

**WOMEN
OF THE ENGLISH NOBILITY
AND GENTRY
1066–1500**

EDITED BY JENNIFER WARD



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WOMEN OF THE ENGLISH NOBILITY AND GENTRY, 1066–1500

While there is increasing interest in the lives of medieval women, the documentary evidence for their activities remains little known. This book provides a collection of sources for an important and influential group of women in medieval England, and examines changes in their role and activities between 1066 and 1500.

For most noble and gentry-women, early marriage led to responsibilities for family and household, and in the absence of their husbands, for the family estates and retainers. Widowhood enabled them to take control of their affairs and to play an independent part in the local community and sometimes further afield. Although many women's lives followed a conventional pattern, great variety existed within family relationships, and individuality can also be seen in religious practices and patronage. Piety could take a number of different forms, whether a woman became a nun, a vowess, or a noted philanthropist and benefactor to religious institutions.

This volume provides a broad-ranging and accessible coverage of the role of noble women in medieval society. It highlights the significant role played by these women within their families, households, estates and communities.

Jennifer Ward is Senior Lecturer in History at Goldsmiths College, University of London

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translated and edited by Jennifer Ward

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CONTENTS

Foreword	page xi
Preface and acknowledgements	xii
Introduction	1
I: Marriage	15
1. Letter from Margaret Paston to John Paston I, 1463	20
2. The marriage of Mary de Bohun, 1380–81	21
3. Maintenance of Mary de Bohun by her mother	22
4. Baldwin fitz Gilbert's acquisition of the honour of Bourne, 1130	22
5. Grant by Henry II to Robert Foliot, 1154–61	23
6. The inheritance of William earl of Gloucester	23
7. The wardship of Isabella Bolebec, 1185	24
8. The marriage of Belesent, daughter of Roger son of Odo, 1173–90	24
9. Proof of age of Joan de Welles, 1351	25
10. Grant by Henry I to Miles of Gloucester, 1121	26
11. The marriage of Hugh de Vere and Hawise de Quency, 1223	27
12. Grant of a <i>maritagium</i> by Warin de Bassingburn, 1265–66	28
13. The marriage of Hugh de Courtenay and Margaret de Bohun, 1315	29
14. The marriage of Hugh Courtenay and Elizabeth Audley, 1387	30
15. The marriage of Thomas Danyell and Grace Ogle, 1458	32
16. Will of William Berland, 1383	34
17. Dispensation for the marriage of John de Hastings earl of Pembroke and Anne Mauny, 1368	35
18. Marriage of William de Roos and Margaret de Neville, 1342	37
19. Matrimonial case of John de Carnaby and Joan Mounceaux, 1390–91	37
20. The bishop's examination of Margery Paston and Richard Calle, 1469	38
21. Letter from Richard Calle to Margery Paston, 1469	39
22. Letter from John Paston II to his mother, 1477	39
23. Letter from Margery Brews to John Paston III, 1477	40
24. Letter from Thomas Mull to Thomas Stonor, 1472	40

25. Abduction of Margaret de Multon, 1314–15	41
26. Abduction of Elizabeth de Burgh, 1316	41
27. The king and the remarriage of widows in the late twelfth century	42
28. The second marriage of Joan of Acre, 1297	43
29. Levying a feudal aid for the marriage of an eldest daughter	43
30. The importance of a public marriage ceremony, 1225	44
31. The marriage of the daughters of Roger Mortimer earl of March, 1328	45
II: Family	46
32. Excerpt from the Dunmow chronicle	49
33. Excerpt from the Llanthony chronicle	50
34. The will of Eleanor de Bohun, 1399	51
35. The Knight of La Tour Landry's advice to his daughters, c. 1372	52
36. Adam Marsh's advice to Eleanor de Montfort, c.1250	53
37. The conduct of Warin de Montchensy, 1235–53	55
38. Letter from Elizabeth Stonor to William Stonor, 1476	56
39. Letter from Katherine Chadyrton to George Plumpton, c. 1450–55	57
40. Cecily duchess of York in Normandy, 1441–44	58
41. Wills of Michael and Joan de Poynings, 1368–69	58
42. Wills of William and Elizabeth Septvans, 1448	59
43. Claim for dower by William Paynel and Margaret de Camoys, 1300	61
44. Maintenance of Katherine Swynford in Mary de Bohun's household, 1387	63
45. Adam son of Warin's provision for a second wife and family, c. 1140–52	63
46. The two wives of Gilbert Pecche, d. 1291	64
47. Struggles in the Neville family, 1432–40	65
48. The projected divorce between Earl John de Warenne and Joan of Bar, 1314	66
49. The reputed pregnancy of Matilda countess of Gloucester, 1316	67
50. The birth of Humphrey de Bohun, 1304	68
51. The burial of Humphrey de Bohun, 1304	69
52. The birth of Mary de Bohun's first child, 1382	69
53. The birth of Mary de Bohun's son Thomas, 1387–88	70
54. Proof of age of Ralph Basset, 1322	70

55. Proof of age of John de Grey, 1321	71
56. Proof of age of Alice de Newentone, 1329	71
57. A miracle performed on James de Clare, 1170–73	71
58. Mary de Bohun's purchases for her children, 1387–88	73
59. Children in the care of their widowed mother, 1185	74
60. Proposal for Henry de Montfort to stay with Robert Grosseteste, <i>c.</i> 1252	74
61. John of Lancaster in the household of Margaret de Brotherton, 1397	74
62. Letter from Elizabeth Stonor to William Stonor, 1476	75
63. The de la Pole children, 1416–17	75
64. The upbringing of Isabella Stonor, 1432	77
65. The wardship of Hamo Lestrangle, 1317	79
66. Arrangements for Alice Plumpton to live with her son, 1428	80
67. Elizabeth de Burgh's concern for her children, 1339–52	81
68. Elizabeth de Burgh's bequests to the Bardolf family, 1355	82
69. The will of William de Ferrers, 1368	83
III: Land	85
70. Domesday holdings of Azelina, widow of Ralph Taillebois	91
71. Women's holdings in 1185	92
72. Grant by Hawise, wife of William earl of Gloucester, <i>c.</i> 1150–83	93
73. Grant by Matilda of St Hilary, 1152–73	93
74. Grant by Alured and Sibyl de Bendeville, 1151	94
75. Grant by Robert the butler, 1138– <i>c.</i> 1150	94
76. Grant by Amicia countess of Hertford, 1198–1223	95
77. Grant by Hawise countess of Gloucester, 1183–97	95
78. Confirmation by Alice de Gant, 1176	96
79. Grant by the abbot of Ramsey to William Pecche and his wife, 1088	97
80. Charter of Roger de Valognes, <i>c.</i> 1145	97
81. Division among co-heiresses in the twelfth century	99
82. Division of the inheritance of William de Say, 1198	100
83. Division among co-heiresses of the Peverel and Pecche families	101
84. Partition among co-heiresses, 1206	101
85. Grant of Margaret de Chesney's inheritance, 1214	102
86. Ela countess of Salisbury's inheritance, 1226	103
87. Partition of the lands of Richard and Philippa Sergeaux, 1400	103

88. Action for dower, 1209	105
89. Action for dower, 1199	105
90. Roger Mortimer's legal action against his mother, 1292	106
91. Claim to hold by curtesy of England, 1200–01	107
92. Allocation of dower to Cecily de Morley, 1379	107
93. Creation of a male entail by Thomas de Beauchamp earl of Warwick, 1344	108
94. Claim by Michael de la Pole for his mother's inheritance, 1389	109
95. The joint enfeoffment of Andrew and Alice de Bures, 1392	111
96. The use of feoffees by the Morley family, 1380	112
97. The use of feoffees by John and Joan de Mohun, 1374	113
98. Joan de Mohun's grant of Dunster to Elizabeth Luttrell, 1376	114
99. Ela countess of Salisbury's grant to her son, 1226–36	115
100. Richard II's grant to Joan de Mohun, 1385	115
101. Grant by Henry III to Sibyl de Dyve, 1266	116
102. Elizabeth de Burgh's protest over Hugh le Despenser the younger, 1326	116
103. Provision for women after the Merciless Parliament, 1388	120
104. Margaret Paston's preparations for defending Gresham, 1448	121
105. Elizabeth de Vere and Richard duke of Gloucester, 1473–74	121
IV: Wealth and lordship	122
106. Charter of Adeliza de Clermont, 1138–48	126
107. Letter of Earl Roger de Clare to Adeliza de Clermont, <i>c.</i> 1152	127
108. Fees paid by Isabella Lady Morley, 1463–64	127
109. 'The Rules of St Robert' for the management of estates, <i>c.</i> 1241	128
110. Accounts of the demesne lands of Isabella de Forz, 1276–77, 1280–81	132
111. Valor of Anne Stafford, 1435–36	139
112. John Paston I's instructions, 1465	142
113. Receiver's account signed by Anne Neville, 1467	143
114. Petition from Margaret de Brotherton, 1377	144
115. Carta of Margaret de Bohun, 1166	145
116. Edward III's letter to Margaret countess of Kent, 1335	146
117. The honour court on the Isle of Wight, 1280–81	147
118. The honour court at Clare, 1326–27	148

119.	Arrangements for wardship made by the countess of Norfolk	149
120.	Franchises claimed by Isabella de Forz at Cockermouth, 1292	150
121.	Ela countess of Salisbury's right to be sheriff of Wiltshire, 1237–38	152
122.	Grant of the custody of Rochester castle to Joan de Bohun, 1399	153
123.	Creation of Margaret de Brotherton as duchess of Norfolk, 1397	154
124.	The countess of Oxford's support of Richard II, 1404	154
125.	The retainers of Joan Beauchamp, 1425–26	154
126.	Royal grant to Elizabeth de Burgh's retainers, 1345	155
V:	Household	156
127.	The 'Rules of St. Robert' concerning the management of the household, c. 1241	159
128.	The household of Elizabeth countess of Hereford, 1304	162
129.	Elizabeth de Burgh's wardrobe account, 1350–51	162
130.	Elizabeth Stonor's account-book, 1478	179
131.	Household roll of Joan de Valence, 1296	180
132.	Entertainment of the Black Prince, 1358	180
133.	The household of Alice de Brian, 1412–13	181
134.	Itinerary and guests of Elizabeth de Burgh, 1349–50	182
135.	Elizabeth de Burgh's private expenditure, 1351–52	183
136.	Elizabeth de Burgh's falcons, 1338–39	185
137.	Joan de Bohun's hunting, 1414	185
138.	Possessions of Philippa countess of March, 1378	186
139.	Furnishings of Matilda Lady St John, 1452	187
140.	Mary de Bohun's dress, 1387–88	187
141.	Elizabeth de Burgh's employment of a goldsmith and illuminator, 1339	188
142.	Servants of Elizabeth countess of Salisbury, 1414	189
VI:	Religion	191
143.	Foundation of Walsingham priory, 1153	198
144.	Grant by Matilda countess of Gloucester to Clare priory, 1276–89	199
145.	Foundation of the Charterhouse at Hinton, 1227	200
146.	Grant by Ela countess of Salisbury to Lacock nunnery, c. 1236	201

147. Transfer of the Minoresses from Waterbeach to Denny, 1339	202
148. Foundation of Pembroke College, Cambridge, 1347	204
149. Foundation of Heytesbury hospital, 1472	204
150. Patronage over Anglesey priory, 1333	206
151. Will of Anne countess Stafford, 1438	207
152. Prayer and piety according to the Knight of La Tour Landry, <i>c.</i> 1372	208
153. Election of the abbess of Barking, 1215	209
154. Archbishop Peckham's injunctions to Barking abbey, 209	1279
155. Office of the Cellaress at Barking abbey in the fifteenth century	213
156. The daily life of Cecily duchess of York, <i>c.</i> 1485–95	217
157. Pilgrimage of Andrew and Elizabeth Luttrell to Santiago de Compostella, 1361	219
158. Elizabeth de Burgh's religious expenditure, 1351–52	220
159. Mary de Bohun's almsgiving, 1388	221
160. Celebration of the feast of Corpus Christi, 1358	221
161. Will of Margaret de Thorp, 1347	222
162. Will of Elizabeth countess of Northampton, 1356	223
163. Will of Mary Lady Roos, 1394	223
164. Will of Isabella Despenser countess of Warwick, 1439	224
165. Will of Katherine Peverel, 1375	224
166. Will of Anne Latimer, 1402	226
167. Will of Beatrice Lady Roos, 1414	227
Glossary	231
Bibliography	234
Index	243

FOREWORD

Jennifer Ward's recent book on later medieval English noblewomen argued convincingly the importance of those women's roles in shaping and structuring their world. In the present volume, she adds new dimensions to her work. She goes back further in time, situating changes as well as continuities in noblewomen's lives against the nobility's social and political evolution over the centuries from the eleventh to the fifteenth; and, in line with the aims of the series, she opens up the evidence, some of it hitherto unpublished, and presents it accessibly to what will surely be a wide audience. The family and household aptly frame material ranging from marriage-contracts to account-books. But Jennifer Ward succeeds in bringing flesh-and-blood noblewomen to life, not only as resource-managers but as political figures in their own rights, as sometimes ardent practitioners of Christian piety, and lastly and centrally as gendered beings with distinctive experiences as daughters, wives, mothers and widows. Generally lacking formal political roles, noblewomen wielded influence and often power, especially at regional and local levels. How they did so, what were the limits to their activities, what were the costs they paid, can be gleaned from the dossier assembled here. These are not peripheral matters: Jennifer Ward offers a broad highway into and through central areas of medieval English life.

Janet L. Nelson, King's College London

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The increase in research in women's history in recent years has revealed the importance of women's role in society. Women of the nobility and gentry often found themselves thrust into positions of influence and power as a result of marriage, widowhood, or the accidents of inheritance. The purpose of the present collection of documents is to show the range of interests and activities among this group of women, and by taking the period 1066–1500 it is possible to trace both continuity and change in their responsibilities and relationships within and outside their families. Some of the sources for medieval women's history have long been known, such as the Paston and Stonor Letters. Many of the documents, however, concerning family, household and estates, and religious and cultural attitudes, remain in manuscript, and deserve to be more widely known. Only by careful assessment of such evidence can a full picture of the women of the nobility and gentry be built up.

In working on this book I have incurred a number of debts. I especially want to thank Janet Nelson, who invited me to contribute to the Manchester Medieval Sources series, and the staff of Manchester University Press for their advice and help. Paul Brand, Nancy Edwards, Paul Fouracre, Jeremy Goldberg, Ray Powell and Martin Stuchfield have drawn my attention to particular sources, and discussed various aspects of the lives of medieval noblewomen. Any remaining mistakes are mine. I would also like to thank the staff of the Borthwick Institute, University of York, the British Library, Lambeth Palace Library, the Norfolk Record Office, and the Public Record Office for their help and for permission to publish documents and translations of documents in their care. Material held by the Public Record Office is Crown copyright and is reproduced with the permission of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office. The investigation of sources is a fascinating process; it is hoped that the collection will provide an insight into the riches of documentation which can be much further explored.

Goldsmiths College, London
October, 1994

Introduction

Throughout the Middle Ages the men and women of the nobility and gentry occupied a position at the top of the social hierarchy. Although there were considerable gradations, depending on size of estates, amount of wealth, and social connections, there were no legal demarcations within the nobility to mark off one social group from another, and there was a great similarity in expectations and attitudes in spite of the differences of degree. The bonds of chivalry, a love of luxury and ostentation, and the desire to enhance the standing of one's family and increase one's estates are found from the highest nobility down to the local gentry from the eleventh to the fifteenth century. These ambitions and concerns give a unity to the period, and affected men and women alike.

At the same time, the way in which the nobility and gentry were envisaged underwent change, and this inevitably had an effect on women who derived their status from their fathers and husbands. The Anglo-Norman baronage of the late eleventh and twelfth centuries comprised the tenants-in-chief of the Crown, men who had been granted their honours, which in some cases consisted of extensive estates, by the Norman kings in return for knight service in the royal host; with good fortune these men were able to pass these lands on to their descendants. The baronage consisted of about 180 tenants-in-chief, and there were wide differences in wealth and landholding.¹ Great changes took place within the group in the 250 years after the Norman Conquest as a result of forfeiture of estates because of rebellion, and the failure of heirs within families; moreover, many new families arose as a result of service and reward, especially from the Crown, and through marriage to heiresses.² Only about thirty-six out of 210 English baronies between 1066 and 1327 descended in a single

1 D. C. Douglas, *William the Conqueror*, London, 1964, p. 269, comments that there were slightly fewer than 180 tenants-in-chief recorded in Domesday Book holding English estates with a yearly value of over £100.

2 E.g. the Clare family; J. C. Ward, 'Royal service and reward: the Clare family and the Crown, 1066–1154', in *Anglo-Norman Studies: Proceedings of the Battle Conference*, XI, 1988, ed. R. A. Brown, pp. 261–78.

male line for over 200 years.³ However, in the late thirteenth century the barons of England still comprised a large and varied group. The situation changed in the fourteenth century as the nobles came to be defined as those who received an individual summons to parliament; the English peerage thus came to be a group of between sixty and seventy, becoming both smaller and more distinct. The range of wealth within the peerage was however still very great; the figure of £250 may be regarded as a minimum for a peer in the late fourteenth century, but John of Gaunt's estates brought in revenues of about £12,000. This gulf between the top nobility and the rest was largely the result of marriage and the accumulation of great inheritances in a few hands.⁴

Between 1066 and 1500 the knight had an important role both in war and society. In the Norman period, the knights were not a homogeneous group, and a few of them held as much land as a lesser baron. On many late eleventh- and twelfth-century honours, a distinction can be drawn between the vassals who were responsible for a considerable amount of military service, and the professional soldiers who were responsible for the service of one knight or less.⁵ Knights held their fees in return for military service in their lord's contingent in the royal host, and castleguard, the service depending on the agreement made with the lord, not on the amount of land held. Although the knight is seen primarily as a military figure in the twelfth century, the wealthier knight enjoyed high social status, and served his lord as steward or constable, or as counsellor in the honour court.⁶ Such responsibilities were to increase from the later twelfth century as the knight became increasingly involved in the operation of royal justice.

For a wide variety of reasons, the number of knights declined in the thirteenth century, and their status grew; partly this was due to inflation, especially severe c. 1200, and consequent economic change,

3 E. Miller and J. Hatcher, *Medieval England – Rural Society and Economic Change 1086–1348*, London, 1978, p. 169.

4 The development of the peerage in the fourteenth century is discussed by C. Given-Wilson, *The English Nobility in the Late Middle Ages: the Fourteenth-Century Political Community*, London, 1987, pp. 55–66.

5 S. Harvey, 'The knight and the knight's fee in England', *Past and Present*, no. 49, 1970, pp. 10–13. Fractional fees were normally discharged through a money payment.

6 J. C. Ward, 'The place of the honour in twelfth-century society: the honour of Clare, 1066–1217', *Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and History*, XXXV, 1983, pp. 195–8.

partly to changing military demands and more expensive equipment, and partly to aspirations for a more luxurious lifestyle.⁷ Some men wishing to evade military and the growing judicial and administrative responsibilities of knighthood simply did not become knights at all. As a result of the changes, knights for the rest of the Middle Ages were a select and elite group, prominent in their own localities, often active at court and in parliament, still noted for their military prowess, as well as being engaged in extensive work for the Crown and local lords, ecclesiastical and lay. It has been calculated that *c.* 1300 the knights in England comprised between 2,500 and 3,000 men, about half of whom had actually been dubbed knight.⁸ Whether they were dubbed knights or not, there was never any doubt that they counted as part of the nobility.

During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries increasing differentiation of rank took place among those below the rank of knight. A distinction came to be drawn in the fourteenth century between knights and esquires, and many esquires came to play a leading part in local society and county government.⁹ By the late fourteenth century, the concept of the rank of gentleman had emerged, and was used widely in the fifteenth century.¹⁰ Thus there could be said to be a hierarchy of knights, esquires and gentry, but it has to be emphasised that these were by no means rigidly exclusive groups. Moreover, a distinction has to be drawn between the county gentry, who were men of wealth and standing, and the gentry whose outlook was confined to the parish or their immediate locality. Numbers varied from county to county, as did their estates and income.¹¹ In his analysis of the income tax of 1436, H. L. Gray suggested that there were eighty-three greater knights in England as a whole, with an income of between £101 and £399, and 750 lesser knights with an income of between

7 Changes in the knightly class are discussed by P. R. Coss, 'Sir Geoffrey de Langley and the crisis of the knightly class in thirteenth-century England', *Past and Present*, no. 68, 1975, pp. 3–37, and in *Lordship, Knighthood and Locality: A Study in English Society, c. 1180–c. 1280*, Past and Present publications, Cambridge, 1991, chapters 7 and 8; and by D. A. Carpenter, 'Was there a crisis of the knightly class in the thirteenth century? The Oxfordshire evidence', *English Historical Review*, XCV, 1980, pp. 721–52.

8 Given-Wilson, *English Nobility*, p. 14.

9 The terminology of this evolution is discussed by N. Saul, *Knights and Esquires: the Gloucestershire Gentry in the Fourteenth Century*, Oxford, 1981, chapter 1.

10 D. A. L. Morgan, 'The individual style of the English gentleman', in *Gentry and Nobility in Late Medieval Europe*, ed. M. Jones, Gloucester, 1986, pp. 15–35.

11 Given-Wilson, *English Nobility*, pp. 70–1.

£40 and £100. Below these he ranked 1,200 taxpayers who had an income of between £20 and £39 as esquires; 5,000 men were returned as having an income of between £5 and £19 and many of these were envisaged as gentry.¹² This provides a useful general view of the hierarchy, but few knights would have had an income of over £200, and in practice there was no economic dividing-line between knights and esquires. Similarly the poorer gentry merged into the yeomen. Status was not only dependent on wealth; local reputation and family ambitions and aspirations all played their part.

Although the use of the term gentleman to denote rank is only found in the late Middle Ages, the gentry as a social group below the level of the knights certainly existed much earlier. Gentry whose interests were focused on their home farm and parish church can be traced back at least to the thirteenth century and in some cases to the minor vassals of the twelfth. These local lords of manors were still part of the elite by virtue of the land they held by knight service and the rights which they exercised over it. Furthermore they shared the outlook of the rest of the nobility.¹³

The nature of their tenure can be seen as binding all these noble groups together and it reinforced the attitudes, lifestyle and interests which were common to all. Tenure by knight service was universal among the nobility in the late eleventh and twelfth centuries, and continued to be widespread until its abolition in 1660, even though its original significance had long since disappeared. Social and military changes gradually rendered knight service in the feudal host obsolete,¹⁴ but the vassal remained bound to his lord by homage and fealty, paid relief on his succession to a fee, and was liable to come into the lord's wardship if the heir was a minor. From at least the thirteenth century the operation of these feudal incidents meant that the relationship between vassal and lord was financial rather than personal. In view of this, the ties provided by bastard feudalism often had greater importance for both lord and retainer, as well as contributing to holding noble society together. The service of the retainer to his lord might be military or administrative; the retainer might be an

12 H. L. Gray, 'Incomes from land in England in 1436', *English Historical Review*, XLIX, 1934, pp. 620–30.

13 Coss, *Lordship, Knighthood and Locality*, chapter 9, discusses the origins of the gentry.

14 It was summoned for the last time in 1385, but was becoming obsolete well before that date.

official, kinsman, friend or ally, and the relationship could be long- or short-term. Whatever the nature of the service, the retainer received his fee and livery from the lord, and the lord's affinity was a strong influence in noble society from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century.¹⁵

The women of the nobility and gentry have to be seen in this hierarchical setting in order to understand the similarities and differences between them. On the economic side the differences could be huge; Elizabeth de Burgh in the first half of the fourteenth century enjoyed an income of about £2,500 a year, more than 250 times as much as the revenues of some of the gentry. On the other hand, there were similarities over concern for family, interest in land, and in religious beliefs and practices and social conventions. The similarities make it possible to take these women as a group, always bearing in mind that they were never an exclusive caste.

A distinction has to be drawn between the subordination of women found in ecclesiastical and legal writing and what was often the situation in practice. The didactic treatises stressed the virtues of meekness, humility and obedience, and emphasised women's religious duties, while many women found that in practice they needed to be active, forceful and energetic. Presumably a compromise could be effected, and it is significant that the knight of La Tour Landry in his advice to his daughters considered that the wife should be submissive and obedient but pointed out that there were ways in which she could influence her husband. The idea that women were inferior and subordinate was deeply rooted in the Middle Ages. Misogyny was widespread in the classical world and among the Fathers of the Church. Women were thought to be disobedient and deceitful; their beauty was a sexual snare; they were lustful and lacked reason, and altogether they distracted men and prevented them from reaching mental and spiritual heights.¹⁶ For churchmen, marriage was considered second-best to a life of virginity. Yet in practice it was essential

15 For a discussion of the early development of bastard feudalism, see S. L. Waugh, 'Tenure to contract: lordship and clientage in thirteenth century England', *English Historical Review*, CI, 1986, pp. 811–39; P. R. Coss, 'Bastard feudalism revised', *Past and Present*, no. 125, 1989, pp. 27–64; D. Crouch, *William Marshal*, London, 1990, pp. 157–68.

16 Translations from these texts are included in E. Amt, ed., *Women's Lives in Medieval Europe: A Sourcebook*, London, 1993; and in A. Blamires, ed., *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*, Oxford, 1992. The latter book includes a number of texts in defence of women.

to regard women more positively. From the twelfth century, the Church insisted that women as well as men gave their personal consent to marriage, and in the occasional pleadings over marital breakdown both women and men had their say. Women were an integral part of noble society, and occasions arose when it was taken for granted that they would take over duties normally performed by men. This is most obvious in the law of the land where a clear distinction was drawn between the wife and the widow. In the former case the husband was regarded as responsible for his wife, just like a father for his unmarried daughter, but, when a woman was widowed, she counted as a *femme sole*, able to plead in the courts and make her own decisions. The way in which a widow was often expected to take over immediately after her husband's death indicates an acceptance in society of her practical abilities.

In order to understand the position of noble and gentry women, it is essential to see them in the context of their families and of the law of the land; changes in feudal lordship, and, more particularly, the growing authority of the Crown certainly had an effect on their lives. The Norman Conquest brought changes over the inheritance of land; in the late Anglo-Saxon period the will had been used to bequeath land among a wide kindred group, a practice which was ended by the Norman stress on primogeniture. This could be detrimental to both men and women in the kindred group, but what becomes apparent from the charters of the late eleventh and twelfth centuries is the extent to which women had an interest in the land of the family. In the Norman period and later family concerns were usually paramount, normally within the immediate family rather than in a wider kinship structure. Arranged marriages were the norm, and great importance was attached to the birth of children, especially a son and heir. The furtherance of the children's interests, and of family interests in general, was a constant concern throughout life. These interests were normally linked with the husband's family, but there are instances where the wife showed a continuing interest in her own natal family and transmitted this to her descendants.

Change occurred over rights to land and inheritance, and many noblewomen became better off and more secure in their landholding as the Middle Ages progressed. As records from the Domesday Survey onwards indicate, women always had the right to hold land, although during marriage the husband was responsible for it. Down to the

fourteenth century, a grant of land, the *maritagium*, was made on marriage, and women were entitled to dower after the death of their husbands. Of considerable significance for many women from the thirteenth century was the development of jointure, land held jointly by husband and wife, which was initially laid down in the marriage settlement, and which the widow held for life in the event of her husband's death. Dower and jointure gave the widow independence, and there was no question that she was in charge of the lands if she chose not to remarry. Levels of wealth varied widely, but the dowager was a common phenomenon in noble society from the late eleventh to the fifteenth century.¹⁷

Changes in the law of inheritance had an impact on the position of women, and have again to be put in the context of the family and of the authority of the Crown. Where no sons had been born to a family, it was accepted that estates could pass through the marriage of a daughter to a new family. The rule that coheiresses should divide an estate equally between them probably dates from the last years of the reign of Henry I,¹⁸ and from that time it was usually enforced. However, the Crown had the last say over inheritance, especially in the case of major honours, and coheiresses could not automatically assume that they would obtain a share of the inheritance.¹⁹ Moreover, the development of the entail in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to ensure that the succession went to a male relation in the event of there being no sons meant that some daughters lost the chance of succeeding to the family inheritance. Daughters and their husbands are known

17 There is evidence in the Beauchamp cartulary of some widows disposing of their dower in return for a cash income; E. E. Mason, ed., *The Beauchamp Cartulary: Charters 1100–1268*, Pipe Roll Society, new series, XLIII, 1980, nos. 17, 22, 130–1. For dowagers, see D. Crouch, *The Image of Aristocracy in Britain, 1000–1300*, London, 1992, pp. 79–80; and R. E. Archer, 'Rich old ladies: the problem of late medieval dowagers', in A. Pollard, ed., *Property and Politics: Essays in Later Medieval English History*, Gloucester, 1984, pp. 15–35.

18 J. C. Holt, 'Feudal society and the family in early medieval England: I. The revolution of 1066', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, fifth series, XXXII, 1982, p. 199; J. C. Holt, 'Feudal society and the family in early medieval England: IV. The heiress and the alien', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, fifth series, XXXV, 1985, pp. 9–10; S. F. C. Milsom, 'Inheritance by women in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries', in M. S. Arnold, T. A. Green, S. A. Scully and S. D. White, eds, *On the Laws and Customs of England: Essays in Honor of Samuel E. Thorne*, Chapel Hill, 1981, pp. 60–89.

19 For examples of Crown intervention, see K. B. McFarlane, 'Had Edward I a "policy" towards the earls?', *History*, L, 1965, pp. 145–59, and reprinted in *The Nobility of Later Medieval England*, Oxford, 1973, pp. 248–67.

to have been angered by this, but usually the only people to gain from a protest were the lawyers.²⁰

Treatises like that of the knight of La Tour Landry did not envisage women as landholders and land-managers, and did not consider providing a formal training for a task which they frequently had to assume.²¹ The knight stressed the importance of education for women but interpreted this as an ability to read and understand the Scriptures; Humbert de Romans considered that they should be able to say the psalter, the Hours, the Office of the dead and other prayers, and women's possession of books of hours indicates that many could do this.²² From the point of view of the Crown and the lord, however, women in charge of an estate were expected to know how to meet its obligations. In the Norman and Angevin period, this could well entail the production of knights to serve in the feudal host and to guard royal and baronial castles; later, contributions were demanded for the defence of the realm. Ladies, like lords, held their honour courts, and enforced feudal incidents such as relief and wardship, and women who were their vassals had to carry out their obligations. During the Middle Ages, a growing number of families became tenants-in-chief of the Crown, and were affected by the Crown's right of prerogative wardship;²³ it can be assumed that a large number of noble and gentry women would come up against the demands of the Crown at some point in their lives. A minority found themselves dealing with the Crown as rebels in time of political disturbance.

From the point of view of the family, the woman took over the management of the estates when needed. Certainly this would be the case with her dower if she was widowed, but it was widely expected that

20 E.g. the entail of the Berkeley estates which meant that Elizabeth Berkeley and her husband Richard Beauchamp earl of Warwick were not entitled to succeed to the inheritance; the Berkeley lawsuit lasted from 1417 to 1609. Its early stages are discussed by C. D. Ross, 'The household accounts of Elizabeth Berkeley, countess of Warwick, 1420–1', *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society*, LXX, 1951, pp. 81–3.

21 A. S. Haskell, 'The Paston women on marriage in fifteenth-century England', *Vivator*, IV, 1973, pp. 463–4. John of Wales, writing his sermons in the later thirteenth century, recommended that children should be taught how to handle their inheritances, but he may well have been thinking of boys rather than girls; J. Swanson, 'Childhood and childrearing in *ad status* sermons by later thirteenth-century friars', *Journal of Medieval History*, XVI, 1990, p. 318.

22 Swanson, 'Childhood and childrearing', p. 324.

23 Under prerogative wardship, the Crown gained custody of all the lands of the tenant-in-chief held by knight service, not just the estates which were held of the Crown.

she would take her husband's place in his absence, relinquishing control on his return. Noble and gentry women needed both practical ability and adaptability. Such activity is described most vividly by Christine de Pisan, who in her *Treasure of the City of Ladies* shows the wise princess presiding over the council and taking decisions in the absence of her husband.²⁴ Christine, writing c. 1400 and familiar with the French court and nobility, probably wrote from personal knowledge, and certainly many noblewomen were called on to do this in the medieval world.

These activities with regard to land and lordship were regarded as very much in the male domain; the woman was virtually taking on a male identity. Other activities were regarded by the treatises as more acceptable for women, such as religion, charity and peace-making. Christine de Pisan's wise princess, like the knight of La Tour Landry's daughters, was enjoined to love and fear God, and to devote herself to the cultivation of virtue and good works. Only a few women, however, were called to the contemplative religious life where they cut themselves off completely from self, family and the world.²⁵ Most women, even those living as nuns, still have to be seen against the background of family and community.

The noblewoman was therefore expected to be obedient, submissive and virtuous, but to be able to carry out men's duties as needed within the family and on the estates. Her world centred on the family and its interests, and her life and prospects were affected by both the law of the Church and the law of the land, as well as by fortune and accident. The question remains as to how full and vivid a picture of her life and world can be built up from the sources. The dichotomy between subordination and activity comes out in different types of evidence. Treatises like that of the knight of La Tour Landry show what was expected of women by way of character and disposition; the romances like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*, with their emphasis on courtly love, portray wives and maidens in a noble setting, and stress love and temptation, the inspiration women gave to their knights, and the ceremonial life of tournaments and jousts.²⁶

24 Christine de Pisan, translated by S. Lawson, *The Treasure of the City of Ladies or The Book of the Three Virtues*, Harmondsworth, 1985, pp. 60–1.

25 Christine de Pisan, *Treasure*, pp. 41–55.

26 Both these romances are available in translation in Penguin Classics: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, translated by B. Stone, second edition, Harmondsworth, 1974; Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, ed. J. Cowen, 2 vols, Harmondsworth, 1986. See also R. Barber and J. Barker, *Tournaments: Jousts, Chivalry and Pageants in the Middle Ages*, Woodbridge, 1989, pp. 206–7.

Although noblewomen attended tournaments and feasts, these were only occasional celebrations, and the didactic treatises warned them to beware of the dangers of courtly love. It is likely that many women enjoyed the romances as make-believe fantasy. The women in the romances epitomised particular traits, good and bad, but they rarely come over as fully developed characters. Chaucer's portrayal of women in *The Canterbury Tales* is much more vivid, and shows the diversity of character and personality which must have existed but which rarely comes over in the historical records.

Chronicles sometimes provide a lively insight into the activities of a particular woman, and they were often interested in family genealogy. Yet their emphasis on events, especially concerning the king, wars, battles, and political affairs generally, meant that they had little interest in social life and economic fortunes. It is therefore essential to turn to more formal records. For the late eleventh and twelfth centuries, charters and documents emanating from royal government reveal more than might be expected about noblewomen. The monastic practice of compiling cartularies, collections of the charters granting lands and possessions, ensured the survival of material which otherwise would probably have been lost. These charters were usually undated, and can present problems of authenticity, but they often throw light on family relationships, household and estate organisation, *maritagium* and dower, as well as religious attitudes. Charters continue to be useful in the later Middle Ages, but by then they can be supplemented by a wide range of other evidence.

The record-keeping practices of the Crown are invaluable for women's history, although it has to be borne in mind that the king was primarily interested in his rights and dues; the records therefore provide details of land, service, feudal incidents and payments made to the Crown. The Domesday Survey of 1086 and royal charters throw much light on women's landholding, whether by way of inheritance, *maritagium* or dower.

The Pipe Rolls of the exchequer of 1130 and after 1155 supplement this material, and are particularly informative over women's involvement in the working of feudal incidents, whether these concerned wardship, relief or the remarriage of widows. Of especial value are the Rolls of Ladies, Boys and Girls, drawn up for Henry II in 1185.²⁷

27 J. H. Round, ed., *Rotuli de Dominabus et Pueris et Puellis de XII Comitatus* (1185), Pipe Roll Society, XXXV, 1913.

These only survive for certain counties, but throw much light on the wardship of the lands and persons of the boys and girls who were minors and in the king's custody, and on the widows who were in the king's gift for remarriage. The descriptions of lands show the resources available to many of these women.

With the growth in documentation in the royal government and elsewhere *c.*1200, far more material on women becomes available.²⁸ This is especially important in view of the increasing number of noble and gentry families who were becoming tenants-in-chief of the Crown. Their lands and tenures came to be recorded in dated royal letters, copies of which were kept by chancery, as well as in exchequer records, and their manors were surveyed in the inquisitions *post mortem* taken at the death of a tenant-in-chief. As royal government became more bureaucratic, so greater control was exercised over the localities and more information recorded on the nobility and gentry.

The availability and increasing elaboration of royal writs encouraged men and women to bring property cases before the royal justices; with the emergence of plea rolls in the late twelfth century, additional information becomes available on inheritance, dower and property-holding in general. The need for families to maintain their rights frequently involved resort to litigation in which women were likely to be included at some point. Women brought cases to secure their dower from the late twelfth century, and, as widows, energetically defended their interests. Although they had no right to plead during their married lives, they were often associated with their husbands in cases of alienation of family land. In addition to the plea rolls, a considerable amount of information on landholding and the land market from 1195 onwards is derived from final concords, agreements drawn up in the king's court of which copies were held by each of the parties, while the third copy, the foot of the fine, was kept in the treasury. The development of new legal devices and remedies had a considerable impact on noblewomen, notably the emergence of conditional fees and the entail in the later thirteenth century. Women who held their own franchisal courts were answerable to the Crown for their working, and most of the information on the judicial franchises which they held is derived from the *quo warranto* pleas initiated by Edward I. At that time women had to be ready to defend their liberties as well as their lands.

28 M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066–1307*, London, 1979, chapter 2.

Royal government influenced record-keeping in other areas, as did the growing use of professional administrators, and this had its effect on the Church and on the noble families themselves. The Church had long been conscious of the importance of documentation, but the range and quantity of its records multiplied from the early thirteenth century. Papal and bishops' registers contain a considerable amount of material on women, ranging from dispensations for marriage to divorce, and from indulgences to visitations of religious houses. Of particular importance are the wills which from the thirteenth century were entered in bishops' registers, and were later to be found in the records of ecclesiastical courts as well.

Many of the records of noble families comprised legal agreements and business documents. They include marriage settlements and an increasing number of estate and household records which throw light on management methods and changing methods of organisation. Such records sometimes enable an assessment to be made of the lady's wealth, and they give information on her lifestyle and standard of living. Letters are found throughout the Middle Ages, but there are no major family collections before the fifteenth century, when the Stonor, Paston and Plumptre correspondence provides material not available earlier, especially concerning family and social relationships and attitudes.

All these records provide a mine of information on issues affecting the women of the nobility and gentry, but they have to be questioned and interpreted. The historian needs to be aware of inherent problems in the records before using them to assess the importance and role of women. Much of the material is factual and formal. Agreements over marriage, wardship and care in old age were couched in legal terms and were clearly business arrangements. What is not recorded is what went on behind the scenes and the feelings and points of view of the parties involved. Without this information, it would be a mistake to conclude that the parties to an agreement saw everything in cold business terms. As far as estates were concerned, there is plenty of information on where they were situated, and what they produced, but the records do not throw light on the discussion which must have gone on before decisions were taken, the relationships between officials and lady, and the pressures on the lady herself. It is sometimes possible to get such information from legal proceedings and more particularly from letters, but often social relationships have to be judged on the basis of factual information, whether this describes actions taken, gifts made, or mutual support offered; there is rarely any knowledge of the

emotions involved. There are comparatively few records in which the voice of the woman herself can be heard. Letters and wills are informative up to a point, but it must be borne in mind that they were usually dictated, and in the case of wills most only survive as copies; moreover, it was rare to express emotion. For some women material survives of sufficient variety to enable the historian to get some insight into what they were really like; this is true of Elizabeth de Burgh in the fourteenth century and Margaret Paston in the fifteenth. Elizabeth ranked among the higher nobility. She was widowed three times before she reached the age of twenty-seven, and was caught up in the machinations of the younger Despenser in the 1320s. She was deeply attached to her family and friends, proved to be an energetic manager, loved splendour and display, and had strong religious commitments. Margaret Paston backed her husband in the pursuit of family rights, was busy and forceful, and conventionally religious; some of her children caused her problems. With many other women it is possible to obtain plenty of factual information as to their role and importance but not to produce a fully rounded character.

The language and terminology of the records also has to be considered. By the thirteenth century, many of the gentry were speaking English as well as French.²⁹ Yet most of the records concerning them were written in Latin down to 1300, and royal government documents and many of the Church records continued to be written in Latin to at least 1500. During the fourteenth century, French came to be used increasingly for letters, wills and household and estate records; Elizabeth de Burgh's clerks used both French and Latin for her household accounts, and Elizabeth used French for her protest about the Despensers in 1326 and for her will. It was not until the fifteenth century that there was extensive use of English. This use of language poses two problems of interpretation, one for the twentieth-century historian in understanding the terminology of the Middle Ages, and one for the clerks themselves who could find themselves writing what to them was not their mother tongue.

In the following chapters, the main areas of activity for noble and gentry women have been examined. For the majority marriage conditioned their future life and responsibilities, and family relationships were often crucial to their well-being. In a society where wealth and status depended on land, it is important to see the types of land that a woman held and the problems she faced in securing her rights.

29 Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record*, pp. 151–4.

Land had to be managed and exploited in order to secure wealth, and it was important for the lady to secure her income and to exercise lordship over her tenants. It was also important for her to manage her household, since this was the hub of her activities and the place where she exercised patronage and influence. It is also in the context of the household that it is possible to reconstruct her lifestyle. Finally her religious concerns formed an important part of her life and paved her way to the next world. Taking all her activities together, these women had an integral and often an important part to play in noble society.

Many of these activities overlapped, and cross-references have been made as necessary. In making the translations, place-names have been modernised, but surnames have been left in their original form unless there is a common form which is now widely used. Places have been assigned to the counties they belonged to before the local government reorganisation of 1974. Sums of money and measures have been given as in the original document; the modern equivalent for measures will be given in the appropriate chapter. As far as money was concerned, £1 was made up of twenty shillings; each shilling comprised twelve pence, and each penny was divided into two halfpennies or four farthings. The mark was often used as a unit of account, and was worth 13s 4d. Totals have been checked and, where necessary, a corrected total has been put in square brackets.