
Conclusion

THE PLACE of noblewomen in the twelfth century was not marginalised by the increasing shift to patrilineal primogeniture and the bio-politics of lineage, two of the key broader changes in the way that society was organised. These were seismic shifts in societal organisation, rightly identified by Bloch, Duby, Goody and Holt as fundamental.¹ Within these changes the sources show that, increasingly, the place and roles of noblewomen were articulated with greater clarity through the definition of appropriate gender roles. These wider cultural shifts, far from disempowering noblewomen, confirmed their importance within society: as progenitors of the lineage, for example, as Duby would suggest, and as transmitters of property rights, as Holt would maintain.² Yet the avenues for the dispersal of power through society followed demarcated gender lines: for women, power was channelled through property rights linked with changes in status which followed the female life cycle. Within the female roles of wife, widow and mother, social status was pre-eminent in determining the range of power and influence that women could exert. Thus, paradoxically, the position of women within the nobility was secured by their tenurial patterns, despite the cultural shift to primogeniture.

The history of the twelfth century need not be understood only in terms of the dynamics of male tenurial lordship, which was itself in the process of development. As Paul Dalton has shown, even in the first half of the twelfth century there was a gulf between ideal society and the social and tenurial reality.³ Indeed, this book has shown that although historians such as Duby, Pollock and Maitland and Stenton believed that women could not and did not play any significant roles in tenurial lordship, the social and tenurial reality was that as wives and widows noblewomen were so involved.⁴ Further debate on tenurial lordship patterns which does not take account of the importance of gender roles is

in danger of becoming sterile, lacking as it is in the tools comprehensively to decode the dispersal of power throughout society. The family as a unit of lordship gave women prominence and in specific contexts – for example, religious patronage – could be a key route for such dispersal.

These themes have been developed in an analysis of private and royal charters as sources for the place of powerful noblewomen as landholders in twelfth-century society. This argued that it is essential to understand the fragmented nature of the discourse on women that charters articulate. In the process of committing land transactions to parchment, élites created a broken narrative which paradoxically both recorded and created custom, practice and procedure. Bloch argued that the twelfth century was one great writing lesson for the nobility, and as a result the process of writing dispersed power yet also concentrated it. He argued that literature ‘stands at the crossroads of medieval social practice and culture’.⁵ What is significant here is that this collective writing lesson was gendered. If the definition of literature is expanded to include not only poetry, history and romance, the main sources which Bloch uses, but also administrative documents and charters, the ways in which individual noblewomen exerted power become apparent. Charters have a particular usefulness in that they are evidence of women’s private initiative and policies. Examination here of charter evidence showed that the public roles, policies and initiatives of noblewomen were defined by their marital status and the female life cycle. The interplay of these factors and the role of social status were vital components in the definition of noblewomen’s roles within the family and also society more generally.

The interpretative challenge posed by charters is intrinsically a problem of the nature of the source material, since their purpose was to record land transactions, and this defined their construction. The role of women as witnesses, as givers and receivers of counter-gifts and in the affidation ceremony showed the complexity of noblewomen’s involvement in land transfers. Counter-gifts were discussed in the social context of patronage, and the ways in which they may be interpreted, in specific contexts, to reveal cultural and economic relations which simultaneously both defined and expressed the place of noblewomen in society, were explained. When women gave affidations they usually did so in the hand of another woman; it is striking that it was women below the rank of tenant-in-chief who gave affidations. Therefore it was possible for hierarchies of lordship to operate within and between groups of women. These roles were deeply gendered, since the female life cycle especially impacted on women’s opportunity to exercise power.

These themes were developed in the discussion of women's sealing practice. The practical role of seals as validators of documents and the symbolic meaning of the motifs used on seals show how women's power and authority in reality and symbolically were imaged in their seals. The spread of the use of seals by women of the nobility occurred in both England and France in the twelfth century. Through the process of cultural diffusion this practice filtered down through the ranks of the higher aristocracy to the lesser nobility by the end of the century, and in the process the iconography of women's seals developed to show social status as well as gender symbolism. Women's seals expressed the basis of women's power in specific iconographic representations of lineage, sexual and cultural functions. These symbols could articulate different meanings which might be invisible and varied, a phenomenon inherent in the medieval conceptual framework of the universe in the West. In the words of St Hugh of Victor, 'A symbol is a collecting of visible forms for the demonstration of invisible things'.⁶ Meanings could be varied, since the symbols used, such as birds of prey and the fleur-de-lis, were ambiguous and invisible, since women's place in the lineage was imaged but was an invisible link with the past. Further, women's seals were discussed within the social and political context of their use and production, since their purpose was to authenticate documents. The texts of women's seals show the importance of land tenure and the female life cycle in defining the legitimate place of noblewomen as landholders in society.

These themes were discussed with specific reference to countesses. An analysis of the contexts in which countesses appeared in charters, as alienors, co-alienors, witnesses and consentors showed these appearances to be related to female tenurial patterns and predicated on women's roles within the family and the female life cycle. Charter evidence indicates that conceptions of lordship in the twelfth century were deeply gendered. The role of noblewomen was structured into lordship in ways not previously perceived, since their spheres of power and influence were constructed differently from those of noblemen. The subtle interplay of the politics of gender, family and lordship explains the place of noblewomen in society. Opportunities for women to enact policies within this framework were predicated on possible combinations of each, some or only one of these factors. For example, Lucy countess of Chester made alienations in favour of Spalding Priory conjointly with her husbands. Yet it was as a widow that she acted independently when she founded Stixwold Priory. Matilda countess of Chester was active in her husband's military initiatives and likewise made religious benefactions

conjointly with Earl Ranulf, yet the charter evidence shows that she too, like Lucy, had more power and authority to act independently as a widow. This pattern is confirmed by other examples of powerful countesses, such as Matilda de Percy and Margaret de Bohun.

Noblewomen's roles changed as they moved through the female life cycle and their status was affected by the transition from wife to widow. Thus, despite the view of the church that widows were *miserabiles personae*, society accorded widows greater autonomy than other categories of women. Married women, who theoretically were 'covered' by their husbands, were nevertheless often involved in the religious benefaction of their families, both natal and marital. The role of wives in land alienations was often to give legitimacy to joint grants, because the involvement of a wife was in some circumstances legally necessary or at the very least advisable.

The ways in which charters may be used to analyse the place and roles of noblewomen from the lesser nobility – the wives of knights in the localities, the lesser barons and sheriffs – were illustrated in the study of the cartulary of St Mary, Clerkenwell. This chapter showed that gender and social status were key constructs which in their interaction defined the place and role of noblewomen in society. The female members of the de Munteni family and others like them, whose connections and status suggest a social rank akin to that of the 'county gentry', exerted power and influence in ways and at stages of the female life cycle comparable with the cases of noblewomen of higher rank. The rarity, but conversely the possibility of, public office holders who were noblewomen was also discussed in this context: social status was a key determinant in defining the amount of influence noblewomen could sometimes extend into a male domain. Countesses occupied an important and often public role in the social hierarchy: lesser noblewomen exerted power and influence in similar ways but in a way which was peculiar to their locality.

The portrayal of noblewomen in the literature of the twelfth century was analysed in Chapters 2 and 3 to show how noblewomen exerted power and influence on the production of texts, as patrons and as objects within them. Noblewomen's spiritual relationships with clerics were an indirect route for female influence in both personal affairs and in wider politics. Such relationships could be close and influential. The portrayal of women in hagiographic sources indicates that women could affect the production and content of saints' lives. This theme was explored in greater detail in a discussion of the role of noblewomen as patrons of the chroniclers and narratives. Such female influence may well have

affected the popularity of important texts in the twelfth century such as Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*. The activity of noblewomen as patrons affected the way that specific genres developed, and they had important roles to play in the process of cultural diffusion.

The development of views of women in chronicles and narratives was discussed in Chapter 2. Chroniclers portrayed noblewomen in a complex and contradictory manner. The portrayal of women was politicised, and increasingly in the twelfth century chroniclers viewed women's agency in gendered terms. The authenticity or historicity of the portrayal of women in chronicles and narratives was discussed in the context of an assessment of the methodological and interpretative problems which are particular to the study of women. In accordance with the analytical framework of the book, it was argued that the complex view of women in chronicles and narratives reflects the socio-political and economic reality of the place of women in society seen in the charter evidence. This varied portrayal offers the key to a complex understanding of the ways that power was disseminated within society. Historians have been ready to accept the marginalisation of women's roles because of their acceptance of the dominant historiographical constructs which have defined men as society and women as passive victims of male violence, as in the Duby model of society or indeed the Stentonesque view of honorial society. Women had, however, as full a role to play in society as men, but the way their power was structured in society was different from that of men because gender roles affected their position and power. Finally, chronicles and narratives acted as a legitimating discourse which reflected deep-seated and fundamental changes in the way that society was organised and conceptualised, and in which gendered categories of women were central.

The complexities of the image of noblewomen in chronicles and narratives as contrasted with the reality of the place of widows as landholders in society was discussed in specific relation to the 1185 *Rotuli de Dominabus et de Pueris et de Puellis de XII Comitatus*. This analysis considered whether the increased powers of a widow were anything more than a legal fiction and provided the context for wider discussion on the position of women at that most powerful stage in the female life cycle. The possibility to assess numbers of marriages, children, patterns of land tenure of widows means the *Rotuli* provide important data for the interpretation of the boundaries of noblewomen's lives. The *Rotuli* make it clear that noblewomen's tenure of land underpinned their status, dower was the principle form of land tenure by which widows were supported and the practice of endowing daughters with *maritagium* was restricted.

In Chapter 1 it was shown how ‘women’ as a separate undifferentiated category were lumped together in the writing of Hugh abbot of Flavigny at the bottom of his hierarchy.⁷ The definition of categories of women is fraught with problems, but this book has suggested ways in which it can be addressed in different sources. Countesses were a distinct status group in terms of rank. Social gradations were recognised in all contemporary writings, not only most obviously by late twelfth-century writers such as Andreas Capellanus and Étienne de Fougères, but also in charters through hierarchically organised witness lists, and in the *Rotuli de Dominabus*. Social gradations based on rank mattered. They defined and underpinned the exercise of power.⁸ Noblewomen were also defined by their marital status. Such a project must take account of the complexities of gender and lordship in defining social gradations. The debate over lordship, the way that women’s land tenure is accommodated within a system based on patrilineal inheritance, problems with defining gradations of social status, and wider theoretical explanations for the dynamics which shape society are all factors which help explain the place and power of noblewomen in society.

Finally this book is intended to contribute to existing debates in three ways. First, as a study of women and gender it has shown that gender was a developing idea that in the twelfth century was articulated through diverse sources. Charters are an important source which can be used to uncover the articulation of gender roles despite the problem of the disjointed nature of the narrative. Second, it has shown that conceptions of lordship were gendered and that the construction of gendered modes of behaviour was ultimately inclusive of noblewomen, since property relations underpinned the exercise of power. Third, the book argues against simplistic explanations of the way that twelfth-century society worked, and urges that the dynamics of society can be fully understood only when the role and place of women are fully integrated within the analysis. The status of women is fundamentally linked with land tenure and with socio-economic and political factors as much as marital and family status. Noblewomen saw themselves as members of the élite, as wives, mothers, sisters, daughters, widows and as women. Such complex identities require a complex explanation. When Petronella countess of Leicester ended up in a ditch indignantly throwing her rings away, when Matilda countess of Chester visited Lincoln Castle in February 1141, or when Nichola de la Haye grimly clung on to her castle during a long siege, they were not victims of a patriarchal system that subordinated them, but rather powerful members of the landed nobility who were actively involved in deciding their own fates.

Notes

- 1 H. Bloch, *Etymologies and Genealogies: A Literary Anthropology of the French Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); G. Duby, 'Women and power', in T. N. Bisson (ed.), *Cultures of Power: Lordship, Status, and Process in Twelfth-century Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), pp. 69–85; *idem*, *Women of the Twelfth Century*, trans. J. Birrell (2 vols, Oxford: Polity Press, 1997); R. Bartlett, 'Colonial aristocracies of the high Middle Ages', in R. Bartlett and A. Mackay (eds), *Medieval Frontier Societies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), pp. 23–47; *idem*, *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change* (London: Allen Lane, 1993); J. Goody, *The Development of the Family and Marriage in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); J. C. Holt, 'Feudal society and the family in early medieval England', II 'Notions of patrimony', *TRHS*, 5th ser., 33 (1983), 193–220; *idem*, 'Feudal society and the family in early medieval England', IV 'The heiress and the alien', *TRHS*, 5th ser., 35 (1985), 1–28.
- 2 Duby, 'Women and power', pp. 69–85; *idem*, *Women of the Twelfth Century*; Holt, 'Feudal society and the family in early medieval England', II 'Notions of patrimony', pp. 193–220; *idem*, 'Feudal society and the family in early medieval England', IV 'The heiress and the alien', pp. 1–28.
- 3 P. Dalton, *Conquest, Anarchy and Lordship: Yorkshire, 1066–1154* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 259.
- 4 Duby, 'Women and power', pp. 69–85; *idem*, *Women of the Twelfth Century*; F. Pollock and F. W. Maitland, *A History of English Law before the Time of Edward I* (Cambridge, 1985; 2nd edn, 1898, repr. London: Cambridge University Press, 1968); F. M. Stenton, *The First Century of English Feudalism, 1066–1166* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932; 2nd edn, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961).
- 5 Bloch, *Etymologies and Genealogies*, pp. 13–15.
- 6 As cited in G. B. Ladner, *Images and Ideas in the Middle Ages: Selected Studies in History and Art* (2 vols, Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1983), 1. 241.
- 7 *Hugonis Abbatis Flavianensis Chronicon*, ed. J. P. Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus . . . series latina*. *Patrologiae latinae*, CLIV (Paris: Garnier, 1881), 384.
- 8 Andreas Capellanus, *On Love*, ed. P. G. Walsh (London: Duckworth, 1982), pp. 16–18, 44–47; Étienne de Fougères, *Le Livre des Manières*, ed. R. A. Lodge, *Textes Littéraires Français*, 275 (Geneva: Droz, 1979), vv. 244–313, 93–102. He also satirised women's sexual behaviour and alleged tendency to lasciviousness, yet also praised their piety, using the countess of Hereford as a model of appropriate female behaviour.

