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Sadie M. Kok-Carlson
Clackamas High School

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Sadie Kok-Carlson

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Empress Matilda: Always the Consort, Never the Queen

March 1141 marked a monumental time for Matilda of England: she was given the title of *Domina Anglorum*, “Lady of the English”, officially designating her as a “female feudal lord” (Chibnall, Church Reform 114). The title was the first of Matilda’s that didn’t reference any relationship of hers with a man. She was “the daughter of Henry I of England, the widow of Holy Roman Emperor Henry V, and the mother to the future Henry II of England,” (Beem 1), as well as the widow of Count Geoffrey of Anjou, but none of these titles reflected her own achievements until 1141. Men defining the life of a woman certainly wasn’t new in any respect, and Matilda was constantly held back in and by a misogynist society. Her right to the throne as the heir to King Henry I was withheld because of her second husband’s lack of initiative in France, her rival cousin’s adamancy in England, and her contemporaries’ gender roles.

Matilda of England was the daughter of King Henry I and Matilda of Scotland. Her mother impressed upon her the importance of religion and kindness, as well as the idea that a woman is successful through the men around her. In a letter to Archbishop Anselm, the man who married Matilda of Scotland to King Henry I and later cared for Matilda of England and her brother, who passed at a young age, the Queen of England says of and to the archbishop “By his blessing I was consecrated in holy matrimony; through his anointing I was raised to the dignity

of holy rule as queen” (Letters from Matilda). When the younger Matilda was twelve years old, she married the Holy Emperor of Rome, Henry V of Germany, gaining the title Empress. After the death of Henry V, to whom she gave no heirs, her father called her back to France and gave her in marriage to Count Geoffrey Plantagenet of Anjou. Henry I hoped that “he might have successors through her grandchildren” (William of Newburgh). She birthed three sons, one of whom eventually became king of England. The king, in an effort to ensure the succession of his rule by Matilda, “made the bishops, earls, barons, and all persons of consequence, confirm by oath the kingdom of England... to her” (William). However, after the death of the king, the throne was not given to Matilda but instead taken by her cousin, Stephen of Blois. The new King Stephen proved to be inept and lacked a firm grip on those he ruled, which allowed for Matilda to accept the loyalty of key political figures, as well as those who remembered their oath to the previous king. While Empress Matilda was able to gain status as a female feudal lord and an alternative monarch, there was a major divide between King Stephen and Empress Matilda, causing a civil war known as “the Anarchy”. As *The Western Experience* summarizes, the civil war “was resolved with the compromise that the son of Matilda... would succeed to the throne at Stephen’s death,” (295). Matilda was never truly recognized as the Queen of England, even though she had the right to the throne, because of the men surrounding her and the control they placed upon her.

Matilda’s first husband provided opportunities far beyond any which could be offered to a woman in the middle ages. Becoming the wife of Holy Roman Emperor Henry V bestowed upon her the title of Empress, which she kept and administered for the rest of her life, long after

the death of the emperor. The title was so impressive that her second husband, the Count of Anjou, even signified himself as “the husband of Matilda, daughter of the king of the English and former wife of Henry, Roman emperor” (Beem 5). Geoffrey continuously used the success and power of his wife to increase his own success and power. His military competence and his title as Count of Anjou provided territorial power and political status, but most of what he gained was inspired by Matilda. Most notable of his accomplishments is his conquest of Normandy, claiming the right of dukeship. Charles Homer Haskins outlines the military successes of Geoffrey Plantagenet in the acclimation of the provinces in Normandy, but Haskins mentions repeatedly that the only reason that he decided to and was able to do what he did was because of the resources provided to him by Empress Matilda (Haskins 129, 130, 131). Almost none of Geoffrey’s military successes could have been accomplished without the help and guidance of his wife and her half-brother, Robert of Gloucester. Robert provided the manpower and the leadership necessary to commit such intense military actions. Geoffrey was clever using available opportunities and alliances wisely, even when said opportunities were originally unavailable to him.

The Count worked long and hard to acquire Normandy because the kingdoms in the area had been promised but not given as part of Matilda’s dowry by Henry I. Geoffrey was generally considered a disagreeable person, and this was reflected in his unhappy, yet convenient and politically promising, marriage and the relationship he maintained with his father-in-law up to the time of his demise. King Henry I did not see Geoffrey as being suitable for ruling the duchy of Normandy, so even though the lands were promised in the dowry, he never received any rights

to the land. After the king's death and the succession of the crown to Stephen of Blois, the count jumped at the chance to liberate a land in turmoil from an inexperienced king. After years of political and military battles, Rouen was conquered and Geoffrey assumed the title of Duke of Normandy.

Before Stephen of Blois seized the throne, Matilda supported and encouraged the conquest of Normandy as a practical and worthy investment in her inheritance as heir to Henry I. When the king died and she watched as the crown was claimed by her cousin, her support wavered and decreased considerably. As Smuts points out in his review, the count "was more interested in his French territories than his wife's ambitions". Instead of pushing to claim the right to the throne for his wife and, by extension, himself, the count lacked the ambition and prevented Matilda from originally claiming the throne before Stephen. When she finally persisted in gaining the monarchy promised to her, Geoffrey refused to "further their recognition as Henry I's successors in England" (Beem 7) and discouraged her efforts to do so. She had to seek support yet again from her brother and from those who still honored their oath to her as the rightful heir to the throne. As an added insult to injury to Matilda, Geoffrey handed off the title to his son, Henry II, which "shows plainly that the count of Anjou had won and held Normandy for his son and not for himself" (Haskins 131). He lacked such motivation and drive for greatness that the time, manpower, money, and energy spent to acquiesce the duchy of Normandy, impeding Matilda's goals to return to England, wasn't even for himself-- it was for his son. Because of Geoffrey's diverted activity, Matilda was unable to become queen of England.

Due to unforeseen circumstances, specifically Matilda's third pregnancy at the time of her father's sudden death, the Lady of the English was physically unable to be in England to claim the throne immediately after her father's passing. Stephen of Blois, Matilda's cousin on her mother's side, made a swift coup and seized the throne in a mere three weeks after her father's death by having his brother seize the royal treasury and convince the political figures in London that Henry I "had effected a deathbed change of mind concerning his successor," (Beem 7). As stated previously, Matilda first agreed with her husband in working to conquer Normandy as a way of gaining her inheritance and securing her path to the throne, so King Stephen was left to his devices in England for about two years. Those two years proved to Matilda and the people of England that Stephen was inept, as outlined by Beem, "as he imprisoned bishops, and courted the church's antagonism, illegal castles were mushrooming all over England in response to the lack of a firm royal hand," (8). Matilda, having recovered from the birth of her third son and having lost interest in the Normandy plan, returned to southwest England where she reinvigorated the spirits of those who swore to recognize her as heir and those who disagreed with King Stephen. She very quickly brought about the alliance of barons, earls, dukes, and other highly important political figures on whom King Stephen relied. She never won the hearts of the people of England due to their expectations of a woman and her stiff economic demands, especially in London, but she established herself in the political sphere as an important and powerful figure, even if it wasn't good enough to achieve that which she deserved.

The king had proven himself formidable at Normandy, where Count Geoffrey continued to fight for the land, though through more peaceful means, as his main military strategist was in

England with Matilda, trying to win her back the throne. But he had a flaw: he was defectively inflexible, and this became apparent in that he ignored the right of Matilda to rule by falsely claiming his own right, and that he denied the problems in his kingdom and continued to leave any problems unsolved. The Empress could prove to be equally stubborn, and she established herself as a secondary monarch in England, throwing the land into a civil war as the people chose between favoring the king or the empress. The war lasted for years in an era commonly known as “the Anarchy”. This is not to say that Matilda never backed down or offered a more peaceful alternative in a compromise; this is to say that King Stephen accepted no compromise until he had seen large losses on his side and even he himself was captured and returned. King Stephen could never accept the Lady of the English as being the Queen of England, so the compromise settled on Matilda’s *son* succeeding to the throne, and Matilda stayed daughter of King Henry I and mother of King Henry II.

The final blow which prevented Matilda of England from ever being truly Queen of England was the single-mindedness of her peers, the writers of history, and the general society in which she lived. Matilda proved to be successful as a military strategist in her independent seizing of several Norman regions, as a political tactician in her progress in England, and as a public speaker, a monarch, and a ruthless and forceful leader, much like her father and first husband. When she displayed these attributes, she was not recognized for her ability or supreme aptitude in the world in which she ruled. Instead, journalists and historians marked her as being truly unwomanly, noting her arrogance, pride, and lack of male guidance. William of Newburgh, in his record of events, says “her recent successes made her so elevated in mind and haughty in

speech”, mentions her “intolerable pride of sex”, and explains that the loss of her glory was deserved of her “unbounded pride” (William). And yet, he says of Stephen “he was himself a most courageous warrior” during *his* loss of glory, being any victories by Matilda and her allies. The phrasing concerning Matilda did depend on “the particular conventional woman’s role in which each writer pictured her,” (107) says Marjorie Chibnall in her article “The Empress Matilda and Church Reform”. Chroniclers in Germany of the Holy Roman Empire and in Normandy used particularly kinder terminology, citing her as being pious, beneficent, and politically apt (Chibnall 107). These chroniclers saw her ability to rule, regardless of her sex, and they recorded the events happening in such a way that documented her successes rather than any personal downfalls. That being said, her supporters were not enough to keep her from being omitted from historical documents, despite her official rule as an alternate monarch for nine months, and when she was mentioned in contemporary documents, the language was biased, emotionally charged, and attacking of her assertiveness.

As one can see in Matilda’s titles, the realm of possibility for her political power was limited to those with whom she was associated, the only exception being her title as *Domina Anglorum*, Lady of the English, referring to her brief rule opposing Stephen, and always the last of her titles. Chibnall sums up “As a woman involved in politics she was assigned a woman’s place: important and influential, but limited, variable, and always secondary,” (“Church Reform” 107). When she had acted under her two husbands, Matilda was able to exercise as much and as forceful political power as she wanted without being corralled by that which was expected of a woman. When she began to act of her own accord, she became a danger to the patriarchal system

in England's society and government. Her role as "an alternative monarch... minting coins, issuing charters, and granting patronage," (Beem 9), threw the land into turmoil, forcing the English people to choose between her, the rightful heir and arguably more capable ruler, and Stephen, the man who got there first. Her adversary and his companions could not accept a woman ruling the kingdom, and their discrimination was one of the two reasons why King Stephen was so opposed to her holding the throne. The idea of a woman having power and acting strongly and forcefully was not beyond the English society; on the contrary, as demonstrated by Stephen's wife as she rallied forces against Empress Matilda, "a woman could get away with unwomanly behavior as long as she did it for her lord and master," (Beem 12). The people of London threw her out because she acted for herself. In short, as Smut puts it, "misogynist prejudices hampered her ambitions", and the rightful heir to the throne was left in Normandy rather than ruling her kingdom.

Matilda of England, Empress of Germany and Rome, daughter of King Henry I, mother of King Henry II, Duchess of Normandy, Countess of Anjou, the rightful heir to the crown of England, had to become satisfied with being Lady of the English. Being defined by one's husband, father, and son was nothing new in early medieval Europe, nor was it anywhere close to ending. While Matilda took pride in her titles, she never let them define her success, and instead she proved herself to a world reluctant to accept her. However much she did was never enough, as current official records of her story are few and far between. But her story lives on, and although we may never truly call her queen, Matilda of England will forever be recognized as the female feudal lord, *Domina anglorum*.

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