

The *Monstrous Regiment of Women* Across Time: Female Rulership in Early Modern England from Empress Matilda to Queen Elizabeth I

The queens of England are a popular topic, particularly in modern times. The public and academic interest has produced numerous articles, books, movies, and television shows. None has received as much attention as Queen Elizabeth I, who ruled England from 1558 to 1603. Seen as a bastard for most of her youth and the last in the final order of succession decreed by her father, no one ever expected Elizabeth to be a ruling queen. Another lesser-known figure in English history is the twelfth-century contender for the throne, Empress Matilda. Like Elizabeth, Matilda was not expected to be a ruling queen. She was a princess who served her purpose of establishing a marriage alliance with another European kingdom. Yet, after her brother's death, the English nobility would have to deal with the prospect of her as the next ruler.

These two queens are the focus of the following examination of cultural reactions and contemporary understandings of female rulership. Most people today have heard about Elizabeth. The dominant opinion is that she was a great queen who had an extremely successful reign.¹ Conversely, Matilda has received limited attention and is often little more than a footnote in historical examinations.² What made one of them successful and the other not? Elizabeth reigned independently of a husband for over forty years and established a long-lasting legacy. When Matilda reached the point of almost becoming the female ruler of England, the public reaction was visceral. She was run out of town by her peers, enemies, and potential subjects. By looking at the attitudes and opinions of their contemporaries, it is apparent that the perspectives surrounding female sovereigns had not changed; however, the circumstances surrounding them were different, particularly in the structure of government and military conflict.

Examining the circumstances of these women and comparing them provides an interesting look into the gender politics of medieval and early modern England.³ Texts produced by their contemporaries illustrate how opinions on female leadership changed and stayed the same. The challenges these women faced define how they were successful and were greatly influenced by their gender. They dealt with continual doubts about their ability and capacity to rule; were constantly defined by their relationships with men, particularly in marriage; and faced questions about their military leadership.

The number of primary sources that mention Matilda is extremely limited. Most of them are historical accounts or chronicles written by members of the aristocracy or clergy. Her name is also on a few charters. Elite Englishmen created these sources for other elite Englishmen and, as a result, gave a limited view of thoughts surrounding Matilda. Her own voice is missing from the historical record, leaving only elite male interpretations of her to rely on. The writer's status and understanding of gender mean that the primary sources have inherent biases against Matilda. This can be observed in how little they mention her, and when they do so, it is in a passive manner. The sources are also generally biased towards the side of the civil conflict that the writer supports, either Matilda or Stephen.

The chronicles fall into a few different categories. Most barely mention Matilda, and a few have a positive opinion of her or are hostile towards her. The more neutral chroniclers try to omit her as much as possible. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, for example, mentions Matilda seven times, none of which are by name. She is vaguely mentioned when she leaves England in 1109 to live with her betrothed, her first husband, Emperor Henry V, in Germany.⁴ She is not mentioned again until 1127, when her father had all the “archbishops, and bishops, and abbots, and earls, and all the thanes that were there, to swear England and Normandy after his day into the hands of

his daughter.”⁵ The last time she is mentioned is the year 1140, when she almost usurped Stephen but failed. Again, in reference to her male relatives, “Afterwards came the daughter of King Henry, who had been Empress of Germany, and now was Countess of Anjou.”⁶ The fact that she is not mentioned throughout the account of the civil war until her biggest failure is an example of the purposeful eraser of her presence.

The chronicler who is most supportive of Matilda is William of Malmesbury. William was employed by and loyal to Matilda’s illegitimate half-brother, Earl Robert of Gloucester. This means that William’s account mostly focuses on Robert, but because Robert was one of Matilda’s most fervent supporters, some information about her can be gleaned from his chronicles. Robert led Matilda’s supporters into battle and communicated with her frequently about strategy as well as other matters. Their close relationship means that William’s account is the closest to Matilda’s actions; however, his depiction of her is still through an elite male lens. He mentions her name only once, after which he refers to her simply as empress, and it is most often in passing. In battle and strategy, William attributes almost everything to Robert, minimizing Matilda’s position as the leader and figurehead of her cause.

On the opposite side of the spectrum is the *Gesta Stephani*, a chronicle written by an anonymous author. The author is a clear supporter of King Stephen and has an extremely negative opinion of Matilda. This can be observed in the way they describe Matilda’s demeanor and actions, as well as how she is referred to. The author can barely bring himself to mention Matilda’s name, and when he acknowledges her, it is as the “Countess of Anjou.” This was a title she refused to use, as she received it from her second husband, a man she barely got along with; to use it to address her was an obvious slight. Sometimes she does not even receive the courtesy of a title, instead referring to her as “King Henry’s daughter” or “the Earl of Gloucester’s sister.”

Those who favored Matilda respected her wish to be associated with her first husband and therefore referred to her by her most prestigious title, Empress.

The primary sources for Elizabeth were produced under significantly different circumstances than those for Matilda. Elizabeth became an official ruler, unlike Matilda, and she reigned for a significant period of forty-five years. Both factors resulted in more material concerning Elizabeth being produced and an effort to preserve those materials. Due to the time period that Elizabeth ruled, there was also more discussion of her in print. Pamphlets were easy to create and distribute, allowing for more public debate and a wider audience. They were read by upper to middle-class citizens and discussed widely. Most of these surviving materials are from a male perspective. Some surviving documents are Elizabeth's actual words, but most of what is known about her is also filtered through a male lens.

This project uses pamphlets published by men debating Elizabeth and her female leadership. The first pamphlet that was published is titled *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* by John Knox, a minister and protestant. Knox was a Scottish reformer, and he wrote this pamphlet to target Queen Mary I, Mary Stuart, and her regent mother, Mary of Guise, all of whom were Catholic. He also had the poor timing of having his work appear a few months prior to the beginning of Elizabeth's reign. While he may have appreciated Elizabeth's Protestantism, his opinion on women rulers was clear. This was something he could not walk back, and in the apology he wrote to Elizabeth, he did not even try to.

John Alymer wrote his pamphlet *Harborrowe of faithful and trewe subjects* in response to John Knox's work. Alymer was an English bishop and scholar who defended Elizabeth's right to rule within this pamphlet. Even though this work is meant as a defense of Elizabeth's reign,

the language Alymer uses reflects stances similar to Knox's. The way he defends Elizabeth reflects a clear gender bias that would have been common for the time. Like Knox's work, this pamphlet would have been available to the wealthier public, and the ideas within it would have most likely spread throughout England as conversation about Elizabeth occurred.

The final pamphlet comes from later in Elizabeth's reign after her failed marriage attempt to Francis, the Duke of Anjou. This pamphlet, *The Discovery of a Gaping Gulf whereunto England is like to be swallowed by another French Marriage*, written by John Stubbs, an English Protestant and scholar, heavily opposes the idea of Elizabeth marrying the French Catholic Duke of Anjou. The fact that this pamphlet was produced twenty years into Elizabeth's reign means that his treatment of her character is a little more constrained; however, the suggestion that she is a weak-willed woman remains constant. Stubbs was also clearly not careful enough in expressing his opinions, as it led to a conviction for "seditious writing" and his right hand being cut off.

These pamphlets, though all bearing different levels of criticism, have certain inherent biases. Similar to Matilda, gender discrimination and how these men understood the role of women played an important role in what they were writing. Religious tensions were also high across the continent, particularly in England, making this another important factor in what was being written. Elizabeth was a Protestant figurehead, and a lot of Protestants in England saw her as a savior from her sister Mary's Catholic tyranny; this impacted how these men wrote about her. These factors all played a role in the debates that occurred surrounding Elizabeth, particularly towards the beginning of her reign.

Capacity to Rule

There were debates about whether these women had the capacity to rule a large country like England. Each faced doubts from their contemporaries about how a woman could be a

strong leader. The previously mentioned Alymer and Knox led the public debate over Elizabeth's fitness to rule, each acknowledging the weakness of the female sex. The sources for Matilda provide little evidence for a public debate, but they allow for inferences of the doubts of her contemporaries. Those doubts resulted in Matilda's failure to secure the throne for herself. Elizabeth was allowed the chance to rule England, and she rose above most of those doubts by becoming one of the longest-reigning English monarchs. The circumstances these women faced and the way they dealt with the doubts about them determined their success.

The first-born child of King Henry I and Matilda of Scotland, Empress Matilda was born in the early twelfth century around February 1102. Her birth was quickly followed by her brother, born a little over a year later in 1103. At the age of eight, Matilda was betrothed and sent to live with her future husband, twenty-four-year-old King and future Emperor Henry V, in Germany. When she reached the age of twelve, they were officially married in a lavish ceremony in the city of Worms. During her marriage, Matilda traveled with her husband across the continent, sponsored royal grants, dealt with petitioners, took part in ceremonial occasions, served as regent in Italy, and was controversially crowned Empress. Though the ceremony was illegitimate, she used the title of Empress uncontested for the rest of her life.

In 1125, Henry V died. After eleven years of marriage, Matilda was alone. Being childless, she could not exercise the role of imperial regent, which is what she was trained for. This left her with the choice of either living alone in the German countryside, becoming a nun, or remarrying. Matilda was presented with a different option. In 1120, the English political landscape had changed dramatically with the White Ship disaster. Matilda's brother, William of Adelin, and several other English nobles died in a shipwreck off the coast of Normandy, leaving the succession of the throne of England in question. Matilda's father, Henry I, attempted to father

a new heir and took a new wife, Adeliza of Louvain, but they did not have any children. Henry explored other candidates, but they were not desirable for him. To keep the English monarchy in his direct line, he called Matilda back. After fifteen years, Matilda returned to England as her father's preferred heir to the throne.⁷

In theory, Matilda's claim as her father's heir was solid, but she faced multiple disadvantages. She was female; she was not in England to assuage any doubts or uncertainties, and the English nobles neither liked nor trusted her second husband, who was chosen for her by her father. There were no rules against having a female ruler of England or Normandy; however, custom, as well as precedent, were important in both places, and the fact that there had been no previous female ruler or queen regent made the idea even far-fetched.⁸ Women were viewed as having a similar status as children and could become wards of the king; so, how could a woman rule England? Women were treated as children in the courts, so the problems of accepting one as ruler would be numerous.⁹ There were also other possible male heirs to the throne, including Henry I's nephews, Stephen of Blois, Theobald IV of Blois, and William Clito. The fact that since the death of Edward the Confessor, the crown of England had been open for the taking each time the incumbent died made Stephen's claim stronger when he took the throne of England before Matilda had even heard about her father's death.¹⁰

Another issue is that her father did not set Matilda up for success. Continental monarchs would often crown their successors during their lifetimes to ensure their inheritance, but Henry I refused to do so. Instead, he did the next best thing and compelled his tenants-in-chief to swear solemn oaths.¹¹ These oaths, taken by virtually every noble in England and Normandy, stated that they would be loyal to Matilda and recognized her as the next heir. Even before Henry I's death, there were claims that these oaths were invalid because the nobles were not consulted on

the selection of Matilda's second husband.¹² Henry's death in 1135 did not clarify matters.

Several reports about his last wishes circulated, some in support of Matilda and others against her.

Before his death, Matilda's father and her husband were at odds. This meant that Matilda was not near her father when he died and received the news relatively late. When the news arrived that her father was dead and that her cousin Stephen had claimed the English throne, Matilda could not take immediate action because she was pregnant. However, Matilda and her second husband, Geoffrey Duke of Anjou, were able to secure a foothold in Normandy, which would play an important role in later successes. Matilda also had strong supporters, including her uncle, King David of Scotland, and they caused problems for Stephen. In 1138, Matilda's half-brother Robert, one of the most powerful Anglo-Norman barons, renounced his fealty to the King and declared his support for Matilda. This gave Matilda a system of support in England and allowed her to start her campaign there, launching the Anarchy.¹³

In 1141, Matilda reached the brink of success. Stephen was captured and held prisoner. Matilda marched to Winchester and was declared "Lady of the English." She then advanced to London to prepare for her coronation, which would make her officially queen of England. Unfortunately, this never occurred. Stephen's queen, along with the Londoners, rose up against Matilda and her allies, forcing them out of London. When Matilda tried to advocate for herself and act as the ruler she learned how to be, the public reaction was resounding. The chroniclers, particularly the *Gesta Stephani*, criticize her heavily for her actions and demeanor around this time, giving an important look into how she was perceived by her peers.

The *Gesta Stephani* does not have a good opinion of Matilda and her behavior. The author had this to say about her actions following the height of her battle when she was declared

Lady of the English, she “at once put on an extremely arrogant demeanour instead of a modest gait and bearing proper to the gentle sex, began to walk and speak and do all things more stiffly and haughtily than she had been wont... she actually made herself queen of all England and gloried in being so called.” The author continues to criticize her, stating, “Then she, on being raised with such splendour and distinction to this pre-eminent position, began to be arbitrary, or rather headstrong, in all that she did.” He admonishes her for her “extreme haughtiness and insolence,” because she no longer relied on the advice of her closest male, companions but instead “arranged everything as she herself thought fit and according to her own arbitrary will.” He also attacks her appearance, stating, “She, with a grim look, her forehead wrinkled into a frown, every trace of a woman’s gentleness removed from her face, blazed with unbearable fury.”¹⁴ Matilda tried to act in the way she knew best, as an authoritative male leader, and the reaction to such a demeanor was intense.¹⁵

Part of the reasons the chroniclers are hostile towards Matilda or try to ignore her presence is because she does not fit the acceptable mold of female conduct. She can be the heir and a vessel for the continuation of King Henry’s line, but only if she does so behind a male figurehead, not in her own right as she was trying to do. Anderson argues that this is part of why the chroniclers emphasize the roles of her male relatives and rivals, “thus reducing the representation of Matilda as a powerful figure.”¹⁶ Hanley also directly states, “Women could exercise authority, but they had to do it on behalf and with the permission of male relatives. This was not what Matilda was attempting to do. She wanted to succeed the throne in her own right, to claim and exercise sovereignty on her own behalf.” Matilda may have had the capacity to rule, but her male contemporaries would never accept her leadership over them because of her gender and perceived role in society.

Matilda was tackling the challenge of becoming Queen of England, not in the conventional sense as a king's partner, but in the unprecedented form of an independent female ruler. She acted in the same manner her father and her first husband had, and it backfired. Her unnatural and unfeminine "haughtiness and insolence" meant that when she was on the precipice of success, she was run out of town.

Matilda had a great political mind, and she would not give up the cause even when she discovered that female rulership would not be accepted in England. She had won the battle, captured her opponent, imprisoned him, and been declared monarch, but she was still not accepted. She recognized that her cause would never come to fruition and changed her strategy, promoting her son Henry II as heir to the throne. When her son was king, she continued to be politically active, helping him with his duties and giving him advice. Emily Staniforth put it best, claiming, "Her determination, bravery and political acumen ensured she would not be forgotten, and her struggle for the crown culminated in her status as the mother of the Plantagenets, the longest ruling dynasty in English history."¹⁷ Matilda set the stage for her female descendants to one day become successful rulers where she could not.

Elizabeth faced challenges and criticisms similar to those of Matilda, but her circumstances allowed her to be successful. In the sixteenth century, women were viewed as weak and incapable of public roles. To be successful, a woman had to move away from expectations of gender and "act like a man," but to do so made her unwomanly and possibly even monstrous.¹⁸ Linda Shenk puts it like this: "According to centuries of misogynistic thought, a woman in power violated natural and divine law: women were emotionally unstable, intellectually deficient, and morally corrupt."¹⁹ It is under these principles that John Knox published his infamous pamphlet *First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of*

Women in 1558.

In his pamphlet, Knox claims divine authority for his views and vehemently describes female rule as blasphemous against God because of the nature of women. He also criticizes the men who have allowed these avaricious, deceitful, cruel, oppressive, and proud women to dominate over them.

I suffer not that women vsurpe authoritie aboue man: he sayth not, I will not, that woman vsurpe authoritie aboue her husband, but he nameth man in generall, taking frome her all power and authoritie, to speake, to reason, to interprete, or to teache, but principallie to rule or to iudge in the assemblie of men. So that woman by the lawe of God, and by the interpretation of the holy ghost, is vtterly forbidden to occupie the place of God in the offices afore said, which he hath assigned to man, whome he hath appointed and ordeined his lieutenant in earth: secluding frome that honor and dignitie all woman, as this short argument shall euidentie declare.²⁰

Knox's pamphlet represents a common feeling about women during the sixteenth century and echoes back to some of the language of chroniclers from the twelfth century.

The following year, John Alymer published his response to Knox's work. Almyer's pamphlet *Harborrowe of faithful and trewe subjects* was his defense of Elizabeth's reign and claim to the throne. In it, he conceded that God did not want women to be priests, but that is separate from "cyvill pollycie." He supports Elizabeth's right to rule because God sent her "by birth" to the English people; however, his support came with caveats. He accepted the view that women are less competent, but that "The male is moore mete to rule then the female" does not mean the woman is unfit to rule just less so.

Elizabeth could rule because she was the sole heir and because she would not be ruling alone. The English government no longer rested solely in the hands of the Monarchy, as it had during Matilda's time. Alymer said that it is acceptable for a woman to rule in England because "The regiment of England is not a mere Monarchie, some for lacke of consideracion thinke, nor a

meere Oligarchie, nor Democratie, but a rule mixte of all these, wherein ech one of these haue or shoulde haue like authoritie.” This is the biggest difference between Elizabeth's and Matilda's time. Elizabeth had a perceived divine right and with Parliament in place would not be the sole decision maker, which made female rule more palatable to some contemporaries.²¹

Matilda certainly showed her capacity to rule throughout her campaign in England, but her gender prevented her from succeeding. When the time came for her to be crowned the official monarch, she was rejected. By Elizabeth's period, precedent and political structures had been solidified. The age of absolutism and the divine right of kings was in full swing, making hereditary claims even more powerful. This, along with the lack of any male heir to the throne, gave Elizabeth the chance to be a female ruler. She would later, using her intelligence and skill, solidify her position, becoming England's longest-reigning monarch.

The Marriage Question

Matilda and Elizabeth were constantly being defined by their relationships with men, which became one of the most prominent challenges they faced in trying to be a ruling queen. Their relationship status and how they interacted with the men in their lives were constantly in discussion. How they tried to work with or combat this challenge became a defining feature of their struggle for power. It also left a lasting impact on how they are remembered. Matilda as a shrew and arrogant woman, in contrast to Elizabeth, who is the Virgin Queen and a known flirt. Even in their deaths, they are remembered through the words and opinions of men.²²

Matilda spent most of her life married; both times to men not of her choosing but instead chosen for her by her father. By all accounts, she seems to have been happy in her first marriage and probably enjoyed the prestige as well as independence that came with being wife to a German King and Roman Emperor. In contrast, Matilda was very much opposed to her betrothal

to her second husband, Geoffrey of Anjou. She most likely viewed the marriage as beneath her and an insult. Previously married to the Holy Roman Emperor, she was now being forced to marry a count, and one that was at least eight years younger than her. Her displeasure with the match is shown by how they were estranged for the first few years of their marriage, resulting in her father ordering her to return to Geoffrey.

This tumultuous relationship was probably in part why she chose not to identify herself with Geoffrey when conducting her campaign in England.²³ Using her title from her first marriage also referred back on her previous station and power, as well as a time when she was viewed favorably. Distancing herself from Geoffrey may have also been a strategic move to show the English nobles that he would not be the one ruling England or involved there at all. The English nobles did not trust Geoffrey and were not happy that Matilda was married to him without their knowledge or consultation. This fact is noted by multiple chroniclers, including William of Malmesbury.²⁴

The king sent his daughter into Normandy, ordering her to be betrothed... Which being completed, all declared prophetically, as it were, that, after his death, they would break their plighted oath. I have frequently heard Roger, bishop of Salisbury, say, that he was freed from the oath he had taken to the empress: for that he had sworn conditionally, that the king should not marry his daughter to any one out of the kingdom without his consent, or that of the rest of the nobility...²⁵

While Matilda's insistence on presenting herself as an independent woman trying to rule in her own right seems like a decent strategy, it did not translate well with her contemporaries.

When looking at the comments of non-English chroniclers across Matilda's lifetime there is a clear difference in how she is talked about. During Matilda's early life in Germany with her first husband Emperor Henry V, the chroniclers wrote about her very favorably. Her partnership with Henry was effective and popular as the German people would come to know her as "the

good Matilda.”²⁶ This is also true of the historians from Normandy in the later stages of her life when she was exercising power there on behalf of her son, the King of England. It was the English chroniclers who saw her trying to rule in her own right and not behind the power of a man that were the most hostile to her, and this is because she tried to break from the acceptable forms of female power.²⁷

The *Gesta Stephani* communicates this issue in how it talks about Empress Matilda in comparison to Stephen’s wife, Matilda of Boulogne. Where the author is extremely critical of Matilda’s actions and conduct, it praises Stephen’s wife, Matilda of Boulogne.

Forgetting the weakness of her sex and a woman’s softness, [she] bore herself with the valour of a man...[the queen] gave orders that they should rage most furiously around the city with plunder and arson, violence and the sword, in sight of the countess [Matilda] and her men. The people of London were in grievous trouble. On the one hand their land was being stripped before their eyes and reduced by the enemy’s ravages to a habitation for the hedgehog, and there was no one ready to help them; on the other that new lady of theirs was going beyond the bounds of moderation and sorely oppressing them... therefore they judged it worthy of consideration to make a new pact of peace and alliance with the queen and join together with one mind to rescue their king and lord from his chains.²⁸

Matilda of Boulogne is a hero because she acts with authority on behalf of and for the sake of her husband. In the same quote, Empress Matilda is criticized for “oppressing” the Londoners, but she never asked for more than a male would have in her position. Matilda wanted respect and recognition as their ruler from the people of London, but they refused to pay tribute or acknowledge her as such.

The ways in which certain English chroniclers praised Matilda also illustrates this idea of female power being acceptable if it is on behalf of a man. One example is a letter from the Abbot of Gloucester to one of Matilda’s most loyal followers, Brian FitzCount, explaining Matilda’s right to the English throne.

...in accordance with her father's wishes she crossed the sea, passed over the mountains, penetrated into unknown regions, married there at her father's command, and remained there carrying out the duties of imperial rule virtuously and piously until, after her husband's death, not through any desperate need or feminine levity but in response to a summons from her father, she returned to him. And although she had attained such high rank that, it is reported, she had the title and status of Queen of the Romans, she was in no way puffed up with pride, but meekly submitted in all things her father's will...²⁹

His basis for Matilda's right to the throne rests on her loyalty and submission to her father.³⁰

Matilda's unwillingness to rest her right of inheritance and rule behind a man was part of the reason she was unsuccessful in claiming the throne; but, her political mind and tenacity allowed her to shift her focus and transition her campaign over to her son, establishing the longest ruling dynasty in English history and leading the way for her future female descendants.

Elizabeth's relationship status received even more scrutiny and conversation than Matilda's. Elizabeth could more easily work around this issue because she benefited from precedent and a lack of options for other claimants to the throne. When Elizabeth inherited the throne in 1558, the only other possible heirs to the throne of England were female. Mary Queen of Scots was the other big contender, but the English people were uninterested in having another Catholic queen. Also, by the time of Elizabeth's reign, the right of inheritance was well established in England. However, just because Elizabeth had a more solid hold on the English throne, unlike Matilda, did not mean that there were no concerns about a woman ruling England.

From the beginning of Elizabeth's reign, her counselors, parliament, and people were concerned about her marriage status.³¹ Elizabeth's Council and Parliaments implored her to marry, finding the idea of an unmarried woman ruling unnatural.³² Even her closest counselor, William Cecil, was concerned, writing frequently about the issue to his close friends: "I am most sorry of all that her Majesty is not disposed seriously to marriage; for I see likelihood of grat

evil... if she shall not shortly marry.”³³ Her refusal to do so hearkens back to Matilda in that she did not want a husband undermining her position.

Elizabeth’s handling of these situations was masterful and resulted in the reluctant acceptance of her independent rule. Elizabeth used her marriageable status as a diplomatic tool and at the same time left her Parliament and Council with the hope that she would marry. Theoretically, Elizabeth could have married whomever she wanted at any given time. However, as she stated in her speeches to parliament, she was not inclined toward marriage. Elizabeth used the inability of Parliament, the Council, and the English people to agree on a marriage candidate to her advantage.³⁴

Even during her last official romantic pursuit, this problem of male dominance persisted. John Stubbs published a pamphlet in 1579 titled *The Discoverie of a gaping gulf whereinto England is like to be swallowed by an other French marriage*, about Elizabeth’s potential marriage to Francis, the Duke of Anjou. It highlighted this exact issue and the numerous public concerns that she had reached a dangerous age for marriage and childbirth.

And if woman, that weaker vessel, be strong enough to draw man through the advantage which the Devil hath within our bosom (I mean our natural corruption and proneness to idolatry), how much more forcibly shall the stronger vessel pull weak woman, considering that with the inequality of strength there is joined as great or more readiness to idolatry and superstition? And if the husband, which is the head, be drawn aside by his wife, over whom nevertheless he hath authority and rule, how much more easily shall the wife be perverted by her husband, to whom she is subject by the law of God and oweth both awe and obedience, howsoever the laws by prerogative or her place by pre-eminence may privilege her?³⁵

He also claims through the marriage to the French, “our dear Queen Elizabeth (I shake to speak it) led blindfold as a poor lamb to the slaughter.”³⁶ Stubbs was convinced that Elizabeth’s marriage was dangerous because a husband could easily dominate a wife and Francis, as a French Catholic, would be terrible for England. He also claimed that Francis had ulterior

motives, suggesting that the duke hoped Elizabeth would die in childbirth so that England would be open for a French takeover.

Following this final failed courtship, Elizabeth and her government started to utilize their powers of propaganda to their fullest capacity. Much like her father, throughout Elizabeth's reign, there were strict policies against slandering the queen.³⁷ Along with keeping a strict hold on what could be spoken about her, Elizabeth also fostered a strong feeling of love and loyalty within her subjects in multiple ways. Elizabeth embraced the womanly ideal of chastity and presented herself as a Virgin Queen who was also the mother of her people.

The relationship status of these women had a huge impact on the way people viewed and talked about them, as well as the strategies they used to combat opposition. Matilda distanced herself from her husband and presented herself as an independent leader. When she discovered that her independent rule would never be accepted, she backed her son and used her resources to secure his place as the next king. Elizabeth used her unmarried status to her advantage, ruling and utilizing power in her own right. She craftily dodged the issue of getting married and sacrificed potential companionship for power and the good of her country. The use of propaganda towards the end of her reign eased the fears of her subjects and solidified her image in history as the Virgin Queen.

Military Leadership

Arguably one of the most important aspects of rulership in medieval and early modern English society was the military abilities of the leader. This was particularly true for the feudal society of medieval England, which was under constant threat of internal or continental battle. During the sixteenth century, military leadership was not as central an aspect of English rulership; however, it still served important propaganda purposes and provided a certain amount

of glory that inspired loyalty. In this aspect of leadership, Matilda and Elizabeth suffered serious limitations because of their gender.³⁸ Elizabeth benefited from the passage of time and established precedent; in that, her place as a monarch was already established and she did not have to prove herself on the battlefield.

Matilda, as a woman in the twelfth century, suffered from two huge disadvantages. One was the reluctance of many magnates to accept her as a female ruler. The other was her inability to lead knights into battle.³⁹ During the twelfth century, military leadership was an extremely important aspect of feudal society and monarchical leadership. Territorial boundaries were flexible, and war was a constant possibility, so a monarch was by definition, a soldier.⁴⁰ This was something that Matilda was not capable of doing, as there was no avenue to do so; however, she found ways to be a strong leader outside of the battlefield.

Evidence of Matilda's leadership in the diplomatic conduct of war shows up in charters and letters from around the time she was recruiting in England. She was also likely involved in some of the tactical decisions as she was directly involved in several military engagements. Her escape from Oxford was so impressive that even the *Gesta Stephani* begrudgingly praised her.

In a wondrous fashion she escaped unharmed through so many enemies, so many watchers in the silence of the night...I do not know whether it was to heighten the greatness of her fame in time to come, or by God's judgment to increase more vehemently the disturbance of the kingdom, but never have I read of another woman so luckily rescued from so many mortal foes and from the threat of dangers so great.⁴¹

Matilda's use of strategy and skill is not a reflection of her leadership, according to the *Gesta Stephani*, but is the work of God and luck. This differs from the chronicle's consideration of Stephen. His victories are because of his skill and his failures are a punishment from God because of his treatment of the clergy. Hanley claims, "She might therefore be considered more as a general than a soldier, planning her battles although not executing them in person; but then,

the same could be said of many male generals, whose status as ‘warrior’ is not questioned or dismissed as Matilda’s has been.”⁴² This was not enough for her male peers and the ways in which she participated in battle are minimized by the chroniclers, even those favorable to her.⁴³

Elizabeth could not lead soldiers into battle, either, but, unlike Matilda, she did not need to. By the time of Elizabeth’s reign, the monarchy was secure and did not serve as many military functions. While King Henry VIII participated in military conflicts, it was mostly because of his wish for glory, not out of necessity; however, Elizabeth was aware of her inability, to lead on a battlefield which left her vulnerable to those who might be successful in war and come home heroes.⁴⁴ It was a type of propaganda she could not foster, but she tried to mitigate this issue as best she could.

Elizabeth, at times, was very crafty about how she avoided getting into military conflicts. Her avoidance of committing England to military conflict also served multiple purposes. Elizabeth’s household and government had monetary issues and military conflict was expensive; by not officially providing English support in continental conflicts, she mitigated a great deal of that expense. She also was not trained in military matters, so by avoiding official English involvement, this deficiency in her knowledge would not be obvious or exploited. Military battles also offered the chance of glory for others at her expense. Elizabeth knew that participation on the battlefield was not a viable option for her. She also did not want men to surpass her image because of military victory. The way she handled this issue was in an underhanded and capitalist manner.

When she could, Elizabeth used deception to provide English support in conflicts and to attack their enemies. While diplomacy was her favored action, she also supported and licensed state-sponsored privateers practicing legal piracy against England’s enemies. Elizabeth would not

fund or provide official government-sanctioned military support, but she would allow unofficial channels. This was used heavily against the Spanish. English pirates would attack, ransack, and destroy Spanish ships and their goods. Elizabeth would make public proclamations denouncing piracy and increasing penalties, meanwhile supporting the privateers behind the scenes.

When Elizabeth was forced to go to war, she did her best to make sure she was seen as a strong, firm leader, even though she could not participate in battle. The most famous example of this is her entrance and speech for the Spanish Armada. She is said to have entered in full armor before giving her famous speech with the words “I may have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king.” While she was turning over the fate of England to military men, in this ceremonial gesture, she visibly retained her control of England and the loyalty of those present.⁴⁵ The resounding failure of the attempted Spanish invasion also bolstered her image.

These women commanded military conflicts to the best of their abilities. They both served as generals, picking their military leaders and helping to facilitate strategies as best they could. Matilda and Elizabeth were also active diplomats, an important function of leadership that can often be used to avoid conflict. Matilda’s historical reputation for her military abilities and diplomacy stems from her place on the losing side of history. Stephen dominates the narrative, and even though her son went on to be the next king, Matilda’s abilities are written out of the narrative. Elizabeth’s cultural image as a divine figure and that she reigned for so long meant that she was largely remembered for her successes.

Conclusion

Matilda and Elizabeth represent the early history of female inheritance and rulership in England. The foundation they set paved the way for future female leaders in England. Their

struggle against medieval and early modern England's gendered notions of power reaped hard-fought rewards. However, gendered notions of power did not go away, but evolved over time; similar doubts about women's abilities to rule plagued their descendants. Doubts about female leadership not only affected the English monarchy but also exist across socioeconomic classes and throughout history. The conversations and debates surrounding Matilda and Elizabeth's leadership sheds light on the origins of key arguments against female power. Their experiences and historical impact provide context to our modern conceptualizations of female power.

ENDNOTES

¹ The body of scholarship surrounding Elizabeth is extensive and academic opinions about Elizabeth remain mostly positive. There are critical interpretations of her, such as Christopher Haigh's *Elizabeth I*, where he takes an unfavorable approach to Elizabeth's personality and approach towards government. The Elizabeth he describes is a shrew, pompous, and unlikable woman that harkens back to the sexist criticisms of her contemporaries. This kind of interpretation is in the minority; more positive interpretations of Elizabeth tend to follow similar narratives. For example, Jane Resh Thomas' *Behind the Mask: The Life of Queen Elizabeth I* and David Loades' *Elizabeth I*, portray a difficult childhood that made Elizabeth a survivor, as well as an intelligent and tactical woman who used her gender to manipulate her councilors and parliament.

² Matilda is a less popular academic subject, and the body of scholarship focusing on her is much smaller. One of the founding pieces of academic research that specifically focuses on Matilda is Marjorie Chibnall's book *The Empress Matilda: Queen Consort, Queen Mother and Lady of the English*. Her book diverged from previous works by not focusing on her rival Stephen's reign; instead examining Matilda's life and side in the civil war. *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior* by Catherine Hanley published expands Matilda's role in military actions, providing her with more credit and agency in such matters than Chibnall. Carolyn Anderson's article "Narrating Matilda, 'Lady of the English', in the Historia Novella, the Gesta Stephani, and Wace's Roman de Rou: The Desire for Land and Order" gives a specific explanation of the most prominent contemporary descriptions of Matilda, arguing that the treatment Matilda receives in the earlier sources leads to her complete exclusion from later primary sources.

³ The connection between these two women is a topic that has hardly been discussed. Helen Castor in her book *She Wolves: The Women Who Ruled England Before Elizabeth* gives Matilda a brief examination in the second part of her book. While Castor does not dedicate a specific chapter to Elizabeth, the goal of her book is to "cross the historical divide between the medieval and early modern period" and provide clarity to the path paved for Elizabeth.

⁴ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, trans. Rev. James Ingram (London: J.M. Dent, 1912), 187.

⁵ Ibid., 200.

⁶ Ibid., 210.

⁷ During the Middle Ages, especially for the nobility, it was not uncommon for women to inherit lands and estates. The possibility of wars, accidents, child mortality, and the unpredictable nature of fertility meant that sometimes a woman was the only available inheritor; however, this inheritance rarely strayed away from the acceptable female roles of wife, mother, and widow. Widows could live in relative independence with a male overseer, mothers would take care of the lands and estate until their children were old enough to take over, and unmarried women would be married off to a suitable man who could take care of their inheritance. Matilda's illegitimate brother Robert of Gloucester, her cousin Stephen of Blois, and one of her biggest supporters Brian FitzCount all benefited from marrying a female inheritor. Matilda's rival Stephen had an advantage over her because of his wife's land holdings which was closer in proximity to England than Matilda's second husband's.

⁸ Catherine Hanley, *Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior* (New Haven: Yale University, 2019), 58.

⁹ There was precedent for female rulership in other places on the continent besides England, showcasing that it was not a completely unfounded idea. Similar to Matilda, Urraca, Queen of León, Castile, and Galicia from 1109 until she died in 1126, was the only surviving child of her father, King Alfonso VI. She was married at the age of eight, later bore two children, and then widowed. Her father briefly named his illegitimate son Sancho as his successor, but after Sancho died in 1108, Urraca was reinstated as heir. Urraca remarried and reigned initially in her own right as regent mother for her son until he reached a suitable age. Other examples around the same time are Melisende of Jerusalem, the eldest of the four daughters of King Baldwin II, who later faced issues of being forced out by her son and councilors, and Matilda of Canossa, a widow.

¹⁰ Hanley, *Matilda*, 90-1.

¹¹ Charles Beem, "'Greater by Marriage': The Matrimonial Career of the Empress Matilda," in *Queens & Power in Medieval and Early Modern England*, ed. Carole Levin and Robert Bucholz (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2009), 3.

¹² Beem, "Greater by Marriage," 6.

¹³ Civil war in England and Normandy between 1138 and 1153 which caused a widespread breakdown in English law and order.

¹⁴ *Gesta Stephani*, trans. K. R. Potter (Oxford: University Press, 1967), 121-123.

¹⁵ This argument is widely agreed upon in recent scholarship on Matilda. The historians Chibnall, Hanley, Staniforth, and Castor all make similar points. Chibnall argues in her book that "Matilda certainly tried to show the man in the woman: unfortunately, the comments of hostile chroniclers make plain that what might in a man have passed for dignity, resolution and firm control were condemned in her as arrogance, obstinacy and anger." Hanley gives a similar description, saying Matilda "flummoxed her contemporaries" by trying to succeed the throne in her own right.

¹⁶ Carolyn Anderson, "Narrating Matilda, 'Lady of the English,' in the *Historia Novella*, the *Gesta Stephani*, and Wace's *Roman de Rou*: The Desire for Land and Order," *Clio* 29, no. 1 (1999): 48. https://link-gale-com.proxy.lib.uni.edu/apps/doc/A61361653/AONE?u=uni_rodit&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=02c0980e.

¹⁷ Emily Staniforth, "Empress Matilda Lost Queen of England: How the Formidable Empress Fought Tooth and Nail for Her Rightful Place on the English Throne," *All About History*, April

2022, 51, <https://link-gale-com.proxy.li>

b.uni.edu/apps/doc/A701735196/ITOF?u=uni_rodit&sid=bookmark-ITOF&xid=467ae3d6.

¹⁸ Carole Levin, *The Heart and Stomach of a King: Elizabeth I and the Politics of Sex and Power* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2013), 1.

¹⁹ Linda S. Shenk, “Queen Solomon an International Elizabeth I in 1569,” in *Queens & Power in Medieval and Early Modern England*, ed. Carole Levin and Robert Bucholz (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2009), 98.

²⁰ John Knox, *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*, ed. Edward Arber (London: University College, 1878), n.p.

<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/9660/9660-h/9660-h.htm#n35>.

²¹ Elizabeth also did a lot of work to secure her place as the English monarch. Elizabeth was very aware of how to use spectacle to enhance the prestige of the monarchy, and she did so. She used travel to her advantage, going on progresses throughout her reign, which helped inspire loyalty in her subjects. She also continued several rituals of medieval kings that demonstrated the continuing power of the sacred monarchy, including the royal touch and the Maundy. She was very skillful in how she represented herself and her authority as a monarch through her speeches and political propaganda. Elizabeth also took her position as Governor of the Church of England extremely seriously and used it as another avenue of political power. Elizabeth knew when she should or should not bend to the will of her councilors and was very conscious of her position.

²² Some of Elizabeth’s words survive in her speeches and letters, but for Matilda, there is nothing except the accounts of male chroniclers and vague charters in the historical record.

²³ Geoffrey did lead Matilda’s campaign in Normandy, but he never set foot into England, possibly in part because of his relationship with the English nobles.

²⁴ The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle also makes note of this stating, “he let her wed the son of the Earl of Anjou, whose name was Geoffrey Martel. All the French and English, however, disapproved of this; but the king did it for to have the alliance of the Earl of Anjou, and for to have help against his nephew William.” *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 200.

²⁵ William of Malmesbury, *William of Malmesbury’s Chronicler of the Kings of England*, trans. John Sharpe (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1847), 483.

²⁶ Hanley, *Matilda*, 24.

²⁷ Chibnall also argues this stating, “To German chroniclers, who saw her as a potential intercessor with her husband the emperor and a patron of religious houses, she was pious, beneficent and even (for good measure) beautiful.” Marjorie Chibnall, “The Empress Matilda and the Church Reform,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 38 (1988): 107-8. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3678969>.

²⁸ *Gesta Stephani*, 127.

²⁹ Gilbert Foliot to Brien Fitzcount, 1139, *The Letters and Charters of Gilbert Foliot, Abbot of Gloucester (1139–48), Bishop of Hereford (1148–63), and London (1163–87)*, ed. Z. N. Brooke, A. Morey and C. N. L. Brooke (Cambridge: University Press, 1967), 26.

³⁰ Even in death, she is remembered for her compliance with the men in her life with her epitaph reading, “Great by birth, greater by marriage, greatest in her offspring... Here lies the daughter, wife and mother of Henry.”

³¹ Historian Carole Levin explains this issue in her book: “The pressure on Elizabeth to marry was great and certainly related to role expectations about her as a woman, in that a king could relieve Elizabeth of the difficulties of rule, or so her councilors fondly believed.” Levin, *Heart and Stomach*, 43.

³² The English people were also concerned with Elizabeth's marriage status and love life. Many of the English still had reservations about the concept of a female ruler. While she inspired a lot of love and respect, on the other side of the coin was a lot of hostility and anxiety about the future. Elizabeth's position as an unmarried woman went beyond the traditional role appropriate for women in society, and this manifested itself in a myriad of rumors dedicated to her. These rumors centered on her sexuality, and many of them focused on the idea of illegitimate children.

³³ Levin, *Heart and Stomach*, 44.

³⁴ It is also easy to imagine that Elizabeth was reluctant to marry because it would mean a deaccession of her power. Levin argues, "it is highly doubtful that a husband, either a foreign prince or one of her own nobility, could simply accept Elizabeth's domination in the public realm without attempting to interfere." Levin, *Heart and Stomach*, 44. Even though the law of inheritance made her an exception to the rule of masculine supremacy in her public capacity as queen, husbands were still the legal head of the family and that would certainly impact how the public viewed the role of Elizabeth's husband. Elizabeth did not know how to solve this problem, which she saw play out with her sister Mary, and so the matter was left unresolved until it was too late to do so.

³⁵ John Stubbs, "The Discovery of a Gaping Gulf," in *John Stubbs's Gaping Gulf with Letters and Other Relevant Documents*, ed. Lloyd E. Berry (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1968), 11.

³⁶ Stubbs, "The Discovery of a Gaping Gulf," 4.

³⁷ According to Levin, the records of her Privy Council are filled with examples of people charged with such treasonous crimes and arrested for "lewd words" spoken against Elizabeth. Levin, *Heart and Stomach*, 28.

³⁸ During Matilda's time, there were no examples of women on the battlefield and no way for her, as a respectable noblewoman, to set that precedent. Joan of Arc had already made waves by the time Elizabeth started her reign, but her fate was not a desirable one.

³⁹ Chibnall, *Lady of the English*, 96-7.

⁴⁰ Castor, *She-Wolves*, 64.

⁴¹ *Gesta Stephani*, 145.

⁴² Hanley, *Matilda*, 239-40.

⁴³ William of Malmesbury, who supports Matilda's cause, attributes the tactical decisions to the two chief male opponents, Stephen and Robert of Gloucester. By comparing Robert to Stephen, the chronicler can ignore Matilda's role. Also, by associating the victories with her brother and the failures with Matilda, he undermines her position. The *Gesta Stephani* follows a similar pattern, interpreting any successes in military leadership and battle as Robert's responsibility and as God's temporary punishment of Stephen for his wrongdoings. Another chronicler, Orderic Vitalis, also mentions Matilda passively, and while her presence is known because of these brief remarks, she is not depicted as an active participant in any of the main events. Matilda could never be the main figurehead of her movement because of her absence on the battlefield.

⁴⁴ Levin, *Heart and Stomach*, 138-9.

⁴⁵ Jane Resh Thomas, *Behind the Mask: The Life of Queen Elizabeth I* (New York: Clarion Books, 1998), 164.