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Assets to the Country: Countesses in Fourteenth Century England

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ASSETS TO THE COUNTRY:
COUNTESSSES IN
FOURTEENTH CENTURY ENGLAND

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
History

by
Janine Honey Sutter
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Accepted by:
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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a study of the lives of English Countesses in the fourteenth century. Past historians have often overlooked the role of females in society. When they were mentioned, it was in connection with their male counterpart ('his wife') or in a role that was non-traditional. Their day-to-day lives and their importance in their world have not been studied and compiled in one place.

Surviving sources can tell us much about medieval noblewomen, even if many earlier historians ignored them. We learn that these women were strong and intelligent, and can answer questions about their childhoods, their abilities to choose marriage partners, their daily and annual schedules, and their experiences during widowhood. These and many other questions were researched to compile this thesis about fourteenth century countesses in England.

One will find that these women were able to manage a manor like a present-day CEO, delve into politics like a lobbyist and yet act as demure and womanly as any medieval man could want. It is my hope that future scholars will research the women of other classes and time-periods so we have a better understanding of every class of people in every era of history. Until then, we cannot have a complete view of our past.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my family: to my husband Trey, my son Dale and my daughter Jordan, for encouraging my interest in history and helping greatly while I was pursuing this degree. And to my mother who encouraged me to be a smart self-sufficient woman from the time I was small and has always been my strongest supporter.

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CHAPTER ONE

RESEARCHING ENGLISH NOBLEWOMEN IN THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY

Margaret of Brotherton married her husband when she was fifteen. By the age of eighteen, she had inherited not only the title of Countess of Norfolk from her father, but also the office of Earl Marshal of England. When she unsuccessfully sought an annulment at the age of thirty after fifteen years of marriage, Margaret disobeyed the king of England and fled to Rome to petition the pope in person. While on her mission, her husband conveniently passed away and she quickly married the man she loved. Unfortunately, he was a member of the king's household, and Margaret was brought up on charges for disobeying Edward III (who had not given her permission to remarry or to leave the country).¹ This is an amazing life for anyone, but even more so since Margaret of Brotherton was a countess who lived in fourteenth-century England; a time when women were rarely allowed to have leadership roles over men or even be allowed to make decisions for themselves.

Despite their obvious importance in the history of any era, historians who research various classes of medieval people – from kings and queens to merchants, magistrates, and peasants, often forget women, particularly women of the nobility.² When they are mentioned, it rarely is in histories about

¹ Rowena E. Archer, "Brotherton, Margaret, suo jure duchess of Norfolk (c.1320–1399)" *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), online edn, Jan 2008 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/53070>, accessed 25 Oct 2016]

² Sir Winston Churchill's many-volume book *The Birth of Britain: A History of the English*

themselves, but rather in conjunction with a political action such as imprisonment of their husband, a political marriage, or a scandal, often fed by rumors and little fact.³

In a feudal society, each person had superiors and inferiors; even the king was accountable to God. It was an organized system in which each person knew where he or she fit within this rigid structure and there was little opportunity to climb out of one's stratum (although it could happen in rare circumstances - poor aristocrats might accept a wealthy merchant-class spouse or a man who proved himself on the battlefield might be rewarded with a title). The top of the fourteenth-century hierarchy in England consisted of the king, a few dukes, and then the earls whose wives were titled countesses. Below this level of the high nobility came the barons who, along with dukes and earls, received individual summons to Parliament which made them "peers" of the realm. Approximately fifty peerages existed in this era within England.⁴ (Figure 1:1- Map of England)

We know far less about countesses than we do about their male counterparts, the earls. Earldoms were created across the country for various reasons. The first earl of Chester was created by William the Conqueror in order

Speaking Peoples (New York: Dorsett Press, 1956), contains no references to noble women in the middle ages, although it was supposed to be a complete work of the history of the country.

³ As an example, Antonia Gransden's article "The Alleged Rape by Edward III of the Countess of Salisbury" (*The English Historical Review* 87:343, 1972), p. 335 points out that the "alleged rape shows that it is a mixture of fact, error and the unverifiable" yet many believe this incident is based in pure fact.

⁴ Chris Given-Wilson, *The English Nobility in the Late Middle Ages* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), p. 56.

to “protect the kingdom...from Welshmen”.⁵ Most were created to reward certain families or individuals or to provide a member of the royal family with a title and lands. However, there never is a mention in these accounts of the countess being elevated.

At all levels of society, it is harder to find information about women than about men. “In archival records women tend to be under-represented because it was normal for the male head of a household to be the recorded taxpayer, or the nominal tenant of land.”⁶ Most documents would have the husband’s name and title only. If researchers are lucky, they might stumble across a mention that a wife and a number of children lived there as well. Unfortunately, records relating to women and children can be confusing or inaccurate. For example, in the case of Joan of Munchensi, Countess of Pembroke, the accounts of her offspring vary from five to seven depending on what records you read.⁷ This could be a case of sloppy record keeping, or a tragedy such as children passing away between the written accounts being published.

Another problem with researching women of the middle ages is locating individuals by name. For example, Alice Hayles, Countess of Norfolk, can also be found under the names Alice Hales as well as Alice Itayles.⁸ When the

⁵ Robin Fleming, *Kings and Lords in Conquest England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p.145.

⁶ Helen Jewell, *Women in Medieval England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), p.1.

⁷ Sidney Lee, ed, *Dictionary of National Biography Vol LXI* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1900), pp. 376-377. Accessed at <https://archive.org/details/dictionaryofnati61stepuoft> on December 1, 2016.

⁸ The Peerage. Retrieved from <http://thepeerage.com/p10215.htm>. June 2015.

woman's name was listed, there was seldom the concern about spelling it correctly (there was little concern about spelling correctly at all) or documenting when and where she was born or resided prior to marriage, unless her family brought wealth or prestige to the husband.

Even in current historical pieces written for the masses, women are barely mentioned. As an example, the Warwick Castle Guide Book, mentions not one countess for the entire fourteenth century although every earl is mentioned by name with some information about them. There is one mention of a countess in the chapter about the thirteenth century, but only because she was kidnapped and held for ransom by a political foe.

Since few women wrote about their lives, one must take into consideration the ideology of the day, displayed in messages written by the clergy and clerks of law, to see how women were viewed and treated during this time period. On one hand, women were treated as fragile objects who could not be counted on to have a serious thought, while on the other hand, according to the church, women were 'sexual beings' who lured good Christian men away from their tasks".⁹ Women themselves perhaps felt that there was no reason to write about their own day-to-day lives; many women also lacked the ability to write. "The picture of women in medieval England cannot therefore be based on their own words

⁹ Helen Nicholson, "Crusades and Crusading Literature," in *Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*, ed. Margaret Schaus (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 183.

directly...the 'woman's point of view' from the Middle Ages is not one that is normally available."¹⁰

One reason for the lack of historical information about women stems from their low education rates, but it is a fallacy to think this is a trait of just women. In fact, most of the population was illiterate, therefore, low education rates alone cannot account for the lack of information about these women. There were no schools for women and no professional occupations such as medicine, law, or teaching available to them. This prevented them from entering many of the professions that would have afforded them the opportunity to acquire their own fame or mention in publications of the day. So, instead of poor educational opportunities, it is more a lack of interest in the details surrounding women's lives and activities, in their own times and continuing to the modern era, which has resulted in scant research and information about countesses and other women through history.

Although there is much less written about the lives of women in the fourteenth century than about their male counterparts, by careful observation, one can learn about their lives and their daily duties by observing the art of the period. Through manuscript illustrations, one can see the varieties of tasks that kept them busy through their lives.¹¹ In addition, the artwork of the time can give one an idea of how women were viewed. Were there a large number of works

¹⁰ Jewell, p.16.

¹¹ Sally Fox, *The Medieval Woman: An Illuminated Book of Days* (London: Balfinch Press, 1985), *passim*

about the Virgin Mary or were women painted as sinful creatures like Eve?

Included throughout this paper are selections of artwork from the middle ages that depict women as responsible, busy, and intelligent individuals.

Another historiographical concern is the problem with flawed history being perpetuated in historical novels and textbooks. Although current historical books try to be more inclusive of women, there are decades of books available that are disparaging to women of all classes. G.G. Coulton's book includes information that all women were subject to "crude ...physical violence".¹² While it is true that a woman was under the control of her parents and then her husband, to imply that all women were physically abused is not helpful or accurate. Some women were subject to corporal punishment, but there is no evidence that all women were.

In Sibylle Harkensen's book, *Women in the Middle Ages*, she continued the same tired rumor that all nobles had the right to take any bride's virginity on her wedding night known as Droit du Seigneur.¹³ More scholarly works, such as Ruth Karras's *Sexuality in Medieval Europe* acknowledge that this is a myth.¹⁴ Of course, there were those men who slept with the peasantry or household members, but this was not a standard of regular behavior.

¹² G.G. Coulton, *Medieval Panorama: The English Scene from Conquest to Reformation* (New York: Abner Schram, 1975), p.615.

¹³ Sibylle Harkensen, *Women in the Middle Ages* (New York: Abner Schram, 1975), p.13.

¹⁴ Ruth Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing unto Others* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p.113.

This thesis, then, attempts to correct inaccurate information about medieval noblewomen as well as to correct the imbalanced focus on men that has been perpetuated both by medieval and modern authors. During the fourteenth century, “twenty-four new earldoms were created outside the immediate royal family” resulting in a much larger noble class and the possibility of upward mobility for some lesser noble families.¹⁵ This created the opportunity for two dozen new countesses to join the ranks, or for current families of this rank to consolidate their power through marriage.

Throughout the Middle Ages, the role of a countess was of major importance both in the political realm and within their own households. “Elizabeth de Burgh’s Christmas feast at Usk in 1326 displayed hospitality with strong, political overtones” and later in her life, one of her frequent visitors was the Black Prince.¹⁶ The responsibility did not lessen with the introduction of duchesses in the fourteenth century. Although they were important too, duchesses were part of the royal family, as wives of King Edward III’s sons, and their lives were probably much different than any women of lesser status. This thesis will not focus on this new group of women and will focus instead on countesses both as a way to narrow down the study and to delve deeper into the lives of this particular class of women. While countesses might not be front and

¹⁵ Given-Wilson, *English Nobility*, p. 29.

¹⁶ Jennifer Ward, *Women in England in the Middle Ages* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006), p. 113; Frances A. Underhill, *For Her Good Estate- The Life of Elizabeth De Burgh* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1999), p.3.

center in the history books, they were an integral part of English politics and society.

In a few instances where it seems that English politics were impacted by a countess from other countries, I have included them in this thesis. Ladies such as the Countess of Buchan in Scotland were an important part of their countries' histories but also impacted English politics often because of being married to English noblemen. In other cases, I have given information about a queen of the era with the understanding that the nobility often mimicked the royals; and therefore it is not a stretch to believe that countesses might have behaved in the same fashion as the queen.

It is my assertion that examining countesses can lead to a more full understanding not only of women in the middle ages, but of society, politics and families in general. Men, even the king and his nobles, were categorized by their profession or class (farmers, knights, royals). Women in this era "were classified according to their status: ...virgins, wives or widows. They were also, of course, mothers."¹⁷ Therefore, chapters in this thesis mirror these life-cycle classifications. There are many books covering the medieval household and some even focusing on the medieval woman, but none of these focus specifically the lifestyles of countesses in fourteenth century England. It is my intention to correct this oversight.

¹⁷ Henrietta Leyster, *Medieval Women: A Social History of Women in England 1450-1500* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1995), p. 93.

CHAPTER TWO

BIRTH, MAIDENHOOD AND MARRIAGE

The politics of the day ruled the lives of women from noble families from the time they were born. For instance, the early life of Elizabeth de Badlesmere contained more drama than a modern day soap opera. Born in 1313, she was married when she was three to Sir Edmund Mortimer, son of Roger Mortimer who was later the lover of Queen Isabella.¹⁸ Her dowry was £2000. When she was eight, Elizabeth, with her mother and sisters, was sent to the Tower because her mother had ordered an attack on the Queen and refused her entry into the castle. Elizabeth's father, Bartholomew de Badlesmere, first Baron Badlesmere, was hanged by Edward II in 1322 for participating in a rebellion. Finally, in 1330, at the age of seventeen, she was remarried to William de Bohun, earl of Northampton, in order to make "peace between families".¹⁹

The lives of countesses in the fourteenth century were often full of intrigue and peril. While the lives of lower classes were more hazardous (because of accidents, malnutrition, diseases, and other perils), there were also dangers associated with being in the ruling classes. However, unlike their subordinates, there were many benefits to being a countess. These included things such as better housing and more access to medical care.

¹⁸ Ages of marital consummation are discussed later in this chapter.

¹⁹ Ward, *Women in England in the Middle Ages*, p.29.

One of the few times when a noble woman was the center of attention and truly enjoyed her higher quality of life was during childbirth. Towards the end of her pregnancy, a pregnant woman would retreat into private life and cease her social calendar for a time. A baby was cause for celebration and sometimes new furniture was commissioned or festivals planned for after the birth. The room was prepared in advance with the lavish furnishings and all supplies that might be deemed necessary. Often there would be clergy present before the birth for prayers. In the case of Elizabeth de Bohun, Countess of Hereford, her clergy included “the confessor of the Prince of Wales, and two monks of Westminster...who brought...sacred relics...believed to be of assistance to women in labour.”²⁰ In addition to the midwife, a countess was surrounded by her ladies-in-waiting or other female servants. Husbands were not invited to the event. If the infant was not healthy, midwives had permission to christen them after birth in case of imminent death. Midwives were also more skilled than many give them credit for. There is evidence of midwives performing caesarean sections occasionally. (Figure 2:1) When the Countess of Derby gave birth to her son, Thomas in 1387, the midwife, Joan, “who was with the lady at the birth of the young lord, Thomas”, was given a gift of 40 shillings (about the cost of a war horse).²¹

²⁰ C.M. Woolgar, *The Great Household in Late Medieval England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p.98.

²¹ Jennifer Ward, Ed. *Women of the English Nobility and Gentry 1066-1500*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 70.

Infancy in the middle ages was a dangerous period. Despite enjoying better food and housing options than the lower classes, infant mortality was still high.²² While there were many large families, medieval people knew the dangers involved in childbirth to both the mother and babe as shown in this poem.

How mankind dooth bigynne
is wonder for to scryue so;
In game he is beigoten insynne,
the child is the modris deedli foo;
Ot thei be fulli partied on tweyne,
In perelle of deeth be bothe two.²³

Even if they were not willing to go through childbirth, there was no reliable form of birth control, so women had no choice but to continue bearing children even after it was no longer safe for them to do so. Yet many women were willing to go through the danger of childbirth to fulfill their God-appointed duty of providing children for their husband and families. And to ensure that people knew the importance of relationships and family attachments, daughters in many noble families were named for the reigning queen, their godmothers, their mothers or grandmothers.”²⁴

In addition to these ties to family and important friends, “a person’s networks were enhanced with friends acquired in various ways”. This might include becoming a confidant of a royal, having an important godparent or earning the ear of an important official. When selecting godparents, one was

²² Nicholas Orme, *From Childhood to Chivalry* (London: Methuen Press, 1984), p. 3.

²³ Frederick J. Furnivall, ed., “The Mirror of the Periods of Man’s Life” in *Hymns to the Virgin and Christ, The Parliament of Devils, and Other Religious Poetry* (London: Early English Text Society, About 1430), p. 58.

²⁴ Frances A. Underhill, *For Her Good Estate- The Life of Elizabeth de Burgh* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999) p. 97.

under obligation to choose individuals who were not related to the child by blood or marriage. This even included people who would possibly enter the family by marriage at a later date. Additionally, the child would be prohibited from marrying closely into the family of the godparents, so any future marital matches would be off limits. The godchildren were thought of as part of the family and were occasionally the beneficiaries of the godparent's wills.²⁵ This added greatly to the size of the family or household in important families.

While growing up in a noble family, even the infants would have their own staff. The staff often included more than one nanny, a wet-nurse, maid and sometimes guards and a chaplain. The mother would visit the child in the nursery or have the child brought to her at set times each day. But, even this is a generalization as there were mothers who were more involved in the care of their children and mothers who did in fact breastfeed their children. There is some controversy about breastfeeding in this period. Some texts state that all children were handed off to a wet-nurse almost at birth, while others insist that no countess would allow her child to ingest the milk of a peasant woman.²⁶ All babies, however, were breastfed for the first part of their lives as there was no real substitute at that time. (Figure 2.2)

Before the age of seven, lifestyle was generally the same for male and female children. However, I will be focusing on female children from this point

²⁵ Nicholas Orme, *Medieval Children* (New Haven: Methuen & Co., 1984), p. 204.

²⁶ Phillip Gavitt, "Breastfeeding and Wet-Nursing" in *Women and Gender in Medieval Europe-An Encyclopedia* (London: Routledge, 2006), p.93.

forward. As girls grew, mistresses were hired to care for them. These older ladies were “charged with the bringing up of girls in later childhood and adolescence.”²⁷ These ladies were able to teach social graces, morals, and occasionally literate education. There was a bias against women who were too educated. In a French poem, men were encouraged to “not choose a wife for beauty or because she is lettered, for such person are often deceivers.”²⁸ However, there were numerous women of this class who were able to read. The number of books left to family members by countesses in their wills (especially after 1350), was great.²⁹ “Henry Bolingbroke’s daughters Blanche and Philippa were about seven and five respectively in 1398 when they were given their ABCs, a new kind of compilation of religious books.”³⁰ Many noblewomen also owned prayer books written in Latin, French, or later in the century, English. Many women were taught to write as well, often against public opinion. In 1330, Margaret Wake, Countess of Kent wrote a letter with treasonous sentiments and was accused in court.³¹

In order to teach lessons, morality plays were popular for everyone.

Young ladies were allowed to see these plays in hopes that they would teach

²⁷ Orme, *From Childhood to Chivalry*, p. 26.

²⁸ Ibid. p.157.

²⁹ Ward, *Women in England in the Middle Ages*. p. 116. Owning a book is not the same as knowing how to read the book. Some individuals enjoyed having others read to them or just owning books as a way to show off their wealth and status, since books were not as inexpensive and readily had as today.

³⁰ Kim Phillips, *Medieval Maidens: Young Women and Gender in England 1270-1540* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 64.

³¹ Orme, *From Childhood to Chivalry*, p.158.

them to be of good character. Chaucer even addresses the importance of the job of mistresses in his story 'The Physician's Tale':

And ye maistresses, in youre olde lyf,
That lordes doghtres han in governaunce,
Ne taketh of my wordes no displesaunce
Thenketh that ye been set in governynges
Of lordes doghtres oonly for two thynges:
Of lords' daughters only for two things:
Outher for ye han kept youre honestee,
Or elles ye han falle in freletee,
Knownen wel ynough the olde daunce,
And han forsaken fully swich meschaunce
For everemo; therfore, for Cristes sake,
To teche hem vertu looke that ye ne slake.³²

A mistress would need to be able to teach the children a wide variety of topics including languages and religion. They needed to know how to speak to both the aristocracy and the local community as these were not always one and the same. Throughout the fourteenth century, the aristocracy gradually moved from speaking primarily French to using English as their common language which meant that children might need to learn one, the other, or both. The mistress would seek help from local clergy on any higher learning or spiritual matters, although religious teaching was not as strenuous as one might suppose.

Since their lives were permeated by at least the public display of religion, it was natural to celebrate feast days, to give to the poor, and to engage in other Christian behaviors as a matter of course without having to be formally taught on how to behave. From as young as six or seven years old, children were

³² Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Physician's Tale* Lines 72-83. Retrieved from <https://sites.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/teachslf/phys-par.htm>.

expected to be part of daily prayers just as the adults, to give payment to the priests, and to behave during mass or other religious services.³³

Children were allowed to play with dolls, balls, carved soldiers and such when they were young. "Books, paper and miniature weapons for the children's use" appear in the expense accounts drawn up for Edward Courtenay, Earl of Devon, between 1395-1400.³⁴ They were taught manners, how to do household tasks, and occasionally how to serve a table. If a family was well-connected, their child might be invited to live with and study alongside children from higher-ranking or even royal households, often taking their own retinues with them.³⁵ By living life in view of a large household, a child was able to develop into someone comfortable being in public and social situations.

According to Helen Jewell, "the overlap between work and education...means that positions held by young women have been viewed often as part of the 'boarding out' system of female education, whereas their brothers...are seen to be taking the first step on a career path."³⁶ By the age of eight, most sons would be sent off to live as a page in the castle of another noble. Therefore, many households "frequently contained young people from outside the nuclear family" which led to lifelong friendships, alliances or even

³³ Orme, *From Childhood to Chivalry*. p.131.

³⁴ Kates Mertes, *The English Noble Household 1250-1600: Good Governance and Politic Rule* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, Ltd., 1988), p.173.

³⁵ Jewell, *Women in Medieval England*. p. 132. In 1350, Geoffrey Chaucer served as a page in the household of the Countess of Ulster, establishing connections that would aid him throughout his life.

³⁶ *Ibid.* p.110-111.

marriages.³⁷ Often, “flirtation and ‘parasexual’ interaction were common elements of life within elite households.”³⁸ With teenage men and women from several families living in close proximity, liaisons were bound to happen.

For most girls, maidenhood was a time of learning how to be a wife and waiting for marriage. In the late fourteenth century, books about how to be a proper lady began to emerge in France. Because girls generally stayed at home longer, learning such skills as how to manage a household, play an instrument, and entertain guests, these books determined a set of guidelines about what a noble lady should know. (Figure 5.3) In a 1372 letter to his daughters, a father advised them to “be courteous and humble to great and small, to show courtesy and respect, to speak to them kindly...[do] not put any paint or make-up on your faces which were made in God’s image.”³⁹ Girls were encouraged to learn needlework, study proper deportment such as taking small steps, and become skilled in hunting with dogs and birds. First aid skills and basic gardening were also highly prized talents in a lady.

How accomplished the maiden became at skills such as these and, even more importantly, the amount of power and wealth of her family, often decided how sought after she was for marriage. Since women had little say about whom they married, kings and overlords often did great business in the buying and selling of marriages of wealthy widows and orphans. A man in need of a wife

³⁷ Mavis E. Mate, *Daughters, Wives and Widows after the Black Death-Women in Sussex, 1350-1535* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1998), p.160.

³⁸ Seymour Phillips, *Edward II*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), p.154.

³⁹ Ward, *Women of English Nobility*, p.52.

might pay a handsome sum to the king in order to secure an heiress or rich widow. To avoid remarriage, some “widows [paid] heavy fines to be allowed the privilege of remaining single... The sums that came in to the exchequer by the marriage of his feudal vassals were enormous; for those who wished to marry widows holding of crown also paid the king for permission to do so.”⁴⁰

Because weddings were extremely important, some witnesses would occasionally “hit one another to impress the occasion on their memories” just in case they were later called upon to testify that the marriage did indeed take place.⁴¹ Then, like now, people like to have a good time, so weddings were often a festive affair. The Earl of Nottingham’s wedding celebrations in 1384 lasted for over a week.⁴²

Marriages were based on business, money, or family ties. If love came later, the couple was thought to be lucky. One of the most important functions as a mother was to help one’s child marry well. While ultimately, it was the father who would make the final decision; it was often the mother who would set the ball in motion. Alice FitzAlan, Countess of Kent and March, gave birth to ten children during her marriage. Six of the children were daughters, of which, three married earls, one married a duke, and one became a nun. The final one may have seemed like a disappointment only marrying a mere knight, but he was also the second son of another earl. Parents showed that they cared by placing

⁴⁰ Augusta Sneyd (ed. and trans.), *A Relation, or Rather a True Account, of the Island of England* (London: John B. Nichols and Sons, 1847), note 88.

⁴¹ Morris Bishop, *The Middle Ages* (New York: American Heritage Inc, 1968), p.116.

⁴² Ward, *Women in England in the Middle Ages*, p.35.

daughters with a husband who could provide for a wife and children. If the prospective husband came from a higher class, that was better for the wife's entire family. There was even no guarantee she would be able to remain in country.

Women at this social level also generally married "at a younger age than women in any other social class."⁴³ However, even the legal and spiritual arenas seemed to have a good understanding of some biology. There were prohibitions against girls being married at too young an age, although they could be betrothed upon birth. According to the famed legal authorities Pollock and Maitland, "seven was held by the Church to be the minimum age of marriage...but that too was ignored in practice and...parents planned and executed marriages for their children at all ages from birth onwards".⁴⁴ A more recent text states that boys would be at least fourteen and females at least twelve before marriage, but betrothals could take place after age seven for both sexes.⁴⁵

Yet even while taking into account the health of young women, the church passed out even more conflicting information. "In the teachings of the Church, women were either worshipped like the virtuous Virgin Mary or subjected and scorned like the sinful and inferior Eve."⁴⁶ Women were instructed to be obedient, dress modestly, and be above reproach while also being placed upon pedestals by poets, minstrels, and other believers in courtly love. Morris Bishop

⁴³ Mate, *Daughters, Wives and Widows*. p.181.

⁴⁴ F. Pollock and F.W. Maitland, *The History of English Law Before the Time of Edward I*, 2nd ed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1898), p.36.

⁴⁵ Ward, *Women of the English Nobility and Gentry 1066-150*, p.18.

⁴⁶ Fox, *The Medieval Woman*. p.6.

hypothesizes that the reason that courtly love was a popular concept was that it “compensated the medieval lady for the brutality of marriage”.⁴⁷ Since we already know that some marriages were happy, this seems more titillating than truthful, although it is also well known that some women were not happy in their marriages.

If a lady was not the first wife, and occasionally even if she was, she might have to be prepared to be a step-mother...sometimes to children her own age or even older. Joan de Munchensi, Countess of Pembroke, was raised by her stepmother since her mother died right after giving birth to Joan. Joan also inherited the earldom after her father and each of five brothers held the title and died in turn! If a woman had children from a previous marriage, she might not have custody of them. They might have become wards of a powerful noble or even a royal depending on how wealthy they might be or how important their title was.

One such royal ward, Joan, countess of Kent, married Thomas Holland secretly when she was twelve. The next year, she was forced to wed William Montacute, heir of the earl of Salisbury. She did not tell anyone she was already married since Holland was off on crusade. Several years later, when Holland returned and petitioned the pope for the return of his wife, Montacute held her captive until the pope intervened and dissolved her second marriage. Since she was the countess of Kent in her own right, she was able to pass this title on to

⁴⁷ Bishop, *The Middle Ages*. p.120.

her son (who also bore the title of the Prince of Wales). Even though she went on to have another husband, she was buried next to Thomas.⁴⁸

Philippa Mortimer was married to the third earl of Pembroke when she was just nine years old; thankfully he was only fourteen.⁴⁹ Maud of Ufford, Countess of Oxford was married at the tender age of five.⁵⁰ Also at the age of five Katherine Mortimer married Thomas de Beauchamp, eleventh Earl of Warwick, to settle a land dispute, and they went on to have seven children.⁵¹ Even with such an unromantic beginning, it seems to have been a good match since she was buried by her husband, and their effigies are holding hands. (Figure 2.3) If lucky, a girl from the nobility was married to someone near her own age.

In the church's view, betrothals were a serious business—betrothals were a valid contract and almost as good as an actual marriage. Occasionally, there were betrothals that never made it to the wedding. Alice FitzAlan, Countess of Kent, was betrothed to Edmund Mortimer, third Earl of March, before her actual wedding to Thomas Holland, second Earl of Kent.⁵² And while being legitimate was generally important, Beatrice, thirteenth Countess of Arundel, was the

⁴⁸ Karl P. Wentersdorf, "The Clandestine Marriages of the Fair Maid of Kent" *Journal of Medieval History Volume 5, Issue 3*, September 1979, pp. 203–231 Retrieved from <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/030441817990037X?np=y>

⁴⁹ Thelma Anna Leese, *Blood Royal: Issue of the Kings and Queens of Medieval England, 1066–1399* (Berwyn Heights, MD: Heritage Books, 2007), p91.

⁵⁰ James Ross, "Seditious Activities", *Authority and Subversion*, Linda Clark, Ed., (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2003), p.26.

⁵¹ Darryl Lundy, *The Peerage*, Retrieved from <http://thepeerage.com/p93.htm#i922> Jan 15, 2017.

⁵² R. R. Davies, *Lords and lordship in the British Isles in the late Middle Ages*, edited by Brendan Smith, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) p.153.

bastard daughter of John I of Portugal.⁵³ Sometimes birth could be overlooked if one was bringing a good connection or a large amount of wealth to the marriage. (Alice and Beatrice both later became Ladies of the Garter).⁵⁴

Despite evidence of early marriages, by the fourteenth century, there was an understanding that it was dangerous for an underage girl to have relations with a man, and even worse if she were to get pregnant. Women that were married young were not expected to consummate their marriage for many years. Occasionally, this could result in an annulment such as in the case of Elizabeth of Lancaster who was married at age seventeen to the eight year old third earl of Pembroke. When he was fourteen, and after her indiscretion, the marriage was annulled.⁵⁵

Isabel le Despenser married Richard FitzAlan, earl of Arundel, when she was just eight. He later petitioned for and won an annulment which rendered their son a bastard and therefore ineligible to become the next earl. Isabel's former husband then went on to marry her cousin, Eleanor of Lancaster.⁵⁶

Annulments also resulted from secret marriages. Secret marriages, while valid, were "illegal, and disciplines and punishments might be visited on a couple

⁵³ Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica, "Thomas Fitzalan Arundel, 11th earl of Surrey" *Encyclopædia Britannica*, (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 1998). Retrieved from www.britannica.com/biography/Thomas-Fitzalan-Arundel-11th-Earl-of-Surrey on Jan 17, 2017.

⁵⁴ List of Knights of the Garter. Retrieved from <http://www.heraldica.org/topics/orders/garterlist.htm> on Jan 16, 2017.

⁵⁵ Phillips, *Medieval Maidens*. pp. 154-155.

⁵⁶ C. Given-Wilson, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* retrieved on Jan 18, 2017 from <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/9534?docPos=2>

who contracted one”.⁵⁷ It was also not an approved method of marriage according to the church. However, when being forced into marriages with men they loathed, some women were willing to take their chances with a secret relationship. Another illicit but sometimes successful method of obtaining a bride was kidnapping. Even when proof of kidnapping was evident, the lady in question did not always see justice. Margaret Audley, daughter of the Hugh de Audley, was abducted by Ralph, Lord Stafford, who was an ally of King Edward III. She was much wealthier than Stafford, and although her parents complained to the King, Edward sided with Stafford. To appease her parents, the king made her father the First Earl of Gloucester and later appointed Stafford the Earl of Stafford. The king provided no restitution to Margaret herself.⁵⁸

In another tale worthy of modern day television, Margaret de Clare was married to Piers Gaveston, King Edward II's “favorite”, at the age of fourteen. Some historians argue that he not only engaged in extramarital relations but also had a homosexual relationship with the king. Margaret's uncle was the earl of Gloucester to whom she complained to often about Gaveston's actions. Since Gaveston was a foreigner with access to the king's ear and she was a high-born English lady and deserved a high-born English husband, most nobles were not a fan of Margaret's marriage to him that caused even more problems throughout

⁵⁷ Angela Lucas, *Women in the Middle Ages: Religion, Marriage and Letters* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), p.96.

⁵⁸ *Calendar of the Patent Rolls Preserved in the Public Record Office, 1334-1358*, (hereafter CPR) (London, 1891-1963), p.283; available online at <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/003914672>, accessed 12 June 2016.

the country.⁵⁹ When her husband was executed six months after the birth of their daughter, the king arranged for her to marry another of his supporters, Hugh de Audley. It was due to the pleas of Margaret that when Audley was captured in the Battle of Boroughbridge during the Despenser War (1321-22), his life was spared. Instead, de Audley was imprisoned, and she was sent to Sempringham Priory. When her husband escaped from his captors, she was released from the priory and was reunited with him.⁶⁰

Yet another lady who suffered because of family politics was Alice de Warenne, heir to the earldom of Surrey. She was married to Edmund FitzAlan, ninth earl of Arundel. FitzAlan was a prominent man, holding positions in Parliament, as Justice of Wales and as Warden of the Welsh Marches. Unfortunately, he was beheaded by Queen Isabella, and all of the estates and titles were forfeited to the crown. While Alice was not implicated in any way, she also lost her titles and wealth.⁶¹ Thankfully, these were later returned to their son. Children were affected in these changes of finances and standing as well as wives. Anne de Mortimer, daughter of Countess Alianore Holland, and who would later become the countess of Cambridge, was extremely poor after her father's death.⁶² Her brothers were taken to be raised at court, but she, her

⁵⁹ Underhill, *For Her Good Estate*. p.8-9.

⁶⁰ J.S. Hamilton, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, retrieved from <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/39593?docPos=1> on January 19, 2017.

⁶¹ C. Given-Wilson, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, retrieved from <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/9529?docPos=1> on January 18, 2017.

⁶² R.A. Griffiths, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* retrieved from <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/19344?docPos=3> on January 20, 2017.

sister and mother were left impoverished.⁶³ She later gave birth to Richard Plantagenet, third Duke of York, so did recover just fine from her childhood situation.

While generally a king's command was final, occasionally, a monarch could be convinced to modify an order. Alice de Lacy, upon the execution of the first husband for treason, was taken into custody by the king. In order to pacify him, she turned over many of the lands she inherited from her father to the crown. She still remained in royal custody, but was free from trial or possible execution.⁶⁴

Monarchs were involved in the lives and marriages of their nobles. When the daughters of Roger Mortimer were married, "the young king of England journeyed to Hereford...there were solemn tournaments there at which the queen mother was present."⁶⁵ Even marriage contracts were important since money, lands, and materials would change hands depending on who was marrying whom. In the case of the marriage agreement between the Earl of Hereford's son and his future bride, "Lady Margaret, Queen of England," was in attendance to witness the contract.⁶⁶

During the fourteenth century, more opportunities to rise to the rank of countess were available, but with this came the restrictions and privileges of that class. The promise of wealth and power was too great a lure for many families

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ J.R. Maddicott, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, retrieved from <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/27195/54461> on January 19, 2017.

⁶⁵ Ward, *Women of the English Nobility and Gentry 1066-1500*, p.45.

⁶⁶ Ibid. p.29.

and daughters were sacrificed for the cause. Many of these daughters, however, rose to the occasion by making themselves valued members of their society whether through their power, passion or placement.

The lives of noblewomen who remained unmarried are still little known since, in many cases, there are few records that describe their day-to-day lives, unless they chose to become a nun. As nuns, “their fate would depend greatly on what provision was made for them.”⁶⁷ Although legally she was able to hold property once she reached her majority and manage her own affairs, she would have been dependent on her family if she did not have her own funds or housing. In most cases it was in the best interest of aristocratic women to marry and to marry well so as to be a boon to their family rather than a life-long burden.

The Neville family made the best use of the female relations. Thus, “John, third Baron Neville, who by judicious marriage of his many sisters and daughters, converted a distinguished northern baronial family into a dynasty equal in wealth and power to the royal houses of York and Lancaster.”⁶⁸ It was his son who became the first earl of Westmoreland and married the half-sister of Henry IV. Later, Neville females held at least seven countess or duchess titles and were mothers to two future kings.

Occasionally, it was the woman who was the ‘prize’ and not the pawn. Mary de Bohun and her sister were the heirs of her father’s estate. Since he had

⁶⁷ Mate, *Daughters, Wives and Widows*. p.37.

⁶⁸ Lacey Baldwin Smith, *This Realm of England* (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1988), p.38.

been the earl of Hereford, he had substantial amounts of lands and funds. Both ladies were married early; Mary to Henry Bolingbroke who would later become Henry IV. Eleanor was betrothed at age ten to Lionel of Antwerp, brother of John of Gaunt, although the marriage was not consummated until she was twenty.⁶⁹ Unfortunately, Mary, like many women in the period, bore more children than was good for her. Her first child was born when she was just thirteen and her seventh when she was twenty-four.⁷⁰ She died giving birth to the last child before Henry became the King, so never experienced the joy of queenship.

Learning to be an accomplished lady was the most important duty of a young noblewoman. Once she gained skills in managing a manor, directing servants, and maintaining decorum, her parents had a much better chance securing the best marriage possible. The marriages of these young women consumed much time among noble families as they considered this one of their most important duties as a parent and to ensure that their family name prospered in future generations.

⁶⁹ W.M. Ormrod, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* Retrieved from <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/16750> on Jan 17, 2017.

⁷⁰ Jewell, *Women in Medieval England*. p 142.

CHAPTER THREE

THE WIFE AND LADY OF THE HOUSE

While one might expect that countesses of the fourteenth century were fragile, giggly, and empty-headed women due to the fact that they were married off young and not allowed much education, this assumption is inaccurate. Instead, “ladies of the manor were well-trained and responsible managers who ran complicated estates. Because their husbands were often absent... responsibility for the ongoing life of the fiefs fell on female shoulders.”⁷¹ It was very rare for a parent to reside with an adult child and even rarer for adult siblings to reside in the same residence, so a wife had to depend on her husband or herself to manage their estates.

In addition to enjoying wealth and title, countesses and their daughters often held positions at court. These ladies were important assets to their families in discovering information about royals, alliances, and patronage opportunities. Occasionally, these ladies were “appointed as castellans during the later middle ages” and kept control of both castles and vast landed resources.⁷² The families that understood the importance of daughters in this fashion were some of the most prominent families of the era.

Some wives remained at home to tend the holdings, but others traveled with their husbands on their trips. The nobles often followed the trends set by

⁷¹ Fox, *The Medieval Woman*. 7.

⁷² Ward, *Women in England in the Middle Ages*, p.111.

royalty and there are several examples of queens following the king on campaign. For instance, Edward III's Queen Philippa traveled extensively with her husband, as revealed by where she gave birth to her children: "two at Windsor Castle, one at Waltham, one at Hatfield by Doncaster, one at King's Lanley, one at Antwerp, and one at Ghent."⁷³

Because many of these households traveled from one estate to another, the chest was one of the most common and appreciated pieces of furniture as it was used as both luggage and storage. When traveling, countesses would either ride on horseback or in a "covered wagon...although the ride was far from comfortable".⁷⁴ (Figure 3.1) Elizabeth de Burgh had a train that "included 134 horses, 28 hackneys and 22 oxen" when she moved between her estates.⁷⁵

"A medieval wife played an important economic role...she was practically a business manager."⁷⁶ A countess at her own domicile would supervise a large contingent of staff including ladies-in-waiting, children's staff such as nannies, and household pages, in addition to estate managers and other 'non-domestic' staff. She would also be aware of where everyone fit into the hierarchy and know how to place each one at the dinner table or any other event. When dining in their great hall, seating would have been in order of importance with the earl and countess sitting at a head table and everyone else sitting by rank along the room.

⁷³ Joan Evans, *The Flowering of the Middle Age* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985) p.131.

⁷⁴ Jeffery Singman and Will McLean, *Daily Life in Chaucer's England* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995), p.90.

⁷⁵ Underhill, *For Her Good Estate*. p.55.

⁷⁶ Lucas, *Women in the Middle Ages*. p.57.

(Figure 3.2) She would know that a bishop would be seated with the same honor as an earl and who could not be seated near another because they were at odds. A good Christian was required to provide good hospitality to their guests. Depending on rank, guests were afforded special accommodations and treated kindly; especially if they were of a higher status in title, politics or within the family.⁷⁷

The duty of running an estate was not gender specific as both the husband and wife needed to know how to handle issues as they arose. Both genders would have a male clerk or steward to write their letters, reconcile their accounts, or manage their estates when they were otherwise occupied.⁷⁸ In addition, they might also have a treasurer to manage their funds or provide daily oversight to expenditures. The number of people in the household who could spend money could be just the treasurer or could involve many others such as the head cook, the countess's wardrobe official, or the agent in charge of the stable.

Noblewomen were raised with expectations that throughout their lives they would help to further the future of that family. They were conscious of their place in society and the duties required of them. Often, close ties remained to their own family even after marriage. This can be seen even in mundane objects such as wax seals. Wax seals were used to close missives as an "unsealed document

⁷⁷ Mark Gardiner, "Buttery and Pantry and Their Antecedents: Idea and Architecture in the English Medieval House" in *Medieval Domesticity: Home, Housing and Household in Medieval England*, ed. Maryanne Kowaleski and P.J. P. Goldberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p.38.

⁷⁸ Jewell, *Women in Medieval England*. p.129.

was in fact regarded as suspect”.⁷⁹ Beginning in the thirteenth century, women with some amount of power had their own official seals, usually in the shape of an oval. “The noblewoman’s sense of her identity was also reflected in her seal. This emphasized her social standing and authority.”⁸⁰ Often these women used their own heraldry or coat-of-arms on the seal or selected emblems such as a lily if they had no heraldry of their own. Occasionally, they might use their father’s mark if it was superior to their husband’s. “The use of the husband’s arms was common and Margaret de Neville included the shields of both her husbands”.⁸¹ In the thirteenth century, it became more common for upper-class ladies to have their own heraldry. It was easy to have this symbol put onto a metal seal in order to insure the security of the document being sent. However, it was most common for a woman to bear the heraldry of her father until she married and then to bear her arms that showed her father’s arms and her husband’s arms combined.

In addition to having their own seals, women could submit petitions to the crown and earn royal favors. Elizabeth de Burgh petitioned the king for return of a valuable vessel that had been taken by another noble but was in current use by the king. The king agreed to pay her for the vessel.⁸² In a 1312 case, the countess of Angus gained protection from the king taking “the corn, or other

⁷⁹ Michael Pastoureau, *Heraldry- Its Origins and Meaning* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 1997), p.21.

⁸⁰ Ward, *Women in England in the Middle Ages* p.101.

⁸¹ Ibid. p.142.

⁸² Underhill, *For Her Good Estate*. p.47.

goods of the countess, or of her men”.⁸³ In another instance, a “pardon, at the supplication of the king’s kinswoman, the countess of Hereford, to Richard, son of John de Helkham, ‘barbour’ of Lenn, for the death of Ralph Portour” granted in 1378.⁸⁴ According to Underhill, “such acts (for others) were not unusual; intervention for favors bound ties of loyalty more tightly.”⁸⁵

Other benefits for women were possible as well. In fact, there were several countesses appointed to the Order of the Garter in the fourteenth century. According to the United Kingdom’s Royal website, “The Order of the Garter is the most senior and the oldest British Order of Chivalry and was founded by Edward III in 1348. During the Middle Ages ladies were associated with the Order, although unlike today they did not enjoy full membership.”⁸⁶ This was a huge accolade for these women who were respected by royals and nobles alike and therefore an asset to their families.

Another way a lady could be of service to their country and their family was to act as a royal liaison. If she was in service to a queen or princess, her duties might vary, but she would be expected to stay near the royal in order to keep her company and help with whatever she may need throughout the day (and often the night). Joan of Bar, countess of Surrey, had no dower lands and “frequently traveled abroad, occasionally acting as a royal agent” as a way to

⁸³ *CPR* (London, 1891-1963), Edward III, Volume 10, 1354-1358, p. 382. Available online at <http://sdr.lib.uiowa.edu/patentrolls/e2v1/body/Edward2vol1page0455.pdf> Accessed Aug 31, 2016.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* Vol. 35. p.151.

⁸⁵ Underhill, *For Her Good Estate*. p.22.

⁸⁶ British Monarchy, “Order of the Garter” Retrieved from <http://www.royal.gov.uk/monarchUK/honours/Orderofthegarter/orderofthegarter.aspx>

gain funds and keep occupied.⁸⁷ Margaret de Clare, Countess of Cornwall and Gloucester, held the position of sheriff of Rutland for six years! Margaret of Brotherton, Countess of Norfolk, not only inherited the Earldom of Norfolk, but also the position of Earl Marshal. This is the eighth of the Great Offices of State and holds courts of chivalry. The person in this job also acts as the head of the College of Arms which includes both genealogy and heraldry. She is the only woman to have ever held this position in England. Because of her importance, she was awarded the title of Duchess of Norfolk in 1397.

While they could inherit lands, title and wealth, there was still much that countesses could not do. Women had little “testamentary freedom”.⁸⁸ This is the understanding that individuals have the right to decide how their possessions will be distributed after death. Women, even ones with titles in their own right, were not summoned to Parliament and were not allowed to be in the government. However, they did influence politics in other less obvious ways.

Some women would maintain their own households.⁸⁹ Isabel le Despenser lived on her manor lands and managed them herself after her annulment from the tenth Earl of Arundel/Surrey. This often was the case if the couple were estranged or if the husband was traveling with the court. Some men apparently did not underestimate the usefulness of their spouse. They very often would leave their wife in charge of the estate when traveling, indicating a trust of

⁸⁷ Underhill, *For Her Good Estate*. p.107.

⁸⁸ Coulton, *Medieval Panorama*. p.55.

⁸⁹ Jewell, *Women in Medieval England*. p.142.

her abilities to handle situations that might come up in his absence. In fact, “the ladies of the manor were well-trained and responsible managers who ran complicated estates.”⁹⁰ When men were away on campaign or fulfilling their obligations at court, the wife ‘would frequently be in sole charge of at least the domestic household and often...the whole complex barony.’⁹¹ These women were not able to run to the local store if they had not planned well and needed some item.

In addition to organizing their household, they “were sometimes involved in warfare during times of rebellion, when they acted alongside their husbands.”⁹² Occasionally it was necessary for a wife to lead people in combat if the husband was away at court or on a campaign. She must be able to lead the defense if their manor was attacked by a neighbor, which was more likely to occur when the husband was absent. (Figure 3.3) In addition to defending their home, some had to defend their people. The Countess of Hereford petitioned the king for a pardon of a ‘barbour’ for the death of another man. The king granted this pardon. This showed her mercy and power to all within her lands.⁹³

When Queen Philippa rode to battle with the Scots, the “court ladies were fascinated by all the attention to military affairs”.⁹⁴ In these situations, women were praised for their resourcefulness, not vilified for turning to ‘manly’ actions.

⁹⁰ Fox, *The Medieval Woman*. p.7.

⁹¹ Michael Powicke, *The Borzoi History of England Volume II 1154-1485—The Community of the Realm*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1973), p.77.

⁹² Ward, *Women in England in the Middle Ages*. p.111.

⁹³ CPR 1232-1582. p.228. Available online at <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/003914672> accessed 9 December 2016

⁹⁴ Barbara Softly, *The Queens of England*, (New York: Bell Publishing Company. 1979), p.37.

This creates an issue for historians trying to get at the truth about how women of the time were viewed, and how they were expected to act.

Even countesses of other countries impacted English politics. The daughter of Margaret de Burgh, second Countess of Ulster, married Robert the Bruce of Scotland. During Edward I's war with Scotland, Edward was offended by Isabelle MacDuff, Countess of Buchan, who crowned Robert the Bruce as King of Scotland. As a member of Clan MacDuff, she had the right to crown Scotland's royals. However, once captured, Edward showed his displeasure by stating, "Let her be closely confined in an abode of stone and iron made in the shape of a cross, and let her be hung up out of doors in the open air at Berwick, that both in life and after her death, she may be a spectacle and eternal reproach to travellers."⁹⁵ "It is not, however, absolutely clear what was the nature of the caging. In addition, one might wonder why, if it was so outrageous, there was so little interest in it in medieval Scots sources."⁹⁶

Of course, not all nobles were pillars of the community. Extortion was common and usually involved using household members to beat up people for money or favor. Banning people from a region was common when landholders argued, and it was not uncommon for the nobles to get away with murder. Abduction was not unheard of and rarely resulted in the accused party being imprisoned or harshly punished. In many cases, it was the men who organized

⁹⁵ Retrieved from www.educationscotland.gov.uk/scotlandshistory/wardsofindependence/isobeloffife/index.asp on July 22, 2015.

⁹⁶ Gwen Seabourne, *Imprisoning Medieval Women* (New York: Ashgate Publishing, 2011), p.75. Retrieved 9 December 2016, from <http://www.myilibrary.com.libproxy.clemson.edu?ID=311550>

these, but not always as there are several examples of royal and noble women taking control and having a husband or enemy removed in some possibly illegal manner, such as Queen Isabella who plotted openly against her husband.⁹⁷

These are examples of women acting outside of the norm of their society, women who took the field of battle or ruled lands in her own right. It shows that the women were capable of doing great things. Often, men believed that these women were not 'normal' females, but were ordained by God to be in charge for a time. Male chauvinism extends as far back as one would care to research, but this is another example of people believing what they are taught as a child. Today, most of us would not find women in leadership roles to be an odd thing, but we must add these stories to the larger picture of what life was like for most women in the Middle Ages, not just the few that managed to break out of their confines of loving mother and proper wife.

In order to help women be a proper wife, there were many books on courtesy published during this period. Men were told that:

“ȝyf þou euer þy wyfe lay
Yn tyme of penaunce, to seye fleshly
ȝyf þou be custumable þar-to,
Þou synnest gretly,⁹⁸
 (“If you ever lay by your wife,
That is carnally, in time of penance,
If you are in the habit of doing so,
You sin greatly”)⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Israel Smith Clare, *The Unrivaled History of the World: Medieval History* (Chicago: The Werner Company, 1893), p.495.

⁹⁸ Robert Mannyng of Brunne. “Handlyng Synne”. (2009-2012), accessed September 7, 2015, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/c/cme/AHA2735.0001.001/1:3.6?rgn=div2;view=fulltext>

⁹⁹ Lucas, *Women in the Middle Ages*. p.112.

With advice on how to dress, how much to speak and how to act both in public and private, noblewomen were groomed to be a desired wife by a high-powered male. If the lady were also well-dowered, so much the better. (Figure 3.4)

Husbands had control over their wives which included chastising them, by striking if necessary. *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*, written in France, but widely available in England, tells a story about a wife who speaks impolitely to her husband in public. He “*smote her with his fyste to the erthe. And smote her with his foote on the visage so that he brake her nose, by whiche she was euer after al disfigured.*”¹⁰⁰ There were laws protecting wives from too harsh treatment, but for the most part, the men were in charge of how their wife acted and were well within their rights to discipline her, but “only to a moderate and reasonable degree”.¹⁰¹

Some wives never got to experience a true marriage at all. Homosexuality was considered a major sin and was covered up by marriage. One potential example comes from the life of Eleanor de Clare who was married to Hugh le Despenser (younger) in 1306. There has been much speculation about an affair between Hugh the younger and Edward II, although no evidence other than Despenser’s power at court has been shown.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ William Caxton, *The Book of the Knight in the Tower*, ed. M.Y. Offard (London: M.Y. Oxford, 1971), p.35.

¹⁰¹ Emma Hawkes, “The ‘Reasonable’ Laws of Domestic Violence” from Eva Salisbury, Georgiana Donavin and Merrall Llewelyn Price, *Domestic Violence in Medieval Texts*. (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2002),

¹⁰² Seymour Phillips, *Edward II*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), p.98

There were also happy marriages between nobles. When Alice Hayles, Countess of Norfolk, died, her husband Thomas founded a chantry in Suffolk in her memory.¹⁰³ When Blanche, countess of four earldoms, died (probably from the Black Death) her husband, John of Gaunt, held a glorious funeral for her. He then commissioned a book in her honor by Chaucer, *The Book of the Duchess*. Gaunt hosted an annual commemoration each year on the day of her death and finally, even though he married twice more, he chose to be buried next to Blanche upon his passing.¹⁰⁴

There were, of course, women who had affairs, but it was most important in a feudal society to know that the child born of your wife was your own. The firstborn son would inherit a title, the lands, and the responsibility of carrying on the family name and honor. If there was any doubt of the child's paternity, there could be dire consequences. However, in an age where even kings had to sometimes hold court in the bedchamber due to lack of household space and privacy, a woman would have had to work hard to have an affair.

The church also admonished married couples and taught that sexual relations were for the purpose of procreation and not for enjoyment. Some clergy made the act of marital sex a sin if the couple enjoyed the act or did it at a time

¹⁰³ Brad Verity, "Love Matches and Contracted Misery: Thomas of Brotherton and His Daughters" from the Foundation for Medieval Genealogy retrieved from <http://fmg.ac/phocadownload/userupload/foundations2/JN-02-02/091Brothtn.pdf> on January 19, 2017, p.103.

¹⁰⁴ D.W. Robertson, Jr., "The Historical Setting of Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*" from *Essays in Medieval Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980). pp. 235-256 and 372-375) retrieved from msuweb.montclair.edu/~furr/chaucer/dwrholmesfs.html on January 17, 2017.

when pregnancy was not possible (such as when the wife was already pregnant). However, we know that the populace did not all agree with this. Chaucer's Wife of Bath is plain when she says that the reproductive organs were made

“for bothe,
This is to seye, for office and for ese
Of engendrure,...

(for both,
that is for service and for the pleasure
of procreation)”¹⁰⁵

When a marriage had reached the end, although modern-style divorce was never an option, marriages could be nullified for several reasons. Barrenness, for example “was not ground for divorce, but it may have been a motive for seeking extrication from a marriage.”¹⁰⁶ With enough money doled out to the correct people and an excuse that they were too closely related to be married, the wife could be set aside for a new and hopefully fertile spouse. Yet we often believe that the termination of a marriage is a modern convenience. In fact, there were popes who chastised countries for having so many broken marriages using technicalities such as suddenly discovering they were related. In the unsuccessful case of Joan of Bar, who was married to the Earl of Surrey as a child, the divorce proceedings state that that she was “related to him in the third or fourth degree, which is forbidden by law.”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Lucas, *Women in the Middle Ages*. p.115.

¹⁰⁶ Jewell, *Women in Medieval England*. p.141.

¹⁰⁷ Ward, *Women of the English Nobility*, p.66.

Divorce was rarely allowed and then only under special circumstances which worked to the favor of some women, but against others. Although, in the case of the aforementioned Joan of Bar, her life improved even without a divorce. She was married to John de Warenne, seventh Earl of Surrey when she was age 10 or 11 and by all accounts he was a fairly mean husband. He abandoned her and tried to petition for a divorce that was not granted. She was able to serve at court and therefore had a purpose and more welcoming place to live than staying at home.

Philippa de Coucy and her husband, Robert de Vere the ninth Earl of Oxford, were married when they were both 9. Twenty childless years later, he set her aside for his mistress who was one of the queen's ladies in waiting. The Pope granted the divorce and Robert married Agnes. This created a huge scandal and set families against one another with Robert's mother taking Philippa's side and bringing her ex-daughter-in-law into her household. Because of the controversy, in 1389, the Pope declared the divorce invalid.¹⁰⁸

Although marital relations ranged from good to bad, a married countess had important functions to fulfill. The role of a wife, mother and lady of the house was a busy lifestyle full of responsibilities to ensure the welfare of many others. Women were trained from a young age to handle these tasks as well as other

¹⁰⁸ James Ross, "Seditious Activities- the Conspiracy of Maud de Vere, Countess of Oxford, 1403-4" in *Authority and Subversions* edited by Linda Clark, (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2003), p.26.

issues that might arise. Although there was little formal education, these women were intelligent, wise, and knew how to get things done.

CHAPTER FOUR

WIDOWHOOD AND DEATH

All widows, not merely countesses, merit their own amount of attention due to the fact that many were heads of households and political women. Widows were a paradox in English society. Some estimates suggest that widows were in control of ten percent or more of the households, as such, these ladies had the responsibility and power to delve into the man's role of farmer, overseer, and decision maker for all of her landholdings.¹⁰⁹ The widow worked to meet any obligations that her overlord, the king, might set to her; she would make decisions for her estates about land management, tenant relations, and grants to charities. They no longer had to gain their husbands' permission or to rely on them for funds to hire new staff or purchase new items. "Clearly then, the best years of a woman's life in the later middle ages were those of her widowhood."¹¹⁰

However, widowhood was not a happy or powerful occasion for some women who had always had a man to watch out for their needs. In some cases, widows had received woefully inadequate training and could not manage their holdings, having never had such responsibility before. Widows were "as liable as any other landowner to fulfill the obligations for their holdings" such as providing an army when the king required, paying taxes or occasionally to appearing at the

¹⁰⁹ Leyster, *Medieval Women*, p.168.

¹¹⁰ Rowena E. Archer, "Rich Old Ladies: The Problem of Late Medieval Dowagers" in *Property and Politics: Essays in Later Medieval English History*, Tony Pollard, Ed. (Basingstoke, United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 1984),

king's court.¹¹¹ This gave them the opportunity to place their household members in positions such as local judges or town councils, even if they themselves could not serve in official positions as women. In this chapter, I will address the unique roles and responsibilities that countesses experienced as widows.

Widows maintained friendships with a wide variety of individuals. These were important, not just for the social benefits, but also to maintain business connections and to keep abreast of what was happening in other parts of the country. Elizabeth de Burgh, Joan of Bar, Queen Isabella, and Mary de St Pol enjoyed a tight friendship based on common interests and concerns.¹¹² Many friends were people local to the manors with whom they would work and live. As they grew older, their wisdom became a draw for royalty and other nobles alike forming tight friendships with other significant persons.¹¹³ In much the same way, becoming a 'beloved aunt' to nieces and nephews ensured visits by young people, further connections, and greater power.

The life of Joan de Bohun exemplifies the potential political power and great access to wealth enjoyed by a widowed countess. Married to Humphrey de Bohun (7th Earl of Hereford, 6th Earl of Essex, 2nd Earl of Northampton and Constable of England), she was widowed at age 25, but did not remarry. Her two daughters married well - one to a duke and one to Henry Bolingbroke who later

¹¹¹ Ibid, p.174.

¹¹² Underhill, *For Her Good Estate*. p.103.

¹¹³ Ibid. p.104.

became Henry IV (unfortunately, the daughter died before seeing this achieved). Joan had a massive dower which made her a large and powerful landowner. Industrious, she encouraged dying and weaving wool cloth on all of her estates which she was able to sell for a great profit. In 1400 John Holland, 1st Duke of Exeter, Earl of Huntington conspired to murder Henry IV (Joan's former son-in-law) and once captured, Joan ordered him to be beheaded. This caused both Henry IV and Henry V to give her even more property.

Almost all countesses who were widowed maintained their own household of servants, family, and possibly wards (as opposed to less well-off widows who lived with their children or other relations), but they did not always have a "completely free hand" on their dower lands as the land still belonged to the family.¹¹⁴ The 'dower' was provided by the husband or his family to support the wife if the husband were to die first. Thus, while the widow could enjoy the profits from the lands, she was not allowed to sell off any part as it and upon her death, it reverted back to the family. However, widows still had much more freedom and options than they had as wives and, if they were cunning, could take great advantage of the opportunity.

Some countesses made decisions that went against the King, who was their liege-lord. In the late fourteenth century, the Countess of Oxford was a major supporter of King Richard II. She made badges for his knights and other

¹¹⁴ Ward, *Women in England in the Middle Ages*, p.106.

household members to wear and “distributed them in place of the King.”¹¹⁵

However, shortly after the King was imprisoned by Henry Bolingbroke (King Henry IV) and died, the countess spread rumors that Richard was alive and on his way to re-claim his throne in order to garner support. Henry IV took a dim view of this interference. He had her lands and goods confiscated and put her under a austere house arrest. Some of the people who were seen as being in collusion with her were imprisoned.

Fighting over dower and other land rights was a fairly common experience for a widow and her clerk. When the dower was not turned over to the widow in a timely manner or was in a lesser condition than expected, she had to take the heir of the estate to court. Unfortunately, women could not “prosecute any plea against another concerning her dower without her warrantor”¹¹⁶ There were, however, many dower-related cases that came through the courts. It is easy to automatically side with the widow, but some seemed to ‘collect’ dowers over the course of their lives. And some of these ladies lived to a ripe old age, such as “Elizabeth de Burgh, lady of Clare (d. 1360), who administered her lands alone for thirty-eight years.”¹¹⁷

If a countess was well placed and wealthy, and was not trying to overthrow the new king, she might be able to obtain wardships of young nobles. These nobles might be orphans or might have parents in exile for one reason or

¹¹⁵ H.T. Riley, Ed. “Thomae Walsingham Historia Anglicana, 2 vols.” Rolls Series, London.
Excerpt from Jennifer Ward, ed. *Women of the English Nobility and Gentry 1066-1500*.
(Manchester: University Press, 1995).

¹¹⁶ Leyster, *Medieval Women*. p.169-170.

¹¹⁷ Archer, “Brotherton, Margaret”, p.8.

another. In many cases, the mother might still be alive and able, but not have custody of her children, because feudal law privileged the father and masculine liege-lords. As the only child of a wealthy baron, Maud Chaworth became the ward of Eleanor of Castile, wife of King Edward I. Maud went on to make a good match by marrying the earl of Lancaster.¹¹⁸

For those widows who did have custody of their young children or influence over their grown children, there was much room to expand the family fortune. The third husband of Joan, Countess of Kent, was her cousin Prince Edward, the Black Prince, whom she married by special permission from the Pope. After the death of her husband and then King Edward III, her son became King Richard II at the age of ten. Joan was the power behind the throne of the young king and much beloved by the people of England.

In addition to their own children, wardships of other people's children was a way to make good connections, and for the less scrupulous, to add to their private coffers. One could be a ward of the youth's land or of the body, i.e. guardian of the child. The guardian of the land enjoyed the entire profits of the estate subject to the mere maintenance of the heir; wardship of the body also carried with it the lucrative right to arrange the heir's marriage."¹¹⁹ One of the

¹¹⁸ Kathryn Warner, "Maud de Chaworth and her daughters" retrieved from <http://edwardthesecond.blogspot.com/2007/04/maud-de-chaworth-and-her-daughters.html> on January 16, 2017.

¹¹⁹ Sue Sheridan Walker, "Widow and Ward: The Feudal Law of Child Custody in Medieval England" in *Women in Medieval Society* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976), p.104. Accessed at http://historyonline.chadwyck.co.uk/getImage?productsuffix=_studyunits&action=printvie

duties of the guardian was to arrange the ward's marriage. Piers Gaveston, 1st Earl of Cornwall, gained richly from his wardship of Roger Mortimer including practically selling him as a husband.

Yet another way to remain well connected was to be the godmother of a child from a powerful family. Katherine Mortimer, Countess of Warwick served as godmother to Philippa, Countess of Ulster. Katherine was an important figure in the royal court, so this relationship was probably a boon to both families in creating another tie.¹²⁰ Seeking favor from the monarchs was a legitimate way to handle issues that fell upon women of this rank. Margaret Wake of Liddel, wife of Edmund of Woodstock, Earl of Kent, was confined in Salisbury Castle with her children after the execution of her husband for treason in 1330.¹²¹ When Edward III became king, he took them in and treated them as family until her death from the plague in 1349. In another case, when Eleanor de Clare's husband was executed in 1326, she was confined to the Tower and her three daughters were forced to become nuns. She was freed in 1328 and some lands were returned to her possession. Interestingly, she was 'kidnapped' soon after by William la Zouche, who had been one of her husband's captors. There is some speculation that it was an elopement, but afterwards, her lands were re-confiscated for the

w&in=gif&out=pdf&src=/pci/c424-1976-003-03-000009/conv/c424-1976-003-03-000009.pdf&IE=.pdf on December 9, 2016.

¹²⁰ Agnes Strickland, *Lives of the Queens of England from the Norman Conquest: With Anecdotes of the Courts: First Published From Official Records and Other Authentic Documents, Private as Well as Public*. Volume II. (London, 1840), p. 295.

¹²¹ *CPR 1327-1330*, p. 499 Retrieved from <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015031081071;view=1up;seq=517> on January 19, 2017.

marriage, and she was imprisoned on the charge of stealing jewels from the Tower. Again, when Edward III became king, he freed her and returned her property.¹²²

Becoming friends with royals was not always done for politics or money. The children of King Edward III spent a great deal of time at the residences of Mary of St Pol, Countess of Pembroke, not only because the adults enjoyed each other's company, but also because of the Countess was born in France as was the Queen Isabella, King Edward's mother.¹²³

If a king wanted a widow to remarry, she had few choices other than to obey. Although some went through being imprisoned or impoverished because of their husbands' actions, or by being desired only for their titles or being used in scandal like the Countess of Salisbury,¹²⁴ countesses were encouraged to remarry after a suitable time of mourning if they were young enough to continue bearing children. The third husband of Margaret Holland, Countess of Somerset's, was the nephew of her first husband. While there is no record of her reason for wedding him, she did become a duchess upon the marriage, so in all likelihood it was a political move upwards and probably not a love match.

¹²² Calendar of the Close Rolls preserved in the Public Record Office. Edward III 1330-1333, page 14, retrieved from <http://www.archive.org/stream/calendarclosero02offigoog#page/n26/mode/2up> on January 20, 2017.

¹²³ Orme, *Medieval Children*. p.122

¹²⁴ C.M. Yonge, *Cameos from English History-from Rollo to Edward II* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1896), p.386.

Occasionally, however, a widow could sometimes pay a fee to her overlord in order to marry the man of her choice.¹²⁵ Or she might pay the king in order to remain unmarried.¹²⁶ Several widows would even use their new wealth and independence to attract a young suitor. Some countesses willingly married men of lower rank much to the chagrin of their families who preferred her to rise, not fall, in social status. “Joan of Acre, daughter of Edward I and dowager countess of Gloucester, was widowed at just twenty-three and “before the end of a year, she secretly married her squire Ralph de Monthermer and her father only discovered the union when he had promised her to the Count of Savory”.¹²⁷

As we saw earlier, being kidnapped was a danger for well-connected women as they were significant playing pieces in the royal world. The heiress Alice de Lacy became the 4th Countess of Lincoln and 5th Countess of Salisbury which made her a important woman on the marriage-market. After her marriage to Thomas, Earl of Lancaster, Leicester and Derby, he controlled five earldoms, making him not only a wealthy man, but powerful as well. Regrettably, marriage and money do not always make for a happy life. Thomas had a mistress that he spent most of his time visiting and with whom he produced two sons. Alice, unfortunately, had no children and lived mostly alone in a castle in Yorkshire until her kidnapping by the Earl of Surrey (or possibly some of his knights) in 1317, probably in an effort to humiliate her husband. Another speculation is that the

¹²⁵ Woolgar, *The Great Household*. p.97.

¹²⁶ Judith M. Bennett and Warren C. Hollister, *Medieval Europe-A Short Story* (New York: McGraw-Hill Inc., 2006), p.183.

¹²⁷ Bennett, *Public Power and Authority*. p.386.

capture was really designed by the King in order to bring the Earl of Lancaster under control.¹²⁸ There are at “least six contemporary but conflicting” accounts of the 1317 kidnapping. Again, even within period sources, there is no agreement. Was Alice kidnapped and “ravished (rapta fuit)”, did she “depart... (recisset) [into] the custody of ...the earl of Warenne” or was she just a pawn in a live chess match between a King and his Earls?¹²⁹ Modern people may never know.

Years later, after she had been widowed by her first and second husbands, she was abducted again by Sir Hugh de Frene who raped her and forced a marriage upon her in an effort to gain her money and lands. “A letter from the Pope seems to reproach her for ‘allowing it’ to happen”.¹³⁰ As with her first abduction, Alice’s perspective is impossible to know. There is still speculation that she was a willing accomplice to this kidnapping as a way of marrying de Frene, but that is unlikely since she took a vow of celibacy after her second marriage ended.

Apart from remarriage, another choice that might be made by a widow would be to join a convent. “Because dowries were required, nuns usually came from the upper classes”.¹³¹ An even more unusual – and scandalous - choice was to be the mistress of a man. Eleanor of Lancaster, (also known as Eleanor

¹²⁸ Le Strange Family website; Caroline Dunn, *Stolen Women in medieval England: Rape, Abduction and Adultery, 1100-1500*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p.163.

¹²⁹ Katheryn Warner, “Abandonment and Abduction: The Eventful Life of Alice de Lacy” Retrieved from <http://edwardthesecond.blogspot.com/2007/01/abandonment-and-abduction-eventful-life.html>

¹³⁰ Fox, *The Medieval Woman*. p.9.

Plantagenet) Countess of Arundel, became the mistress of Richard FitzAlan, 10th Earl of Arundel after the death of her husband in 1342. It appears that the relationship was well known throughout the nobility. Fortunately, she was able to marry him shortly thereafter. During his life, he was able to purchase important wardships and high-level husbands for all of his daughters. The Earl lent money willingly to the Crown who repaid him not only in money but in favors. He had beautiful castles and manors as well as funding a chapel for his youngest son who was in the church. "At his death... [he]...was probably the richest man in England."¹³² In what must have been a love match, they died in the same year and are buried together with their effigies holding hands.

That women in the Middle Ages had a short lifespan is yet another fallacy. While it is true that women died quite regularly in childbirth, once a woman was past the dangers of her childbearing years, she could expect to have a fairly long life. Marie St. Pol, Countess of Pembroke, was 74 at her death while Margaret de Bohun, Countess of Devon, was 80.¹³³ Unfortunately, this could lead to trouble with her family. "During the thirteenth century the widow's rights were gradually extended and...described as 'one of the first great stages in the emancipation of women.'"¹³⁴ The Magna Carta declared that a widow's dower portion of her late husband's estate to be one third of his holdings.¹³⁵ While she

¹³² Chris Given-Wilson, "Wealth and Credit, Public and Private: The Earls of Arundel 1306-1397" *The English History Review*, Col 106, No 418 (Jan 1991), p.1.

¹³³ Woolgar, *The Great Household*. p.97

¹³⁴ Rowena E. Archer, "Rich Old Ladies" p. 17.

¹³⁵ Jewell, *Women in Medieval England*. p.123.

was not allowed to sell the land, she was entitled to all of the revenues produced on those lands.

In some cases, this provided a serious drain on the head-of-household's finances which led to more bad feelings against women. Not only had she passed the useful time of her life, but now she was costing her descendant a large portion of his proceeds. If more than one widow were still living, it could create further hard feelings. In one case, a widow married her late-husband's brother. Upon his death, she "retained a hold on over half the Stafford inheritance" for over thirty-five years.¹³⁶ Maud de Ufford, Countess of Oxford held almost half of the de Vere estates as her dowry until her death in 1413. The Clifford family had three dowagers living in 1391-1393 each with a dower portion coming from the family coffers.¹³⁷

Countesses with wealth in the Middle Ages were able to do some memorable works. Joan de Bohun, Countess of Hereford, was a patron of Walden Abbey and several monasteries.¹³⁸ When the French lands of Marie de St Pol, Countess of Pembroke, were confiscated by King Charles V of France, King Edward III exempted her from his order to arrest all French people residing in England and granted her a manor house. She in turn started a Franciscan nunnery in 1342 and founded Pembroke College in 1347.¹³⁹ The family arms

¹³⁶ Jewel, *Women in Medieval England*. p.143.

¹³⁷ Ibid. p.123.

¹³⁸ William Page and J. Horace Round, Eds. *A History of the County of Essex: Volume 2* (London: Victoria County History, 1907), p.112. Retrieved from <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/essex/vol2/pp110-115> on 11 December, 2016.

¹³⁹ Sally March, "Why did Marie de St Pol found Pembroke?" (Cambridge: Pembroke College,

remain on the college arms to this day. Elizabeth de Burgh was instrumental in starting Clare College at Cambridge and on the original Statutes for the college, she affixed her personal seal.¹⁴⁰ (Figure 4.1)

A lady's possessions became her husband's upon marriage, and she was rarely allowed to allocate them in a will without his permission. Even when allowed, he had to approve not only what items were listed, but who might inherit them. And even further, most items within a woman's will were "bedhangings, furnishings, dresses, robe and personal jewelry" and other domestic items.¹⁴¹ Once women were widowed, they were given much more latitude in the dispersion of their possessions, and therefore most of the women's wills that survive from the 14th century were widows' wills. Often, there would be a stipend or gifts to her servants for providing faithful service. "Juliana de Leybourne, countess of Huntingdon, by her writing has granted for life to her servant Roger de Hynkele a moiety of the manor Westgate."¹⁴² The Countess of Albemarle left money for her chaplain to say a daily mass for her soul providing her with assurance for a good afterlife and him with a continued income.

In some cases a woman dictated in her will where or how she wanted to be buried. For example, Marie de St-Pol, Countess of Pembroke, chose to be

2014), Retrieved from www.pem.cam.ac.uk/the-college/news/2014/11/why-did-marie-de-st-pol-found-pembroke 11 December 2016.

¹⁴⁰ Jennifer Ward, Ed. *Elizabeth de Burgh, Lady of Clare (1295-1360)*, (Suffolk: Suffolk Records Society, 1014), p.67.

¹⁴¹ Jewell, *Women in Medieval England*, p.130.

¹⁴² *CPR, 1354-1358*, p. 382 (available online at <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015031079323;view=1up;seq=394>, accessed 6 June 2016).

buried in an abbey in Cambridgeshire instead of with her husband in Westminster Abbey. Of course, since he had predeceased her by over fifty years, any feelings she might have had for him might have faded if they existed at all. Margaret Holland, Countess of Somerset, was laid to rest between her two husbands, the first earl of Somerset and the duke of Clarence.¹⁴³ (Figure 4.2) Elizabeth de Badlesmere, Countess of Northampton, requested to be buried in Black Friars Priory in London, which was accomplished.

Many women planned for their deaths by not only making wills, but letting their relatives and friends know about their wishes. The Countess of March requested to her family that her entire household be kept together after her death until she was buried. This also allowed for the household to continue to run smoothly until it was passed into the hands of the heirs.¹⁴⁴ In some cases, the countess died without proper planning. In one court case of 1343, which went before King Edward, “the countess died without heir of herself... [and her possessions went to] Mary as her kinswoman and heir”, although the legal proceedings lasted for many years after her death.¹⁴⁵

Some historians have argued that old age resulted in a “new equivalency in the public power of the sexes”.¹⁴⁶ Many elderly males retired somewhat by

¹⁴³ English Monarchs, “The Holland Family” Retrieved from http://www.englishmonarchs.co.uk/plantagenet_77.html on 10 December, 2016

¹⁴⁴ Woolgar, *The Great Household*. p.105.

¹⁴⁵ *CPR, 1354-1358*, p.382 (available online at <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015031079323;view=1up;seq=394>, accessed 6 June 2016).

¹⁴⁶ Judith M. Bennett, “Public Power and Authority in the Medieval English Countryside” from Erler, *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, p.23.

giving their heirs more and more power over the years. They took a backseat to courtly matters and chose to delegate more of their responsibilities. For many widows, the case was just the opposite. She could continue to be known as “X, the widow of’; she could also take on her husband’s name as her own; alternatively she might choose to revert to her maiden surname.”¹⁴⁷ For what was possibly the first time, they were in full control of their landholdings, they could make final decisions about their lives and their possessions, and they could even take part in some political and legal proceedings.

The roles of countesses during the fourteenth century of England was neither unimportant nor unexciting. These ladies proved that they could manage their own affairs, lead others, and enhance the wellbeing of their holdings, family and indeed, the country. Their lives were full of intrigue, politics, and drama. Historians have missed a great opportunity by ignoring the contributions of these women.

¹⁴⁷ Leyster, *Medieval Women*. 168.

CHAPTER FIVE

LIFESTYLES

There are some aspect of a medieval life that would remain unchanged over the course of a lifetime. Clothing and jewelry would be of interest to a countess whether she were single, married, or widowed. Residential architecture, furnishings, and other household details would not vary widely between a countess's birth and her death. Travel and entertainment were important to noblewomen within each stage of their lives. (Figure 5.1) This chapter investigates these aspects of a medieval countess's daily lifestyle and material surroundings.

As women moved from their maidenhood into their new role as wives, they would be expected to bring their personal items, household supplies, and furniture. For an example of household items that a bride might take to the marriage home, we can look to the inventory of Princess Joan who died en route to marry Pedro the Cruel of Castile. While not a countess, one can surmise that a noble lady would follow the royalty's lead and have a similar list of possessions that they would bring with them to their new home that might differ only in the quality of the items. The inventory listed "complete furnishing of a chapel, two sets of hangings for a hall...the hangings for two beds, two chairs, one specifically for washing and the other for fixing her hair, a suitable quantity of

saddlery...and the pots, pans, cutler, etc., need to equip a kitchen, pantry, buttery and spicery together with a supply of spice.”¹⁴⁸

Traveling was something that most countesses would be prepared to handle. Because it was often necessary to be near the court for political and social reasons, many countesses would have had a town home in London at which they could stay during the season. Blanche of Lancaster (wife of John of Gaunt, Earl of Lancaster, and later Duke), resided in the Savoy Palace in London whenever she needed to be in the city. Unfortunately, this often meant moving a great deal of their furnishings with them as well.¹⁴⁹ Margaret de Lacy, Countess of Lincoln, was advised “to make plans at Michaelmas, after the harvest, as to how many weeks she was going to spend on each manor over the coming year.”¹⁵⁰ In this way, she would not tax any one estate too greatly and would be able to spread out the cost across the holdings. Visiting each manor on a regular basis ensured that the staff knew how to care for the family and were managing the estate properly. The household of Gilbert de Clare, eighth Earl of Gloucester, moved on the average of twice a month.¹⁵¹ In some cases when the journey was long, the household might take up residence in a monastery or abbey for a time. When Edward I was dying, he stayed for months at Lanercost Priory.

In the 1300s, many of the daily schedules were based on religion.

Festivals and celebrations during certain seasons guided the year with prayers

¹⁴⁸ Evans, *The Flowering*. p.140.

¹⁴⁹ English Heritage, *Medieval Part I*. Retrieved from: <http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/story-of-england/medieval-part-1/networks/> 10 December 2016

¹⁵⁰ Ward, *Women in England in the Middle Ages*, p.103.

¹⁵¹ Mertes, *The English Noble Household*. p.15.

and church services guiding the day. All large households employed at least one chaplain to perform Mass, to provide advice on moral matters and often to tutor the children. "Being a part of society in medieval England was in fact the same as being part of the church."¹⁵² In wealthy households, the chaplain might have others to assist him such as a secretary or chantry priest. In fact, an earl or countess might have as many as six chaplains within their household. The life of a chaplain within one of these households was an honor and placed him in a important position if the family was powerful or important. Obviously, some households would have been more pious than others. We cannot be sure that everyone was expected to attend every service or that mass was offered daily. However, we do know that in a God-fearing household, there would be prayers at

6:00 am - (Matins / Lauds / Orthros)

9:00 am - Third Hour (Terce)

Noon Prayer - Sixth Hour (Sext)

3:00 pm - Ninth hour (None)

6:00 pm (Vespers / Evensong)

9:00 pm (Compline)¹⁵³

Cushions were a not only a "fashionable must-have", but also "their use in chapels as kneelers...went beyond mere displays of wealth."¹⁵⁴

The housing of a fourteenth-century countess might vary greatly depending on the wealth of her husband or where they resided. While there was

¹⁵² Singman, *Daily Life*. p.26.

¹⁵³ Mark Preston, Assessed September 6, 2015

http://www.prayerfoundation.org/dailyoffice/the_seven_hours_of_prayer.htm.

¹⁵⁴ Peter Jeremy Piers, "The Fashioning of Bourgeois Domesticity in Later Medieval England: a material culture perspective" from *Medieval Domesticity Home, Housing and Household in Medieval England*, Kowaleski, Maryanne and Goldberg, P.J.P. eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p.144.

some diversity, there were also some set archetypes. Most nobles built a stone house, followed by brick with a slate or tiled roof. The interior walls were generally made of plaster and the size of the house and wealth determined the number of interior walls the family would have. The hall, the largest room in the house, was for eating, socializing, and conducting business. It was often chilly, noisy, and crowded. The home might have a solar (a private room for them to gather) and possibly even another private chamber or two.¹⁵⁵

Goodrich Castle along the Welsh border, home to the de Valence earls of Pembroke, was started in the twelfth century and added to in the thirteenth century before it came to their family.¹⁵⁶ (Figure 5.2) By the end of the thirteenth century and beginning of the fourteenth, the family had added additional walls to enlarge the original keep and an external barbican.¹⁵⁷ Not only did the additions provide extra protection against the Welsh, but also additional space and the much valued privacy lacking in most other medieval houses. Of course, not all countesses lived in castles and many, as mentioned above, were not blessed with much privacy.

In general, living arrangements often consisted of a large common room and a bedroom for the earl and countess. Often they conducted business in the bedchamber. Servants, squires, and business colleagues coming and going resulted in limited privacy for anyone. Because of the size of the households and

¹⁵⁵ Plantagenet Somerset Fry Editors, *Castles of Britain and Ireland* (Devon: David & Charles Publishers, 1997), p.26.

¹⁵⁶ Woolgar, *The Great Household*. p.61.

¹⁵⁷ Carney Castle Website. Retrieved from <http://www.carneycastle.com/Goodrich> on Aug 4, 2015.

the constant movement, privacy was something that was craved. Some families maintained a formal dinner in the great hall, but many started eating separately from their servants. "Privacy was the rarest of luxuries for everybody... [and noble women] have never enjoyed it, ladies-in-waiting, pages, sentries in every passage, at every turn of the stairs."¹⁵⁸ As time passed, even more additions or partitions were added to increase the "number of chambers... {often} assigned to individuals and their servants."¹⁵⁹

Glass windows were a new invention for houses. Usually just seen in churches, wealthy people began installing them in the upper windows of their houses inviting in light and keeping out cold.¹⁶⁰ The glass was not the transparent type seen in modern times, but a hazy, thick glass that was not able to be seen through. However, this was a remarkable addition to their housing and was another new type of object that showcased the wealth of the family.¹⁶¹

Throughout the home, rushes would be strewn on the floor to create some warmth and to cover any uncleanliness such as dropped food. The rushes were removed and replaced on a regular basis by servants.¹⁶² In the countess's chamber, there might be woven rugs strewn about if they were wealthy, or if they had a skilled weaver on staff. The walls were often covered with woven or embroidered tapestries to help keep the cold at bay. Because there were no

¹⁵⁸ Norah Lofts, *Queens of England*. (London: George Rainbird Ltd., 1977), p.57.

¹⁵⁹ Woolgar, *The Great Household*. p.61.

¹⁶⁰ Bishop, *The Middle Ages*. p.126.

¹⁶¹ Ibid. p.73.

¹⁶² Maryanne Kowaleski, and P.J.P. Goldberg, Eds. "Introduction" from *Medieval Domesticity Home, Housing and Household in Medieval England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p.18.

safe deposit boxes at the neighborhood bank, it was up to the family to store and safeguard their possessions. As the fourteenth century progressed, many nobles began to decorate more ornately, using gold, bronze, and ivory items throughout their house. Display of fancy objects showed their wealth and importance while gold and jewels were often locked into large metal banded chests in the chambers. The Earl of Arundel had a huge amount of money “in his coffers” upon his death.¹⁶³

Fires were not a luxury in the middle ages, but a necessity. The nobility did have fireplaces with chimneys, but even these needed to be banked or extinguished each night to avoid spreading a fire. With no indoor lighting, the household depended on candles and lanterns for light. Often these were made from tallow (fat) that left the air smoky and ill-smelling. Beeswax candles were costly and generally only used by the royals and the church. However, if a countess was a royal favorite, she might receive the candle ends of beeswax candles previously used by the monarchs.¹⁶⁴ This was actually a nice boon given by the king to some of his nobles.

Bedding for most of the household consisted of pallets on the floor, but the earl and countess would have had wooden beds with a mattress—often stuffed with feathers.¹⁶⁵ Pillows and blankets were common for the wealthy and many

¹⁶³ Woolgar, *The Great Household*. p.200.

¹⁶⁴ Bishop, *The Middle Ages*. p.126.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid. p.127.

times their beds had drapes to close that provided both privacy and helped heat the bed area.¹⁶⁶

Countesses were amused by entertainers such as jugglers, acrobats, and jesters during and after feasts and entertainers were occasionally retained by a noble family to reside in the household for their enjoyment. Jesters were well versed as story tellers and would have been a valued part of the household.¹⁶⁷ Musicians were also either hired for special occasions or they could be a permanent part of the residence for a family that enjoyed music. Songs that focused on romance and military themes were the most popular. Carols (festive dance music) were frowned upon by the church and were seen as too worldly to be played near churches or religious festivals.¹⁶⁸ King Edward I had over twenty-five musicians on his royal staff. He also hired almost two hundred minstrels for the celebration of his son's knighting.¹⁶⁹ When entertainers were not available, the nobles could amuse themselves with games of chess, cards, and dancing.¹⁷⁰ The game of chess was played by men, women, and children and was thought an important part of their education and, unlike some music, was condoned by the church. (Figure 5.4)

If the church was not consistent about forms of music, they were downright confused about astrology. While most lay-clergy were opposed to the

¹⁶⁶ Woolgar, *The Great Household*. p.79.

¹⁶⁷ Compton Reeves, *Pleasures and Pastimes in Medieval England*. (Somerset: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd., 1995), p.44.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid. p.47.

¹⁶⁹ Reeves, *Pleasures and Pastimes*. p44.

¹⁷⁰ Woolgar, *The Great Household*. p101.

study, practice, or even mention of this 'science', many abbeys and friaries were immersed in it since they had very large collections of books on many topics.

Richard II was quietly open to the study of astrology, resulting in a book of divination created just for him in 1391.¹⁷¹ Items such as predictions about marriage, the outcomes of war, and elections of officials were all fair game when it came to consulting the stars for answers. Horoscopes for young nobles were often prepared upon birth to see how their lives would unfold.¹⁷² Countesses and other nobles were not immune from such interests as books of that era clearly show.

We must remember that only a few men received formal education in this era. However, there were women like Margaret de Bohun, Countess of Devon who received a classical education and were avid readers. The Countess of Leicester had a "medieval alphabet book" at the beginning of the century which is now in the Bodleian Library in Oxford.¹⁷³ Indeed, many noble ladies were more literate than the knights, who usually were only trained in warfare and sport.¹⁷⁴ G.G. Coulton surmised that more noble women were literate than we believe because of the large amount of romantic books obviously written for their pleasure.¹⁷⁵ This is the century where the ideals of Courtly Love, of the faithfulness of the brave knight even though away from his true love, continued to

¹⁷¹ Reeves, *Pleasures and Pastimes*. p.184.

¹⁷² Ibid, p.186.

¹⁷³ Susan Groag Bell, "Medieval Women Book Owners: Arbiters of Lay Piety and Ambassadors of Culture," in *Women and Power in the Middle Age*, ed. Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1988), p.163.

¹⁷⁴ Harkensen, *Women in the Middle Ages* p.13.

¹⁷⁵ Coulton, *Medieval Panorama*. p.618.

take hold in English and French romances and these concepts were certainly not being written for the typical contemporary male reader.

Books such as Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* were popular ["which is a series of stories about good women...betrayed by ...wicked men"].¹⁷⁶

Religious treatises for women, such as those written by Richard Rolle, were common. That times were changing can be seen even in items that modern individuals would find mundane, such as reading materials. "Only in the last decades of the fourteenth century, with the period of Chaucer and his contemporaries, does a set of non-clerical, worldly, yet intellectually and ethically provocative works appear."¹⁷⁷ *Piers Plowman* by William Langland and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* were as popular as romantic poetry for pleasure reading as was other Arthurian literature.

Hunting and hawking were popular sports for nobles. In addition to providing amusement and sport, hunting on horseback was also considered training for war.¹⁷⁸ While the use of arms was normally a taboo for ladies, riding on a hunt was encouraged and admired. Trained horses and hawks were more prized than just about anything else. In 1304, Elizabeth, Countess of Hereford had in her possession, "5 horses for the carriage, 5 palfreys, 6 pack-horses, 14 cart-horses, 2 hackneys" as well as several horses belonging to others, which she was responsible for housing and feeding.¹⁷⁹ Both men and women would be

¹⁷⁶ Reeves, *Pleasures and Pastimes*. p.6.

¹⁷⁷ Andrew Galloway, *Medieval Literature and Culture* (London: Continuum Books, 2006), p.9.

¹⁷⁸ Reeves, *Pleasures and Pastimes*. p.103.

¹⁷⁹ Ward, *Women in England*. p.162. (These expenses were paid for by Elizabeth herself, not by

well-versed in these sports and often had both a horse and bird of prey of their own. A countess was most likely to own a merlin or peregrine. These birds are small enough for a woman's arm to hold and less dangerous than some of the larger game birds. These birds were often decorated with bejeweled jesses or hoods that matched the lady's garments.¹⁸⁰ The hoods would sometimes be embroidered in great detail, often with the family heraldry. Hunting was largely a pastime for the noble class since many of the forests were off-limits to the lower orders.¹⁸¹

Countesses often had pets. A family pet, which, unlike a horse or hunting dog, was not required to work and showed that the family had extra money in which to support animals whose only function was to be a companion.¹⁸² Many images of ladies with their dogs either on their laps or in the folds of their skirts are found in collections throughout the world. Dogs would have worn embroidered or decorated collars. Some households kept pet birds, such as parrots (called popinjays in the Middle Ages) and magpies, in cages. Parrots who could speak were highly prized and the source of much amusement. "Parrots were expensive exotica: the gift of such an animal reflected the high status of both parties."¹⁸³

Cats were viewed as mousers when they were tolerated at all. Some held beliefs that cats were evil and served as the familiars of witches. "Archeologists

her husband).

¹⁸⁰ Reeves, *Pleasures and Pastimes*. p.112.

¹⁸¹ Ibid, p.103.

¹⁸² Ibid, p.126.

¹⁸³ Kathleen Walker-Meikle, *Medieval Pets* (Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2012), p.24.

have found cat bones with cut marks suggesting that the fur had been removed...which signifies the keeping of cats as livestock, not as pets.”¹⁸⁴

Some of these pets are not what we would consider as normal in modern times such as squirrels. (Figure 5.5)

In much the same way, gardening for pleasure and not sustenance proved that you had enough discretionary funds to provide space for plants of pleasure. Mazes cut out of shrubs, flower gardens and water gardens were created for pleasure and not out of need for food or medicines. Gardens provided a countess with a private area outside to take air, relax with a picnic, or walk with a friend.¹⁸⁵

Watching plays was also a common pastime. Christmas plays were dramatic and expected in most large towns and many churches. The plays would contain a moral that both would instruct and entertain.¹⁸⁶ In the winter, ice skating was enjoyed by both males and females of all ages. “Skates made from the bones of cattle and horses have been recovered from archaeological sites.”¹⁸⁷ Snowball fights were also an enjoyable activity. In the summer, people of all stations swam in local lakes and rivers. Additionally, jousting in boats or ‘water-tilting’ was fun for both the spectators and the participants.

¹⁸⁴ Reeves, *Pleasures and Pastimes*. p.128.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, pp.131-132

¹⁸⁶ Ibid, p.81.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid. p.93.

Although we normally thinking of bull running as a Spanish phenomenon, in the time of King John, bull-running was found in Lincolnshire.¹⁸⁸

The nobility played games such as blinds-man's-bluff and games of chance that could involve large amounts of money. Horse racing was one of the main sporting events where money was won or lost in large sums as was cock-fighting and bear/bull baiting. More rare, but still worth mentioning, was boar baiting.¹⁸⁹ Many of the earls made a substantial income from the successful bets with which to purchase fine clothes and furnishings.

Having wealth helped in a society where style and showmanship helped make countesses more desirable as an ally or asset. In fact, a nice gown might not be a permanent part of her wardrobe but would be passed down to another family member or a favored servant if outgrown. While a woman's dress might be expensive and bejeweled, it would have also undergone a multitude of alterations through the years as there was just not the ability to make a large amount of new dresses. That said, the more dresses a countess was able to wear, the more it showed the wealth and status of her family and their ability to set fashion trends and enjoy their money.

The styles of dresses changed through the century. Towards the first part of the 1300s, clothing was more utilitarian. Women wore a tight-fitting kirtle with a surcoat as an outer dress. Countesses might wear woolen or linen with fur trimming their over garments. These included quality and expensive fur like

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 101

¹⁸⁹ Ibid. p.101.

“marten called sable, pine martin and the black lambskins know as budge”, as well as lesser furs such as rabbit and squirrel.¹⁹⁰ A belt, often with a pouch attached, might be worn to carry items in a handy and stylish fashion. Hair was often worn in a hair net or braided and coiled over their ears. A wealthy noble would have a much-decorated hairnet possibly even with jewels.

As time progressed, clothes became more elaborate, complete with headdresses and embroidered gloves which allowed women to change their look even if they were wearing one of the same dresses that they had previously worn frequently. Long pointed shoes were the norm for nobles, which must have been unwieldy and uncomfortable, but conveyed a high status as a common worker would never be able to work in such shoes. Women would have owned combs for grooming their hair and countesses would have owned mirrors made of glass or polished metal. “Cosmetics were also used by fashionable women, although moralists condemned the practice”.¹⁹¹

During the fourteenth century that lacing became the norm for fitted garments. And, late in the century, handkerchiefs were invented which helped with hygiene. Even common items such as “belts and buttons were becoming more decorative.”¹⁹² During the final quarter of the century, influenced by royal interest in fashion as exhibited by King Richard II and Anne of Bohemia, love of extravagant dress, styles became even more pronounced and elaborate.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid. p.53.

¹⁹¹ Singman, *Daily Life*. p.113.

¹⁹² Reeves, *Pleasures and Pastimes*. p.50.

Houppelandes, which required much more fabric, became common for both the men and women as did longer shoes and more decorative jewelry.

Unfortunately, little jewelry from the fourteen century survives because precious jewels and metals were constantly reworked into more fashionable pieces. The ring brooch depicted in Figure 5.6, while from the thirteenth century, is a style that would have been worn through most of the middle ages. "Such a piece could be made of gold or silver and be decorated with stones and inscriptions. Various examples of these brooches have survived."¹⁹³ Decorated belts, rings, and gold chains were also popular items for wealthy men and women. Most wealthy noblemen and women would have owned at least one gold ring fitted with rubies, sapphires, or other stones. Mary de St Pol, Countess of Pembroke, enjoyed collecting not only jewelry, but gold and silver plate and bejeweled holy relics as decoration.¹⁹⁴ Cloaks were held together with jeweled clasps if wealthy or by ties if necessary. Sumptuary laws were introduced to govern what jewelry could be worn by the lower classes, but with no success. People just ignored them and they were difficult to enforce.¹⁹⁵

People close to the earl or countess, along with family, formed the household. "No prudent man trusts his life to total strangers if he can avoid it, and such retainers, or retinues, were recruited from a man's relatives, tenants, and neighbors whenever possible"¹⁹⁶ They might wear livery or badges

¹⁹³ Ibid, p.61.

¹⁹⁴ Underhill, *For Her Good Estate*. p.105.

¹⁹⁵ Reeves, *Pleasures and Pastimes*. p.49.

¹⁹⁶ Singman, *Daily Life*. p.16.

signifying which house retained them and they might have privileges granted to them such as support in legal matters. The livery was not only a way to show how large their household was, but again, a chance to demonstrate wealth by dressing their people in rich garments all in the household colors. It showed the lord or lady's generosity and power. While livery was not worn all of the time, it was a way to indicate the importance of a family and their strength.¹⁹⁷

The people serving the household were cultivating relationships with another noble family and the others who may have resided there. In "the most important households, the major serving positions were actually held by aristocrats".¹⁹⁸ These individuals would be squires, pages, or wards assigned to the family, or other nobles hoping for a permanent position. Even a younger son's or daughter's connections from childhood might one day be significant. Occasionally, an earl or countess might employ someone from a foreign land. While this was not common, it did add an allure to their household and give the family a significance of position.

While the members of the household in total were not technically part of the countess's blood relations, they were living within or nearby the manor and were valued both as status symbols and as part of a larger network or clan. Towards the end of the fourteenth century, noble households grew in size. A larger household showed that you were wealthy enough to afford extra food and clothing, and it also provided you more connection in case of war or political

¹⁹⁷ Mertes, *The English Noble Household*. p.132.

¹⁹⁸ Singman, *Daily Life*. p.29.

issues. Many of these household members lived in the manor-house and eat in the dining hall with the family, so while the 'family' was a nuclear one, it was also a household. The cost of maintaining food, clothing, and shelter for one's household was the major expense of the nobility. But in the same way a large household could show you in a good light, just one "impudent servant, or a poorly dressed on, did more to undermine a lord's reputation" than most other things.¹⁹⁹ It was part of the staff's job to ensure that they behaved properly especially when in public and served any guests, especially important ones, exceptionally well.

Servants frequently acted act as messengers for the family. In this instance, someone who might not have rank or status at home might, in fact, fulfill the role of an observer or even an ambassador. It was not uncommon for the messenger to return and describe what was seen, how he was treated, and responses given to his message. If the messenger was trusted, he might be given permission to make decisions or work out deals while on his mission. To treat another's messenger badly was to show your disgust with his lord or lady. While on their mission, many messengers were well treated and well fed.

The most common foods consumed during the fourteenth-century were "grain, meat, poultry, fish, dairy products and eggs, vegetables, spices and fruits, and ale and wine."²⁰⁰ The grains were most commonly used to bake breads and pastries and included barley, wheat, and rye. Grains would also have been used to feed to the livestock and to make ale. Finer ground grains were used to create

¹⁹⁹ Mertes, *The English Noble Household*. p.103.

²⁰⁰ Ibid. p.108.

the noble's bread while the less ground grains would go towards the bread for the lower-class individuals of the household. In Elizabeth de Burgh's household, baking was done twice a week to produce the over 2000 loaves of bread needed.²⁰¹ Cattle, sheep, pigs, oxen, chickens, doves, rabbits, and other meat animals were kept in order to supply meat to the household.²⁰² Hunting was not only a sport, but it was a way to provide additional foodstuffs to the kitchen. Hunters might bring home deer, duck and other wild birds, and wild boar. Like hunting, fishing was serious business as pious households would not eat meat on religious days and would consume fish instead. These included both salt and fresh water fish depending on where the manor was located, eels, oysters, crayfish, and more. Dairy cows were sometimes kept on-site, but others made do by purchasing milk and cheese daily from a local farmer. While milk does appear in some inventories, it does not appear as a quantity to suggest that it was a common drink.²⁰³ Cheese was enjoyed, but considered "the poor man's meat" and generally served below the salt.²⁰⁴

Although a garden was grown at each domicile, nobles preferred a diet of bread, meat and sweets to a healthier fare.²⁰⁵ Vegetables do not appear as supper dishes in many of the recipe books of that era. When eaten, it was generally in a soup or stew and not as a side dish as is common now. Popular

²⁰¹ Underhill, *For Her Good Estate*. p.69.

²⁰² Woolgar, *The Great Household*. p.114.

²⁰³ Mertes, *The English Noble Household*. p109.

²⁰⁴ William Langland, *Piers Plowman: The A Version*, ed. by George Kane, rev. (London: Athlone Press, 1988).

²⁰⁵ Mertes, *The English Noble Household*. p.107.

vegetables were onion, parsnips, leeks, and mushrooms, all of which are the usual components to soups and stews.²⁰⁶ Fruits such as cherries were generally eaten raw as were other small fruits such as blackberries and gooseberries. Grapes were either eaten raw, turned into wine, or made into grape vinegar which was popular in medieval cooking. (Figure 5.8) Quince, on the other hand, were always cooked as they are extremely sour when eaten raw. Nuts such as walnuts and filberts were eaten raw and used in other dishes.²⁰⁷

While some manors brewed their own ale, many purchased it from the local ale distributor. Many nobles stored different grades of ale in their cellars to be brought forth depending on who would be drinking it.²⁰⁸ By the end of the fourteenth century, both white and red wines were available when it was possible to import them from Europe. Cider was another popular drink usually made from apples, but occasionally from pears.

Towards the end of the fourteenth century, earthenware plates began making an appearance in England, before that wooden trenchers or even bread bowls would have been used by most of the people with only those at high table sometimes eating off a higher quality plate such as silver or gold.²⁰⁹ (Figure 5.7) The food towards the top of the room (where the Count and Countess sat) was of much better quality than at the far end of the room (where the lowest class of people would sit). "Ironically, the diet of working commoners may actually have

²⁰⁶ Ibid. p.109.

²⁰⁷ Reeves, *Pleasures and Pastimes*. p.141.

²⁰⁸ Ibid p.110.

²⁰⁹ Woolgar, *The Great Household*. p.130.

been healthier than that of the aristocracy, at least in terms of nutritional balance.”²¹⁰ Breakfast was often leftovers from the night before and was an informal meal. Dinner, the midday meal, was frequently the largest of the day, although some families preferred a larger supper. Dinner was followed by a mid-afternoon snack often called nucheon and supper in the evening. The nobility often ate the large meal in courses making it a longer and more festive occasion.

For great feasts, cooks often made a special effort to have the food appear interesting. Cooking a peacock and re-attaching the feathers in full plume was a popular and striking dish. This made for an exciting meal since most meals would consist of bread, meat or fish, and the occasional vegetable in season. Elaborate dessert items were also popular. Subtleties, “made from a variety of materials. Some...edible” were table decorations designed for both between courses or for desert. Oftentimes they were intended to add to the theme of the feast or occasion such as a nativity scene or a large ship before a trip.²¹¹ Like the food, drinks were dependent on wealth and station. Most people would drink ale while a noble might have wine or distilled spirits.

High society tried very hard to ensure that everyone knew their proper place. The “sumptuary legislation of 1363 attempted, with utter lack of success, to regulate what strata of social and economic society might employ”.²¹² Colors,

²¹⁰ Singman, *Daily Life*. p.159.

²¹¹ Tim Richardson, *Sweets: A History of Candy* (New York: R.R. Donnelley & Sons, 2002), p.148-149.

²¹² Reeves, *Pleasures and Pastimes*. 63.

metal types, styles of dress were all regulated at one point or another, but many people just ignored these laws if they had enough money to purchase those items. As the merchant class became wealthier, they worked hard to imitate the dress of the nobles. The nobles, who were not always wealthy, fought hard to keep the lesser classes from moving into their territories. One regulation stated that “wives were not to exceed the cost of their husbands’ clothing for their own”.²¹³ Only a year later, the laws were repealed as there was no way to enforce them.

Even wealthy noble families would have managed their holdings in such a way to be “as nearly self-sufficient as possible.”²¹⁴ This would include more than just a garden and livestock, but would also include medicinal herbs, items to be made into clothing and even materials for weaponry. Herbs such as tansy would have been grown as an insect repellent while others such as wormwood were grown as a treatment for constipation. A countess would have known which plants would be beneficial to her household as a medicine, dye, or food flavor and how to use these ingredients. Some plants were grown for the pleasure of bathing in their scent or showing off heraldry that might be of plant design. The Earl and Countess of Lancaster had red roses planted as this was the emblem of the Lancaster household.²¹⁵

²¹³ Stella Mary Newton, *Fashion in the Age of the Black Prince* (Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1980), p.132.

²¹⁴ Fox, *The Medieval Woman*. p.7.

²¹⁵ Reeves, *Pleasures and Pastimes*. p.135.

Like today, it was important for these ladies to be seen with the right people, wearing the correct garments and showing proper consideration to the lower orders. Their daily lives were varied between managing their staff, sewing, gardening, instructing, maintaining proper comportment in their house, and being a helpmeet to their husband. Showing off one's wealth was not a way to snub the lower-class, but it was a way to make your family stronger by gaining better marriages for your children or better alliances in the political realm. These women had a better understanding of the way the world worked than many of us do today.

CONCLUSION

What are the implications? Who really cares what high class women did hundreds of years ago? Why should we care? As you can see, much like in today's world, countesses (and indeed most women) were an integral part of medieval life. They served in many different roles, chatelaine, politician, spy, estate steward, supply clerk, supervisor, scholar, benefactress, and much more.

The purchasing they did in nearby towns and markets helped drive the local economy. They supported the arts by planning performances by entertainers and portraits by painters of the day. The clothes they chose provided work for women of the lower classes. Hiring servants also provided employment and occasionally, a chance to move upwards. These women were supporters of their church with donations, building projects and money for chantries for themselves and others.

Women as a whole have been overlooked by historians until recent years when people have taken an interest in the people who were not the politicians or rulers of their time. There has been a surge of books and journal articles about the lives of 'common' and 'middle class' citizens. However, there is still much work to be done in these areas. In addition, the lives of the upper class, but not of the ruling class, are often left out of these projects.

Women are rarely added to history lessons in elementary or middle school—times when young girls are developing their identity and should have an opportunity to feel proud about the contributions of their predecessors. Girls

should know that women were able to overcome issues, fight for their families and hold important roles throughout history. And, we must make it clear that it is women from all backgrounds, color, religion, and geography who have helped to make our world what we know today. There is much work to be done.

Each time a girl opens a book and reads a womanless history, she learns she is worth less. ~ Myra Pollack Sadker

Through the study of history, we are able to learn about mistakes others have made and avoid those same situations. We are able to see that we are not very different from people who lived long ago. And we are, possibly, able to learn more about ourselves. The study of countesses in fourteenth century England was born out of my desire to know about how these ladies lived their day-to-day lives and my frustration at finding bits of information in many different places. Through this study, I hope that others can know how important these ladies were and how they were really not that different from modern women.

Hopefully, this thesis had provided useful information about the lives of Fourteenth Century Countesses in England and will encourage others to continue researching the lives of women of our past. Women in 2017 took to the streets for fair treatment and equal rights making equality a timeless issue that links us to the women of our past and connects us to our great-great-grand-daughters of the future. Without knowing our past, we are limiting our future and

in the words of Santayana, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”²¹⁶

²¹⁶ George Santayana. *The Life of Reason; or, The Phases of Human Progress*. (New York: C Scribner's Sons, 1905). p. 284.

APPENDIX

PICTURES/ILLUMINATIONS

Figure 1.1: England 1399



Figure 2.1: Caesarean Section

Figure 2.2: Noblewomen with Children





Figure 2.3: Effigies holding hands

Figure 3.1. Luttrell Book of Psalms. Women in a carriage



Figure 3.2. Aristocrat household at table

Figure 3.3. Defense of Manor



Figure 3.4: Medieval Marriage

Figure 4.1: Marie de St Pol





Figure 4.2. English Monarchs.

Figure 5.1. Countess Joan's May-Sept 1297 travels.



Figure 5.2. Goodrich Castle.

Figure 5.3: Music



Figure 5.4: Women playing draughts

Figure 5.5. Woman with Pet Squirrel





Figure 5.6: Ring Brooch

Figure 5.7: The Bermondsey Dish.
c. 1335-45.



Figure 5.8: Drawing vinegar

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