

Three Perspectives on the Historiography of Medieval Women

Caitlin Hedrick

When looking at the trajectory of women, it is clear that their history reveals a very unsteady one as it has not always been seen as marching forward. For example, taking into account the time from the Middle Ages, to the Renaissance, to now, the views of women of the past were constantly changing, depending very much on what was going on in the world during the time in which history was written. In regard to the role of women during the medieval period, the general attitude toward them is that they were inferior to men, a position held by a prominent medieval scholar from the Annales school, Georges Duby. Duby's position is tempting to take for granted, as general audiences share his same beliefs before digging further down into the lives of women. However, as we look at gender and historiography, we see that many historians are using gender as a lens to look at history in a new way. The general idea that women were submissive and obedient to the men in their lives has been refuted by many scholars, two of them including Kimberly A. LoPrete and Miriam Shadis. Thus, despite the fact that Duby was one of the important figures to set the playing field for the way we view medieval women, taking other sources into account helps to broaden that field, ultimately allowing us to see the women of the Middle Ages in a more accurate light.

Setting the stage for the responses of other scholars, Georges Duby states in the introduction to his book, *Women of the Twelfth Century*, that what he is "trying to show is not the lived reality... [but] reflections, what written texts reflect."¹ As he begins with the texts, as a postmodernist does, Duby discusses the lives of Eleanor of Aquitaine and six others who are deemed to be important during the Middle Ages. Paying close attention to the perception of these texts, Duby attempts to "reconstruct a value system and identify within this system the place assigned to women by male power."² Here, clear in his introduction, Duby informs us, almost like a warning label, that the men writing during the time, men of the church such as monks and clerics, ascribed the positions of the women that he presents in his book. Taking his sources into account, all of which were ecclesiastical documents and literary sources, it is no surprise that Duby would illustrate an image of women who are judged and mistrusted, and whose true reality of the time period is neglected.

With Eleanor of Aquitaine's story, the first to be discussed in the volume, Duby depicts her with the same skewed image as the priests who were writing about her, as a scandalous and objectified woman. He made clear that the reader understand how much Eleanor was talked about, "because her behavior had been a vivid demonstration of the terrifying powers with which nature had endowed women, who were lustful and treacherous... which made it self-evidently essential to keep daughters under the

strict control of their fathers and wives under that of their husbands.⁷³ By presenting this view of Eleanor, Duby indirectly argues that Eleanor contributed to the overall prejudice that men had against women during the time and basically legitimized the reasons why men should have been afraid of women and femininity. At the end of her story, Duby says that he is inclined to pity her for the events that took place in her life.⁷⁴ But in turn, Duby uses Eleanor of Aquitaine as a didactic tool to show us an image of women, thus objectifying her in his own way.

Just as “the hopes and fears of men were projected onto the body of Eleanor,”⁷⁵ the same goes for Mary Magdalene, the most visible of all women in the Gospels. Duby depicts Mary as being a model for men during the time. However, acting as a backwards sort of compliment, Duby states that the female nature is defined in the texts by “weakness and timidity... [making] it possible to present Mary Magdalene as an example to men.”⁷⁶ Clearly having a sort of “if a woman can do it then why can’t you?” approach, Duby discusses Mary as being a model for men with a slap in the face to women.

Illustrating the life of a rebellious and scandalous woman, Eleanor of Aquitaine, and the saint-like life of another woman, Mary Magdalene, Duby also presents us with that of H el oise. For her story Duby uses a letter written in 1142 AD, presenting us with a female voice. Although he questions its authenticity, he states that it is “the most substantial, and also the most reliable, information we have about this woman.”⁷⁷ Duby uses H el oise’s story to act as a composite between the other two women. He points out that her passionate side is her weakness, but she is also submissive to her husband and the church, as women should be. Also, he presents us with an example of medieval marriage with H el oise’s story, demonstrating that at the beginning a man and a woman may be more on equal footing but once they marry that is no longer true, thus showing that Duby doesn’t think that marriage helps, or should help, the status of a woman.

Although Georges Duby is writing from a gendered approach, let it not be confused with a feminist viewpoint. Duby presents powerful women, such as the three discussed here, yet still considers them secondary. He takes feminist heroes of the past and displays them in a subjugated, objectified light. His depiction of women illustrates them in a role where they were expected to be submissive, where it was a man’s duty to discipline them. They had no influence over political or economic matters, with no individual power but that of which they acquired through men, such as through marriage, lineage and sex. As a result, Duby’s presentation of medieval women ultimately portrays them as being property of men.

Offering a different view of aristocratic women and “yielding a picture of women’s roles and lives in noble households substantially different from the one depicted so vividly by Duby,”⁷⁸ is Kimberly A. LoPrete. Looking at sources not taken into account before, LoPrete uses Episcopal letters, ecclesiastical charters, necrologies, narratives by male clerics, and poems as sources for her essay, “Adela of Blois: Familial Alliances and Female Lordship,” in Theodore Evergates’ collection *Aristocratic Women in Medieval France*. Contrary to Duby, LoPrete’s sources, consisting mostly of documents of practice, “reveal that women who embodied the joining of two families through marriage and childbearing were not merely passive pawns in power relations among groups of men; rather, they were active participants whose actions could profoundly

affect the shape of those relations and the course of politically significant events.⁹⁹ She is using these sources to render the real experience of women that these sources reveal, opposed to giving an idealized version of how women *should* be, as Duby does. Thus LoPrete, along with the rest of the authors included in Evergates's book, disputes Duby in every sense of the word.

Challenging Duby, LoPrete discusses the life of Adela of Blois, the youngest daughter of William the Conqueror who married Stephen-Henry, count of Blois, Chartres, Meaux and Troyes.¹⁰ Adela was unique because, despite being the youngest child in her family, she was born after her father had become King of England, which automatically set her above the rest of her siblings. While married to Stephen, she became an active participant in her marriage, involving herself in comital rule¹¹ and participating in decision-making with things such as "judicial affairs and property transfers of comital followers."¹² In addition, it is interesting to see a point of view where a medieval "couple appear to have developed a relationship based at least on trust and mutual respect if not affection,"¹³ where LoPrete is clearly contradicting Duby, who depicts medieval marriage as a mere selling off of a woman from father to husband. The ecclesiastical documents LoPrete uses report "the couple acting publicly together,"¹⁴ involved with the issues that she and her husband had to deal with and being an important asset while doing so. We also see Stephan acting on Adela's advice and, with her consent, which LoPrete argues that her husband valued her. In addition, "the authority-enhancing prestige and literate skills of the high-born and educated countess impressed contemporaries."¹⁵ These are aspects of medieval women that had not been seen before with Duby.

When Stephen was absent from court, having duties in the Holy Land, one would think that Adela's responsibilities would have dwindled without her male counterpart, however we see the opposite. Charters and letters confirm that "Adela exercised full comital authority"¹⁶ while he was away, and "though she was not accorded the title of regent in any surviving source, Adela's ruling powers were acknowledged in the dating clause of two charters issued by others."¹⁷ Even after her husbands' death and when her sons came of age, "charters reveal that Adela still acted with full authority without her son until she retired to a monastery."¹⁸

Clearly, LoPrete is lending an interpretation of medieval aristocratic woman that very much contradicts Duby's arguments and beliefs discussed before. LoPrete does not present Adela of Blois as a secondary character but as a valued wife and partner in her and her husband's court. She did not gain her power through a man, as her "prestige enhanced his own"¹⁹ and "contemporary observers acknowledged that Adela exercised the same authoritative powers as her male peers."²⁰ Adela possessed a kind of power that was both private *and* public, as we see her controlling her son's marriages and other issues of the home and family, as well as executing public power with things such as issuing charters and overseeing judicial affairs. Differing from the image of "passive pawns" that LoPrete gives us when referring to Duby, "Adela's life and political career show how aristocratic women could play authoritative and decisive roles in the politics of their day."²¹ The inclusion of LoPrete's article in Evergates's collection further exemplifies that she is responding to Duby, by looking at sources like documents of practice that reveal women's experience of having power in the public realm, and by giving more insight into the lives of women. In addition, LoPrete

indicates that although "Adela was indeed a woman, she was far from being a mere object of sexual fascination"²² to churchmen and other males around her, an important detail to be noticed when comparing LoPrete and Duby's arguments with one another.

To go along with scholars who strive to better the image of medieval women, Miriam Shadis follows LoPrete in using sources to offer an interesting take on the way women gained and harbored their power. Like LoPrete, Shadis uses documents of practice, such as foundation charters and letters, that present us with a fascinating aspect of the way women cultivated power through patronage in her article, "Piety, Politics and Power: The Patronage of Leonor of England and Her Daughters Berenguela of León and Blanche of Castile." Shadis argues that these aristocratic women "were interested in constructing their own power as well as that of their families,"²³ their goals of patronage were not different from that of men's but the way they went about it was.²⁴ Thus, just as LoPrete discusses Adela of Blois as playing an important role both publicly and privately as a prominent and influential queen, we see Shadis building on this idea of women executing public power as well, but through the means of patronage.

Shadis illustrates that the institution of family was becoming very powerful as "royal women of medieval France and Castile used patronage as a way to cultivate political power and authority."²⁵ The four women discussed in her article are Eleanor of Aquitaine, her daughter Leonor of England and her two granddaughters, Berenguela of León and Blanche of Castile, all of whom "built and maintained necropolises as a way to perpetuate their own personal influence indefinitely, gaining power for themselves as well as for their families."²⁶ Leonor's main act of patronage, the female Cistercian abbey of Las Huelgas, with that of her husband Alfonso VIII, was modeled after Fontevrault, her mother's favorite institution.²⁷ Like Fontevrault's function as a family burial site, "Las Huelgas was founded specifically as a necropolis for the royalty of Castile."²⁸ It is interesting though that Leonor wanted it to be established with the Cistercian order because the Cistercians "actively discouraged the formal association of women in their order."²⁹ But despite this, the abbey, patronized by women who placed female abbesses in power, ended up becoming "the head abbey over all female Cistercian abbeys in Castile and León."³⁰ This attributed an important position for the royal family that patronized the abbey, for the abbesses in charge and for the position of women in general. Given that it was the church that played a large role in the suppression of women during the Middle Ages, finding sources that demonstrate a woman patronizing the church is important and must have really increased women's power during that time.

We see an interesting aspect of the abbesses' role at Las Huelgas evident in Shadis' research of letters, discussing that the abbess was carrying out sacerdotal duties³¹ such as "preaching homilies, hearing confessions, and blessing novices."³² Such behaviors were "particularly unacceptable because the abbesses are women" as one bishop stated that "even though Mary was more perfect and of greater dignity than the apostles, it was to them, and not to her, that the keys to the kingdom of heaven were given."³³ In this instance we see the bishop trying to put the women of Las Huelgas in their place. One historian, Amancio Rodríguez, to whom Shadis responds, attributes such behaviors of the women to their ignorance.³⁴ However, Shadis is quick to refute this argument, stating, "It is difficult to believe that the abbess of such a central, royal

institution would have been ignorant of the privileges of gender within the church.³²⁵ With this small yet powerful argument, Shadis is clearly doing two things; first, she is standing up for the position of women and the knowledge they had about their surroundings, politics, and the power patrons had over the status of the abbess, and second, she is making the important point that women were indeed exercising power at this Cistercian abbey.

Establishments by these royal women, like the foundations discussed in Shadis's article, was an effort to "reinforce the continuity of their families' authority and power,"³²⁶ ultimately displaying the influence of family (and women) over determining patronage. The fact that "Las Huelgas provided an arena for women to exercise both power and authority, both internally, as abbesses and nuns, and externally, as royal patrons,"³²⁷ is an extremely important detail to be noted because it is further evidence of women possessing political power. In addition, Shadis's discussion here parallels nicely with LoPrete's arguments of women participating in and executing their political power.

Differing from Duby's image of women having no real power or influence in society, Shadis states that, "these princesses and queens played an important role in securing certain rights and privileges for the monastery in the 'outside' world, by serving as liaisons between the monastery and the royal court..."³²⁸ This, again, refutes Duby and builds on LoPrete's argument of women having political power. In addition, Berenguela and Blanche's own choice to continue the "patronage of this particularly masculine order [of the Cistercians] seems to represent a clear expression of female domination or control in a male arena."³²⁹ This is an important factor highlighted by Shadis. One would assume that their efforts to "dominate a male arena" was a purely feminist move in spite of men during the time, however, these women's "special patronage in an order resistant to them does not indicate any feminist sensibilities on their part, but rather an effort to identify themselves with the power of the order, as well as their personal ability to control their endowments."³³⁰ By "asserting for themselves a certain amount of power and authority,"³³¹ these women clearly saw themselves and their family as important figures during their time and, as conveyed in her article, Shadis proves just that.

Although prescribed not to, as Duby says, women in reality did hold power, and when comparing his portrait of women with that of LoPrete and Shadis, audiences can see that women were indeed a visible asset to medieval society. Presenting an image of women that were faceless and voiceless during medieval period, Duby's representation proves to be problematic. He uses prescribed sources to talk about how women were supposed to act and the way people wanted them to be during that time, as opposed to LoPrete and Shadis who use documents of practice to offer a very different experience for medieval women. His assessment of women can be attributed to the specific kind sources he used and the lack of citation in his book, as using texts written by clerics would allow Duby to present this skewed image of women. LoPrete and Shadis, on the other hand, were able to dig down deeper because they used sources such as charters as evidence, giving a more accurate portrayal. As LoPrete says, if historians look at the right sources, they "will surely discover that women exercised more acknowledged power than has been assumed and that accounts of medieval politics are incomplete if they ignore the deeds of female lords."³³²

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Endnotes

¹ Georges Duby, *Women of the Twelfth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 2.

² *Ibid.*, 3.

³ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁸ Kimberly A. LoPrete, "Adela of Blois: Familial Alliances and Female Lordship," in *Aristocratic Women in Medieval France* ed. by Theodore Evergates (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 2.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹² *Ibid.*, 17.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

²² *Ibid.*, 29.

²³ Miriam Shadis, "Piety, Politics and Power: The Patronage of Leonor of England and Her Daughters Berenguela of León and Blanche of Castile," 210.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 202.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 203.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 204.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 206.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 206-207.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 213.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 207.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 213.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 217.

⁴² Kimberly A. LoPrete, "Adela of Blois: Familial Alliances and Female Lordship," 43.