"The Softness of Her Sex": Matilda's Role in the English Civil War of 1138-1153

Catherine Hardee

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Honors Program of Liberty University.

_____
Douglas F. Mann, Ph.D.
Thesis Chair

_____
Donna D. Donald, M.A.
Committee Member

_____
William K. Hammersmith, M.Ed.
Committee Member

_____
James H. Nutter, D.A.
Honors Director

_____
Date

Abstract

This thesis examines the life of the Empress Matilda (1102-1167), focusing on how factors beyond her control directed much of its course. It discusses her attempts to take control of the political realm in England and the effect this had on her, her supporters, and her kingdom. It also analyzes her later years and influence on her son Henry II.

"The Softness of Her Sex": Matilda and the English Civil War of 1138-1153

When the White Ship disappeared beneath the waves of the English Channel in November 1120, it took with it William Atheling, the sole legitimate son of the English King Henry I.[1] With his heir-presumptive dead, Henry was forced to consider the options left for succession. The king's immediate reaction was to take another young wife, but his marriage to Adeliza of Louvain in January of 1121 produced no children.[2] A possible solution to this impending crisis presented itself when the Holy Roman Emperor Henry V died in 1125, leaving Henry I's daughter Matilda a widow.[3] As his only surviving legitimate offspring, Henry I recalled Matilda (1102-1167) from Germany and introduced her to the English and Norman nobility as his heir.[4]

This young woman, who would have such an impact on England over the next several decades, had been sent to Germany at the tender age of eight to begin preparation for her agreed upon marriage to the Holy Roman Emperor.[5] She grew up in Germany as the consort of one of the most powerful men in Europe, with influence and wealth to match her status. Following the death of her husband, her father arranged another marriage for her, this one far less illustrious. Matilda's marriage in the year 1128 to

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[1] Henry of Huntingdon, "The Chronicle of Henry of Huntingdon" in *The Chronicle of Henry of Huntingdon: Comprising the History of England, from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Accession of Henry II, also the Acts of Stephen, King of England and Duke of Normandy,* trans. and ed. Thomas Forester (London: Bohn, 1853), 249.

[2] Roger De Hoveden, *The Annals of Roger De Hoveden: Comprising the History of England and of Other Countries of Europe, Volume One, the First Part A.D. 732 to 1154,* trans. by Henry T. Riley (Felinfach: Llanerch Publishers, 1994), 214.

[3] Ibid., 218.

[4] Henry of Huntingdon, 253.

[5] Ibid., 244.

Geoffrey, son of the Count of Anjou, who was more than ten years her junior, made peace between Normandy and Anjou and produced three sons.[6]

In 1126, prior to her marriage to Geoffrey, Henry I attempted to ensure the accession of Matilda by requiring all of his barons to swear an oath that they would support her as her father's heir. When King Henry died in 1135, however, the king's nephew, Stephen of Blois, stepped into the vacuum of power and had himself anointed king in December of the same year.[7] There was no significant challenge to Stephen's reign until Earl Robert of Gloucester, the half-brother of Matilda, renounced his loyalty to the king. After Robert's *de facto* declaration of war, resentments that had apparently been hidden among much of the nobility escalated into open support for the woman they now declared to be the rightful heir to the throne of England.[8] The civil war that ensued would last until 1153, when the Treaty of Winchester ended the hostilities and Matilda's son Henry was named Stephen's successor.[9]

Though the war was nominally fought over the question of Matilda's right to succeed her father, the complexities of alliances and ambitions among the nobility of England and Normandy meant that few partisans were without ulterior motives. In the cases of many, such as Geoffrey de Mandeville and Ranulf of Chester, their fluctuating loyalties reveal that devotion to Matilda was subordinated to the advancement of their own fortunes, with the empress simply providing a convenient excuse for mischief. [10] This was a familiar scenario for a woman who from her earliest days had been used to

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[6] Marjorie Chibnall, *The Empress Matilda: Queen Consort, Queen Mother, and Lady of the English* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 54.

[7] Jim Bradbury, *Stephen and Matilda: the Civil War of 1139-53* (Phoenix Mill: Sutton, 1996), 14,15.

[8] Ibid., 42.

[9] R.H.C. Davis, *King Stephen 1135-1154* (New York: Longman, 1990), 118.

[10] Chibnall, *The Empress Matilda*, 103; Orderic Vitalis, *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, trans. and ed. Marjorie Chibnall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 6:540-541.

further the goals of powerful men. Matilda's first attempt to move outside the roles prescribed for her did not allow her to attain the crown of England, a failure that can largely be attributed to factors outside her control. Her acceptance of a more traditional position in the later years of her conflict with Stephen allowed her to become far more successful, a success she would maintain for the rest of her life.

Matilda's Early Years

Matilda was barely seven years old when she became a significant factor in her father's political strategies. In 1110 she was betrothed to Henry V, king of the Germans and soon-to-be Holy Roman Emperor, a match designed to "enhance the prestige of Henry I and his house immeasurably."[11] The bride's attraction to her groom was undoubtedly the enormous dowry she would bring with her from England.[12] Thus disposed of by her father, Matilda would not figure into English political calculations for the next fifteen years. Matilda had no input into the matter of her betrothal and marriage, but once she was the wife of the emperor, she was in a position of relative power for a woman at the time, though she remained firmly under the auspices of her husband.

Matilda first exercised her political abilities when she was left as regent over the Italian domains of Henry V. From 1117 to 1119, while the emperor dealt with rebellions in Germany, his young wife held authority in his name over the lands he had inherited from the Countess Matilda of Tuscany.[13] While in Italy, records show that the Empress "issued charters, decided lawsuits, and served as intercessor between her husband and his

[11] C. Warren Hollister, *Henry I*, ed. and completed by Amanda Clark Frost (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 216.
[12] Chibnall, *The Empress Matilda*, 217.
[13] Ibid., 33.

vassals."[14] Throughout her time as empress, even when she and her husband were together, she continued in the tradition of empresses who held an important position in the government of the empire. Rather than a simple consort, the position called for her to be a fellow administrator and the empress could truly be said to share in the power of the emperor.[15]

When Henry V died in 1125, he consigned the imperial regalia into the care of his widow, a move intended to give Matilda a measure of control over the succession of the imperial title. Despite her husband's trust, Matilda's position as a childless widow put her in the familiar situation of having little actual power to influence the election.[16] Her execution of the duties of empress had been successful enough for her to earn the name 'the good Matilda' in the realm, and it was asserted by the chronicler William of Malmesbury that her position in Germany was so satisfactory that she had little reason to wish to leave the realm when her father desired her return to England following her husband's untimely death.[17]

Second Marriage

However satisfactory her first arranged marriage had been, once it was over, she had no choice but to return to her father. Soon, Matilda was confronted with the plans her father had made for a second marriage, another connection that served the purposes of the king.[18] Henry I had sought to attain peace with Anjou throughout his reign, and the marriage of his heir William to the daughter of the count of Anjou temporarily achieved

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[14] Charles Beem, *The Lioness Roared: the Problems of Female Rule in English History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 40.

[15] Chibnall, *The Empress Matilda*, 29; Joan M. Ferrante, *To the Glory of Her Sex: Women's Roles in the composition of Medieval Texts* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), 105.

[16] Chibnall, *The Empress Matilda*, 40-41.

[17] Ibid., 45; William of Malmesbury, *William of Malmesbury's Chronicle of the Kings of England from the Earliest Period to the Reign of King Stephen,* ed. J. A. Giles (London: Bohn, 1847), 480.

[18] Donald Matthew, *King Stephen* (London: Hambledon and London, 2002), 57.

it. However, William's death brought an end to that alliance. The resurgence of Henry's old rival, William Clito, [19] and the threat he posed to Henry's realm made a new alliance even more desirable.[20]

When Matilda became marriageable again, it is hardly surprising that the husband Henry I chose was the younger brother of his former daughter-in-law. There is some evidence that Matilda balked at these arrangements and had to be persuaded to accept the diminution of her status from empress to countess.[21] However, she understood her duty to her father and duly acquiesced to the marriage with Geoffrey of Anjou on 17 June 1128, a union that would prove of doubtful value.[22]

Though some questions exist over whether King Henry I truly intended for Matilda to succeed him as his heir, the fact remains that first in 1126 and later in 1131, the king compelled all his barons to swear to support his daughter should he die without a male heir.[23] All the nobles of the church and the realm swore oaths of fealty to the Empress Matilda should Henry indeed "die without male issue."[24] Robert of Gloucester and Stephen of Blois, two men who would later become deadly antagonists on the battlefield, disagreed over who would have the honor of swearing their allegiance first. Foreshadowing the events of the next decade, Stephen won that debate and swore his

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[19] William Clito was the son of Henry's older brother Robert Curthose, and had presented a threat to Henry's reign due to his strong hereditary claims to both the throne of England and the duchy of Normandy.

[20] Chibnall, *The Empress Matilda,* 54.

[21] Ibid., 55.

[22] Ibid., 56. William Clito died less than two months after Matilda's marriage to Geoffrey, seriously undermining the necessity for the Angevin connection.

[23] Ibid., 51-52. Matthew argues in *King Stephen* that Matilda's Angevin husband would make her succession to the English throne very difficult. Henry did not include Matilda and Geoffrey in the government of Normandy or employ any other measures that would have helped make the couple more palatable to English and Norman nobles (55-57).

[24] William of Malmesbury, 12.

loyalty to his cousin before Robert.[25] Most of these oaths would be broken in less than ten years.

The reason for the willingness of these powerful men to forfeit their sworn word can perhaps be found in the changing conventions of female roles in property inheritance. The twelfth century saw noble women gain greater importance as they gained greater rights to inherit property and act on the behalf of husbands.[26] However, the environment in which Matilda was operating was one in which "there were no hard and fast rules relating to female succession."[27] Though women could and did inherit lands and other properties from their fathers and husbands, control over the heiresses themselves remained in the hands of the king or overlord.

Female inheritance was more about transmission of rights to a husband or son than ascribing those rights to the woman herself.[28] Therefore, upon Matilda's marriage to Geoffrey, he could conceivably expect to gain the rights she would inherit from her father, and the nobles who were pledged to support her saw him as an Angevin threat to their English and Norman dominions.[29] Indeed, the Archbishop of Canterbury would cite Matilda's Angevin marriage as justification for breaking oaths to the Empress.[30]

In addition to the general suspicion of the nobles, Matilda's position as the wife of the count of Anjou made her accession to the throne of England a direct threat to the

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[25] Ibid.

[26] Judith A. Green, "Aristocratic Women in Early Twelfth-Century England," in *Anglo-Norman Political Culture and the 12th-Century Renaissance* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1997), 59.

[27] Ibid., 61.

[28] Ibid., 62.

[29] Matthew, 54.

[30] *Gesta Stephani*, ed. and trans. K. R. Potter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 11.

interests of Stephen of Blois, a hereditary enemy of the Angevins.[31] Territorial disputes between Theobald, count of Blois, Stephen's older brother, and the rulers of Anjou meant that Angevin control over Normandy and England would have left Blois in a difficult position.[32] Had a different husband been found for Matilda, one more acceptable to the powerful magnates of Normandy and England, Stephen may not have felt impelled to take preemptive action to protect his family's possessions. The arrangements her father had made for her life, therefore, had much more far-reaching consequences than Henry perhaps considered when he made them.

Fight for the Throne

When King Henry I died suddenly in December 1135, Stephen saw his opportunity to strike, and made his way quickly to London where he convinced the nobles of the kingdom to support his claim to the throne, and the Archbishop of Canterbury crowned him at Westminster with the crown of the realm on 22 December 1135.[33] Whatever motivated Stephen to claim the throne, when he did take power, most of those who had solemnly pledged their loyalty to Matilda saw that the immediate future would be much brighter for those who supported Stephen. Robert of Gloucester did not fight Stephen's ascent to the throne any more than the rest of the nobles of England.[34]

According to William of Malmesbury, Robert's loyalty to his sister was tempered with a healthy dose of prudence, and he saw Stephen's well-stocked treasury that could purchase mercenaries and the personal qualities that had engendered loyalty to the new

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[31] Marjorie Chibnall, "Normandy" in *The Anarchy of King Stephen's Reign*, ed. Edmund King (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 95.

[32] Bradbury, 15.

[33] Roger of Wendover, *Roger of Wendover's Flowers of History Volume One Part Two* (Felinfach: Llanerch, 1994), 112; David Crouch, *The Reign of King Stephen 1135-1154* (Harlow, England: Longman, 2000), 37.

[34] Bradbury, 23-24.

king as the formidable obstacles that they were.[35] Whether or not Malmesbury's assertion of unfailing, yet practical, loyalty to Matilda is accurate, or the whitewashing of a biased chronicler, he made his declaration of support for his sister three years after Stephen took the throne. In 1138, Robert formally announced his defiance to Stephen, effectively renouncing the oath he had previously sworn to the new king.[36]

The reasons for this sudden change are not entirely clear. The explanation provided by Robert's devoted chronicler, William of Malmesbury, was that Stephen, growing suspicious of Robert's loyalty, had his Flemish mercenaries plot an ambush. That trap failed to harm its target, but it succeeded in turning Robert irrevocably against Stephen.[37] No other contemporary source mentions such an attack, suggesting that it may have been a fabrication to allow Robert to save face, but it does provide an explanation for what would otherwise seem to be an inexplicable action on Robert's part. Bradbury suggests that a deep dislike of Stephen may have been the cause, as "they were perceived by their contemporaries as natural political rivals."[38] Crouch accepts that explanation, arguing that Robert was unhappy with his position within the king's court.[39]

Chibnall, however, grants Robert the motives ascribed to him by William of Malmesbury.[40] The fact that Robert acted as one of Stephen's strongest supporters for the two years prior to his defiance seems to indicate that any personal loyalty he may have held toward his sister was greatly outweighed by his practicality in a difficult

[35] William of Malmesbury, 19-20.

[36] Davis, 35.

[37] William of Malmesbury, 22.

[38] Bradbury, 25; Matthew, 71.

[39] Crouch, 68.

[40] Chibnall, *The Empress Matilda*, 82.

situation. Robert's newfound support for his sister started a chain reaction that allowed Matilda's cause to gain traction.

In September of 1139, Matilda traveled from France to England to encourage a revolt against Stephen. Matthew attributed Matilda's journey to England to her displeasure with how her supporters were managing the campaign and a rather vain hope that her presence would help the situation.[41] Chibnall points to evidence that Matilda believed, whether rightly or wrongly, that many of the English magnates wished for her presence. The Empress even claimed to have received a letter from the king's brother asking her to come.[42] Once the Empress did land at Arundel with her brother, whatever her reason for the journey, Miles of Gloucester declared his support for her cause.[43] Of course, neither this landing, nor the support of Miles would have occurred without the prior support of Robert.

Matilda's Supporters

Robert was Miles' overlord, and it was important for Miles that they remained on good terms. Whether Miles joined the Empress's party out of loyalty or out of fear of Robert's reprisal is uncertain, but his military prowess would prove to be critical to Matilda's successes in the battles to come.[44] Another magnate who declared his support for Matilda at this time was Brian Fitz Count, who would prove to be the staunchest of Matilda's supporters. Uniquely among her party, his allegiance seems to have been based, not on ambition, but on what he thought was right.[45] Fitz Count left a "written justification for his actions," indicating that his adherence to the Empress was based on

[41] Matthew, 89.
[42] Chibnall, *The Empress Matilda,* 81.
[43] Ibid., 82.
[44] Ibid., 83-84.
[45] Bradbury, 44.

his high regard for the importance of oaths.[46] He defended Matilda's claim to the throne using biblical precedent from the book of Exodus, employing arguments that would be repeated by other supporters throughout following decades.[47] Despite such strong personal loyalty, Fitz Count did not move to openly ally with Matilda until Robert had first paved the way.

Even those followers who formed the backbone of her strength were unwilling to declare their support until the powerful Robert had made the first move. Throughout the conflict, "Robert of Gloucester's lordship was the foundation of the Empress's cause."[48] Had Robert never seen fit to defy Stephen, Matilda's cause likely would not have gained traction.[49] The implication is that the escalation of rebellion against Stephen had far less to do with its focal point and more to do with the ambitions and grievances of individual nobles.

Though Robert's support gave Matilda hope for success, prior to the Battle of Lincoln, the military situation made it seem quite certain that Stephen would maintain his throne. The aftermath of that 1141 battle changed that apparent certainty into grave doubt. Robert of Gloucester's men captured King Stephen himself, and the king was conveyed as a prisoner to the Empress at Gloucester.[50] Even this critical incident, however, was not initiated by any campaign of Matilda, but by a series of events that was almost entirely unrelated to the succession question.

Lady of the English

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[46] Chibnall, *The Empress Matilda*, 84.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Edmund King, "The Anarchy of King Stephen's Reign," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 34 (1984): 134, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3679129 (accessed October 12, 2010).

[49] Bradbury, 44.

[50] *Gesta Stephani*, 113-115.

As Matthew notes, the Battle of Lincoln was fought due to a disagreement between the earl Ranulf of Chester and King Stephen over Chester's refusal to turn over the castle at Lincoln to the king. The earl, when confronted with the king's troops arriving to besiege him, escaped the trap and went to Robert of Gloucester for help, leaving his wife behind in the castle. Chester's wife happened to be Robert's daughter, a factor which no doubt influenced Robert's decision to come to Chester's aid.[51] However little Matilda may have contributed to the course of the battle, the result was that she, through her brother, was in possession of the king's person.

At this point there seemed to be few obstacles between Matilda and the throne. For four months she was in a position to make her own decisions and direct the actions of her own forces and supporters. Since the difficulties she faced were political rather than martial, this allowed her, for the first time, to make decisions on her own behalf as she had never had opportunity to before. But, as events would prove, political negotiations could be nearly as dangerous to her cause as combat. The most formidable obstacle still standing in the way of her coronation was Henry of Blois, bishop of Winchester, papal legate, and brother to King Stephen. Initially, his support was won by solemn oaths to respect the rights of the Church, something which Stephen had largely failed to do, and he "receive[d] her as sovereign of England" along with many other nobles.[52]

Since the legate's support was largely based on necessity, as well as Matilda's promise to respect the rights of the Church, her actions in Church matters were of greatest importance to her success. The first test of her position brought no complaint from anyone but Stephen. The church hierarchy accepted Matilda's nominee Roger de Sigillo

[51] Matthew, 102.
[52] William of Malmesbury, 517.

for the open see of London, and he was consecrated by the Archbishop of Canterbury and took up his position. Stephen's protests were ineffectual, and the matter made little stir.[53] The election of the Bishop of Durham was an entirely different situation, one in which her actions seem quite ill advised. William Cumin was the candidate put forward by Matilda's uncle, King David of Scotland, but the cathedral clergy were in favor of another, and both parties sought the approval of Bishop Henry, the papal legate.[54] When the messengers from both sides reached the Empress, she sided with King David, while Bishop Henry found the Scottish King to be in the wrong. Matilda's opposition in this test of the sincerity of her commitment to the rights of the Church eroded the legate's support.[55]

Another issue helping to drive Bishop Henry back into opposition was Matilda's attitude toward Eustace, Stephan's eldest son. The legate asked that she return to Eustace the titles and lands that had been stripped from him, that were his rightful inheritance from his father. She ignored his request, and in so doing, cemented the loss of an important ally in her bid for the throne.[56] Bishop Henry reconsidered his alliance with Matilda and began making overtures to Stephen's queen, who was actively gathering support for her husband.[57] The anonymous writer of the chronicle *Gesta Stephani* asserts that the legate was a part of the revolt against Matilda that would soon occur in London.[58]

While she had still been assured of Bishop Henry's support, Matilda made her way to London, and was awaiting her coronation when the citizens of that city rose

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[53] Marjorie Chibnall, "The Empress Matilda and Church Reform," in *Piety, Power and History in Medieval England and Normandy* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), XII: 115.

[54] Ibid., XII:116.

[55] Ibid., XII:

[56] Bradbury, 107.

[57] Ibid. Stephen's queen was also named Matilda, as was Empress Matilda's mother and several other women of note.

[58] *Gesta Stephani*, 125.

against her and forced her to retreat to Oxford.[59] Her fortunes worsened even further when her siege of Winchester went awry and her brother Robert was captured in the ensuing flight from forces loyal to Stephen's queen, forcing a prisoner exchange that negated all the gains made at the Battle of Lincoln.[60]

Reversal of Fortune

The contemporary chroniclers who documented this sudden reversal of fortune laid the blame for it solely at the feet of the Empress. Even the writer most sympathetic to her cause, William of Malmesbury, darkly hinted that the ill fortunes suffered by the Empress occurred because Robert's advice for "moderation and wisdom" in dealing with the people of the realm were ignored.[61] He also circumspectly notes that the Empress alienated Henry of Blois by refusing out of hand some advice that Malmesbury terms as just.[62] If a friendly writer had such doubts about her conduct, it is little wonder that Henry of Huntingdon and the anonymous author of the *Gesta Stephani*, both highly loyal to Stephen, did not observe even as much generosity in their accounts of the period.

Henry of Huntingdon blamed Matilda for the problems that arose. He asserted that she "was elated with insufferable pride at the success of her adherents… that she alienated from her the hearts of most men."[63] That alienation caused her subsequent retreat from London, as well as the battle that led to Robert's capture. The author of the *Gesta Stephani* was even more critical. He asserted that Matilda refused to even treat the men who were most loyal to her with due respect, ignoring their counsel and disregarding their requests.

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[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid., 133.
[61] William of Malmesbury, 521.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Henry of Huntingdon, 280.

In dealing with the citizens of London, the *Gesta Stephani* recounts the reason for their sudden turn against Matilda. In his account, some wealthy citizens received a summons from the Empress, at which meeting "she demanded from them, a huge sum of money, not with unassuming gentleness, but with a voice of authority."[64] Their reasonable objections to this demand were met with "a grim look...[and] unbearable fury."[65] This rebuff turned the citizens of London toward the emissaries of Stephen's queen, and they therefore turned against Matilda and drove her from the city.[66]

Role of Gender

Did Matilda's sudden success truly bring her to a state of incredible pride that overcame all her better judgment? Perhaps the perceptions of a male-dominated society may better explain criticisms of her actions. When the specific accusations leveled against her are examined, it becomes obvious that her gender was the factor that made much of her behavior odious to these chroniclers. The author of *Gesta Stephani* accuses Matilda of having "an extremely arrogant demeanor" instead of possessing "the modest gait and bearing proper to the gentle sex."[67] Her misconduct toward her counselors is specified as her refusing to do everything they proposed, "as she should have" but instead "arranged everything as she herself thought fit."[68] Henry of Huntingdon refers to the decision to place Stephen in irons as "a woman's bitterness," while William of Malmesbury claims it was due to the king's venturing outside the wards of the castle more than once.[69]

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[64] *Gesta Stephani,* 121-123.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid., 125.
[67] Ibid., 119.
[68] Ibid., 121.
[69] Henry of Huntingdon, 280; William of Malmesbury, 516.

The actual policies that Matilda pursued, such as requiring a tax of the Londoners, were not outrageous in themselves. In fact, her son would employ a very similar strategy in attempting to curb the power of the city when he became king, and no one accused him of acting so badly.[70] Likewise, no male ruler would be criticized for failing to blindly follow all advice advanced by his councilors, as was Matilda.[71] And one need only compare the description given by William of Malmesbury of Matilda's father to the descriptions of her conduct to notice a double standard. Henry I was "inflexible in the administration of justice" and quick to bring "back the refractory to soundness of mind by the wounds he inflicted on their bodies" lest things occur that were "repugnant to his dignity."[72] It seems that Matilda in her conduct was simply trying to emulate the successful attitudes that had been employed by her father.

That these practices failed when Matilda tried them speaks to the uneasiness of these men with the role that Matilda was attempting to assume. She sought to become *domina Anglorum,* an "individual woman capable of possessing and wielding regal power."[73] However, while she modeled her behavior on male rulers such as her father or first husband, the people of England expected the behavior of a woman and were highly displeased with what they got. What would have made sound political sense for any man in Matilda's position did not work for her.[74] That the problem arose from the role she was assuming and not her actual behavior is made most clear in the *Gesta Stephani*. Where only paragraphs earlier the author had berated Matilda for her lack of womanly gentleness, he admiringly writes that Stephen's queen forgot "the weakness of her sex

[70] Bradbury, 106.
[71] Castor, 104.
[72] William of Malmesbury, 445-446.
[73] Beem, 52.
[74] Ibid., 54.

and a woman's softness, and bore herself with the valor of a man."[75] It could apparently be acceptable for a woman to behave in a masculine fashion, as long as she was doing so on behalf of a husband, instead of her own authority.[76] The prevailing attitudes toward women in power were something that she cannot have accounted for, given that her situation was virtually unprecedented.

London

Even if Matilda had been every inch the soft and generous woman, giving heed to every suggestion given her by supporters, conforming to the accepted roles for women and granting every wish of the citizens of London, those worthy burghers would likely have reacted in a similar fashion. Stephen's close relationships with many of the leading citizens of London had been well established for many years prior to his ascension to the throne.[77] Stephen and his queen, as well as many of Stephen's leading supporters, had been assiduous in their duties to popular London religious houses, such as St. Martin-le-Grand, "a training ground for royal clerks," of which he was a patron, therefore giving him close ties to much of the royal bureaucracy of London and therefore a great deal of control over the mechanisms of government.[78]

Several substantial London landholders also had very close business ties with Boulogne, and therefore enjoyed the benefits of their close ties with its count when he ascended the throne.[79] Indeed, the citizens of London had welcomed Stephen with "exultant joy" when he entered the city, and, claiming a right to choose their king, he was

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[75] *Gesta Stephani*, 127.
[76] Beem, 58.
[77] Jean A. Truax, "Winning Over the Londoners: Matilda, Stephen, and the Politics of Personality," *The Haskins Society Journal* 8 (1996): 52.
[78] Ibid., 53-54.
[79] Ibid.

chosen with "universal approval."[80] This was the mindset that Matilda had to contend with in her quest to be crowned in Stephen's place. These circumstances, utterly beyond her control, make it seem doubtful that even the most conciliatory actions possible would have been sufficient to sway Stephen's faithful partisans in London and prevent the reversal of fortune that ended her best chance for the crown.

Fighting for Henry

Matilda's first opportunity to exercise authority in her own right was largely unsuccessful. Her own mistakes combined with other circumstance outside of her control to cause failure. Subsequent to the high point of 1141 she never had the same level of influence in England, but her administration of her responsibilities was much more successful. Part of that success could be due to a shift in her objectives. By 1142, Matilda's oldest son Henry was nine years old, and the men who supported the Empress could look to him as the future for which they fought, freeing her from many of the constraints that had previously made her position difficult.[81] Matilda herself seemed to recognize that she would never wear the crown, but she nonetheless continued the struggle against Stephen in the hope that her son would ascend the throne instead, as her father had possibly intended from the start.[82]

Late in 1141, Stephen laid siege to Oxford Castle, where Matilda was in residence. As the siege dragged on and no relief forces came to the Empress' aid, the situation became tense.[83] Supplies in the castle were running low when Matilda took control of the situation and committed herself to a desperate escape attempt. Making use

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[80] *Gesta Stephani*, 7.
[81] Bradbury, 121.
[82] Helen Castor, *She-Wolves: the Women Who Ruled England Before Elizabeth* (New York: Harper Collins, 2011), 114.
[83] Roger de Hoveden, 245.

of the snow-covered ground and frozen river, Matilda and several of her knights covered themselves with white cloaks and slipped from the castle, walked across the Thames on the ice, and made their way through the lines of the besiegers.[84] Though this was referred to by some as a "woman's trick,"[85] even one hostile to her cause admitted that this escape would "heighten the greatness of her fame in time to come."[86]

Following this narrow escape, Matilda retreated to the security of the castle of Devizes from 1142 until her final return to Normandy in early 1148.[87] During this period, she maintained her own sphere of authority in the area that was militarily controlled by her half-brother, Robert, Earl of Gloucester.[88] Though she was not the anointed ruler of England, she granted titles and lands to her supporters and issued charters that in some cases conflicted with writs issued by Stephen. With lands at her disposal, she began to give estates to those of her following who had been dispossessed due to their support of her cause, building up a solid base of vassals and supporters around her center of power.[89]

Matilda also utilized this time to make grants to various religious houses that fell within her jurisdiction, seeking to keep her relationship with the church intact, something Matilda succeeded at even more than her opponent.[90] Throughout this period, she issued various charters granting to religious houses the same rights that charters from Stephen had guaranteed, attempting to assert her own right to distribute those lands and

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[84] Roger of Wendover, 494.
[85] Ibid.
[86] *Gesta Stephani*, 145.
[87] Davis, 95.
[88] Edmund King, "The Anarchy of King Stephen's Reign," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 34 (1984): 134, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3679129 (accessed October 12, 2010).
[89] Chibnall, *The Empress Matilda*, 123-124.
[90] Ibid., 131.

privileges.[91] In addition to these grants, Matilda avoided any serious breaks with the Church, and her studied attention to the rights of the Church greatly aided her cause and the future of her son's rule, while Stephen's behavior earned him opposition from Rome.[92]

This period can be seen as "the most impressive part of her career," as Matilda held on to a modicum of authority in England and kept Stephen's attention occupied. Meanwhile, her husband Geoffrey successfully conquered all of Normandy, thereby depriving Stephen of a large part of the realm and providing the Angevins with a guaranteed base of support.[93] When Matilda left Devizes in 1148, it may have been due to the necessity of maintaining a good relationship with the Church. The castle had been the property of the bishop of Salisbury when Stephen had captured it, and the Bishop desired its return. Henry had reached an age where he could take up the fight on his own; indeed, he had already made one abortive attempt to challenge Stephen. Therefore, Matilda chose to leave the castle that had been her home for nearly six years and return to Normandy, leaving the field of battle to young Henry and returning Devizes to the bishop.[94]

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[91] Ibid., 134-135.
[92] Ibid., 139; Davis, 96.
[93] David Carpenter, *The Struggle for Mastery: Britain 1066-1284* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 188; Davis, 95.
[94] Chibnall, *The Empress Matilda,* 148.

Power in Normandy

Henry's struggle for his own right proved to be largely successful, and Stephen finally came to terms in 1153. With the Treaty of Winchester Stephen recognized Henry as "my heir by hereditary right; and thus I have given and confirmed to him and his heirs the kingdom of England."[95] Stephen would not long survive this agreement, and Matilda's son ascended the throne of England in 1154.[96] While Henry fought for his rights in England, Matilda again carved out a sphere of influence for herself, this time in Normandy. She would remain there until her death, and prove to be an important figure in the duchy throughout remaining lifetime, working tirelessly to support her son's claims and rule.

Matilda utilized all her connections to assure her son's continued authority, including her special relationship with the monks of the monastery of Bec, with that house's historians lending "steady support to Henry's hereditary rights."[97] Once Henry received the title of the Duke of Normandy from his father, Matilda also began to assert authority in Normandy in her son's stead, and she played an active role in the government when Henry was in England.[98] Even though the authority in Normandy as well as England ultimately belonged to Henry, he always respected his mother's claim, as "her name always preceded his in their joint charters."[99]

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[95] "Charter of Stephen describing the conditions of the 'Treaty of Winchester', made between the king and Henry, son of the Empress Maud (later Henry II), at the conclusion of the civil war (November 1153)," in *English Historical Documents 1042-1189, vol. 2, English Historical Documents,* ed. David C. Douglas and George W. Greenway (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 404.

[96] Bradbury, 186.

[97] Marjorie Chibnall, "The Empress Matilda and Bec-Hellouin" in *Piety, Power and History in Medieval England and Normandy* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 43.

[98] Marjorie Chibnall, "The charters of the Empress Matilda," in *Law and Government in Medieval England and Normandy: Essays in honour of Sir James Holt*, ed. George Garnett and John Hudson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 289-290.

[99] Ibid. 290.

Grants of royal lands to abbeys made by Matilda during the period preceding his ascent to the throne helped to secure the borders of the territory controlled by Henry by making any incursion subject to serious disapproval by the Church.[100] Matilda was greatly engaged in the administration of Normandy, even more so than Henry's wife. In some cases, Henry granted his mother specific authority to ensure that his wishes were carried out, and she was often applied to as the person in charge when Henry was not in Normandy.[101]

Not only did Matilda participate in the governance of Normandy, but she also proved to be a source of advice for her son during the early years of his reign. Contemporary sources credit her with advising Henry in several important crises that arose while his position was still shaky. Henry aborted a plan to send his younger brother William to invade Ireland because Matilda was opposed to it.[102] In a show of remarkable intuition, Matilda strongly opposed her son's plans to appoint Thomas Becket as Archbishop of Canterbury. Though in this case Henry did not listen to his mother, her advice shows political aptitude that was perhaps the product of her long experience with the relationship between bishop and ruler.[103]

Conclusion

The major events of Matilda's lifetime began with an uninterrupted series of happenings completely beyond her control. From her first betrothal as an eight-year-old girl, to her unwilling return to England, to her unpopular marriage to Geoffrey of Anjou,

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[100] Chibnall, *The Empress Matilda,* 158.
[101] Ibid., 161.
[102] Ibid.,163.
[103] Ibid., 167. During Matilda's time as the wife of Henry V, the emperor had raised his chancellor Adalbert to the archbishopric of Mainz, and had been blindsided when his former friend took the duties of archbishop very seriously. Adalbert's staunch adherence to the rights of the church made him a deadly enemy of Henry V, and he was imprisoned by the emperor (Chibnall, *The Empress Matilda,* 31-32).

her first twenty-five years found her in roles proscribed for her by others. Hasty decisions by her father may have even helped to spur Stephen to deprive her of what she viewed as her rightful inheritance. Once the struggle for the throne reached stage of pitched battle, she was barred by her gender from any direct control of her fate. What was arguably the most critical battle of the entire war was not even fought over her claims to the throne.

The aftermath of the Battle of Lincoln allowed Matilda to take control of her followers in a significant way for the first time. It is hardly surprising that a woman who had had every aspect of her life dictated to her for nearly forty years had trouble competently managing both an army and the government of a country in turmoil. As Chibnall notes, her education had been exemplary in the areas needed for acting as a queen consort or a regent. For actually governing in her own right, however, she had absolutely no relevant experience.[104]

The setbacks she experienced in her quest for the crown can be seen as resulting from her own mistakes, but also from other unavoidable factors that converged to deprive her of the crown. That her unwise actions toward Henry of Blois materially harmed her chances to rule England cannot be denied, but neither can the effect of her gender on the attitudes of both supporters and critics be ignored. Neither can the close ties Stephen held with the city of London, something Matilda could neither have foreseen or circumvented, be left out of an assessment of her conduct during this period.

That she retained any supporters after this series of disasters indicates that there must have been some aspect of her conduct that was acceptable to those around her. The admiration that even her enemies could not conceal for her bravery and perseverance may have had some role in the continued loyalty of her camp. As the war continued, it is clear

[104] Chibnall, *The Empress Matilda*, 50.

that her abilities at administration grew, as is evidenced by the authority she exercised over the territory she controlled through her brother's strength of arms. As she gradually ceded her authority to the son who would succeed her, she was able to step back into the role for which she had always been best suited.

As a regent and source of advice on matters of state, Matilda performed admirably. Her residence in Normandy, and her ability to supplement her son's authority when he was across the Channel made her a valuable asset to King Henry II. Finally in control of her destiny, the Empress Matilda utilized her extensive talents in promoting the well being of her son, and therefore the ultimate wishes of her father. As Henry II consolidated his reign in England and Normandy, the last scars of the wreck of the White Ship were slowly healed.

That tragedy cost many more lives than those who drowned that fateful night. Its loss led to fifteen years of civil war and the loss of unknown thousands of lives. Matilda's lifelong struggle with the people and things that controlled her was sent in a new direction by that ship and its fate, a direction that led her to a gradual realization of her own abilities and an immortal place in history as one who was "great by birth, greater by marriage, and greatest in her offspring."[105]

[105] Ibid., 143.

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