members of their community and contributed to their family and society in many ways. These were not women confined to castles or subordinated by men. Instead they participated in virtually all of same activities as noblemen. They went to war, on Crusade, and on pilgrimage. They acted as lords, adjudicated disputes, and appointed estate officials. They managed their homes and educated their children. Contact was maintained with their birth families. While the selection of