
Countesses

CHARTERS SHOW that women of comital rank routinely fulfilled administrative roles at various stages in the female life cycle. The focus here is on charter evidence relating to those aristocratic women who were explicitly accorded the title *comitissa*, or else were married to men of comital rank, or were born into such families. Comparison with other high-ranking women is included where appropriate, in order to illustrate the central argument that women's power was constructed through the family in their role as wife or widow, and was thus tied to the female life cycle. Such power, like that of men, was rooted in land tenure.

The definition of categories of women is fraught with problems, yet arguably countesses were a distinct status group.¹ Andreas Capellanus, writing in the late twelfth century, recognised social gradations based on rank and distinguished countesses as a group which he placed amongst the high nobility.² Charters relating to the *honor* of Chester demonstrate the formal public power, spheres of influence, land holdings, economic interests, and the religious and cultural roles of the countesses. It will be considered whether they were unusual in the range of roles and functions that they fulfilled. These formal public roles can be explored through an examination of their activity as witnesses, signers, consentors, alienors and co-alienors, which can be related to the gendered functions of wife, mother, heiress or conversely widow or mother of the heir. Each category could define the role of each countess, or more than one could affect her position within the family. The close examination of charters also raises some fundamental problems of the nature of the source material itself, but examples of other powerful countesses who acted in similar roles to those of the countesses of Chester do show useful patterns in the way that women of comital rank exerted power throughout the female life cycle.

The Chester evidence

The earls of Chester were among the greatest nobles of the Norman and Angevin realms, the high political élite of twelfth-century society. Their power was rooted in extensive land holdings in Cheshire and beyond, which by 1086 consisted of land scattered throughout twenty of thirty-four English counties.³ Two of the most famous, or, more correctly, infamous, earls were Ranulf II (1129–53), whose change of allegiance during Stephen's reign has been often cited as a typical example of the troublesome baronage that bedevilled both Stephen and Matilda, and Ranulf III (1181–1232).⁴ The wives, mothers and widows of these powerful figures are the subject of this section.

In the late eleventh century, Earl Hugh I of Avranches married Ermentrude, the daughter of Hugh count of Clermont. Their son and heir Richard succeeded to the earldom of Chester at the age of six on his father's death in 1101. He married Matilda (I), a daughter of Stephen count of Blois, but they were both drowned in the wreck of the *White Ship* on 25 November 1120. Ranulf I 'le Meschin', Richard's first cousin, succeeded to the earldom and he married Lucy, the widow of both Ivo Taillebois and Roger fitz Gerold. Their son Ranulf II 'de Gernons' was earl from 1129 to 1153. He married Matilda, daughter of Robert earl of Gloucester. She outlived Ranulf and his heir, dying in 1189. Their son Hugh II married Bertrada, daughter of Simon count of Evreux, who also outlived her husband and died in 1227. Ranulf III 'de Blundeville', earl from 1181, married twice, first in 1189 Constance, daughter and heir of Conan earl of Richmond and duke of Brittany, widow of Geoffrey Plantagenet, Henry II's third son. They were divorced in 1199. Secondly, he married Clemencia, the widow of Alan de Dinan, a daughter of William de Fougères, which lay to the south of the Chester lands in Normandy, on the borders of Brittany, Maine and Normandy. She survived her husband, dying in 1237.⁵ These marriage alliances were diverse. What they have in common is that the women who were married to the earls were of high aristocratic status, Constance of Brittany's marriage marking the twelfth-century apogee in the Chester marriage strategy. More interestingly, and reflective of the disparity of age between men and women at the time of their marriage in the twelfth century, most of the women who married the earls then managed to survive their husbands – and it is during these periods of relative independence that they are most visible.

Herluin de Conteville = Herleve (mother of William the Conqueror)

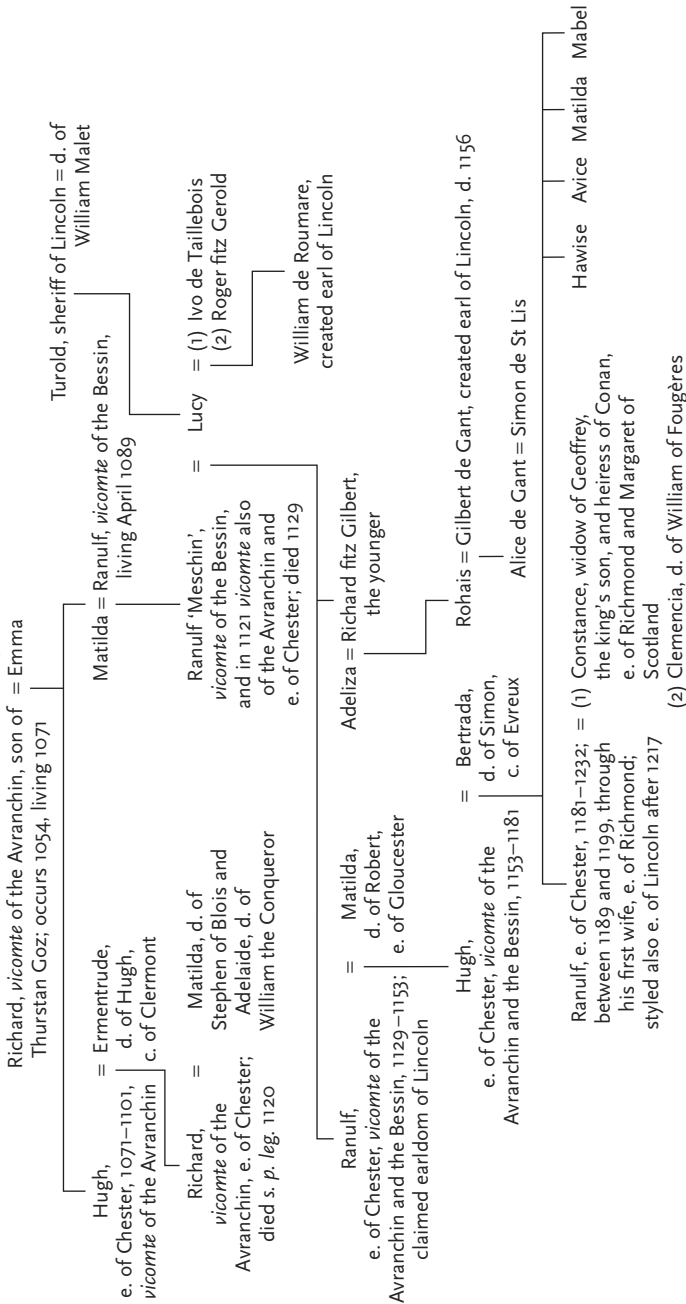


FIGURE 1 The earls of Chester in the eleventh and twelfth centuries

ERMENTRUDE

The earliest evidence relates to the countess Ermentrude. Orderic Vitalis condemned Earl Hugh as a ‘slave to gluttony . . . given over to carnal lusts’.⁶ Ermentrude’s character is not commented upon: it was her pedigree and role as mother of the heir which was important. The charter evidence, however, shows that the role of the countess as wife to the earl was to support his policies, and as mother of the heir to the earldom her role was to support her son. As wife Ermentrude played a consultative role. Of the five extant charters of Earl Hugh, Ermentrude appears in three. A letter to Rainald abbot of Abingdon states that Hugh agreed to grant the land in question only after consulting his wife and barons.⁷ Ermentrude clearly participated in the decision-making process of the *honor*; her advice is sought along with the *consilium* of Hugh’s barons.⁸

Ermentrude also played a crucial role in the foundation of St Werburgh’s Abbey, Chester. The so-called ‘Great Charter’ of Ranulf II, dated to the early 1150s, reveals that it was Ermentrude who, at the order of her husband, placed the gift of Weston upon Trent on the altar at the public founding ceremony.⁹ The importance of such public ceremonies was to secure the grant in memory before the use of written records became routine, yet their precise mechanisms are often obscured in charters where routine formulas were used to convey routine ceremony.¹⁰ The precision of the detail concerning Earl Hugh ordering Ermentrude to place the gift on the altar is unusual, but there are other examples of husband and wife conjointly placing gifts on altars. For example, Jordan Paynel and Gertrude, his wife, c. 1125–35 and Robert de Percy and Agnes, his wife, in 1160–65 symbolically transferred livery of seisin by placing gifts on the altar of the beneficiary.¹¹ The ‘Great Charter’ was probably drawn up by the monks of Chester in the period of Hugh II’s minority (1153–62), and, although questions have been raised about its diplomatic, the details concerning the role of Ermentrude probably reflect a reliable oral tradition.¹² This was an important occasion; Archbishop Anselm had been involved in the negotiations prior to foundation and witnessed the charter.¹³ It was Ermentrude who symbolically enacted the transfer of property on this important public religious occasion.

If the foundation of St Werburgh’s was an expression of the cohesiveness of the honorial community created by Earl Hugh in the aftermath of the Conquest, and a focal point for personal loyalty to Earl Hugh,¹⁴ the role of Ermentrude as wife of Earl Hugh is also as a focus of loyalty – her role in the foundation ceremony is doubly important and symbolic. Firstly, she symbolically enacts the transfer of land – the land

is passing to the church through the actions of the wife of the earl. Ermentrude was the vessel through which the land became the inheritance of the church and passed into its control, thus she symbolically and practically conveyed a new phase in the ownership of the land. Secondly, she made the gift at the order of her husband, emphasising his power and authority as head of the family, as superior lord, and this emphasises his control over the ceremony. This also indelibly associated her with his authority. Hence there is another dimension to the foundation of the abbey – it could be argued that in fact the foundation is a joint act which demanded the loyalty of Earl Hugh's followers to both him and his wife, who then as countess enacted the donation. Therefore the foundation is a focal point of loyalty to the family acting together in lordship. The familial nature of this endowment was further stressed when both Hugh and Ermentrude gave their bodies for burial to St Werburgh's.¹⁵ If the document was created during Hugh II's minority, the period which saw his mother, Matilda, assume a more powerful role as guardian of the heir and when she co-granted charters with him,¹⁶ then quite possibly the monks of Chester recorded Ermentrude's role with care, since Countess Matilda was the key to ensuring the charter was accepted. As such the monks were emphasising the role of a previous countess to ingratiate themselves with the current dowager countess. Thus recording the role of a previous countess as subservient to, but crucially involved with, their religious patronage of her husband may well have functioned as a model of behaviour appropriate for the wife of an earl. This model of Ermentrude sustained a positive image of female activity on behalf of the monastery which served the purposes of the monks who wished to secure their gift. This was in sharp contrast to the memory of her daughter-in-law Matilda, whom Richard married in 1115. According to later tradition Matilda poisoned Richard's mind against the abbey; he was indeed not a generous benefactor to the abbey and he left the abbacy open for three years prior to his death by drowning in 1120.¹⁷ This is important corroborative evidence of women's counsel. More significantly, it also indicates that monks would expect women to influence the monastic benefaction of their marital family.

Ermentrude's role assumed a new prominence in the affairs of the *honor* when as widow she had an important role to play as guardian of the heir. She conjointly granted a confirmation charter with her son Richard on the day of Pentecost 13 May 1106 in favour of Abingdon.¹⁸ The Abingdon Chronicle states that this charter was issued after Ermentrude and Richard *cum melioribus suorum baronum* were received at the abbey.¹⁹ Abbot Faritius and Ermentrude petitioned Richard to issue the

charter, which was then attested with Ermentrude's seal.²⁰ The chronicler accords Ermentrude a key role in this confirmation. Firstly she and Abbot Faritius acted together to ensure that Richard issued a confirmation charter. Her seal was used to authenticate the charter. Both of these are important, since her role is more than one of support, as Barraclough maintained – it is as mother of the unbelted earl (*nondem militare baltheo cinctus*). This is a rare early reference to a non-royal female seal, the earliest of which dates from c. 1136–38.²¹ It is also a rare insight into the basis of the power of the mother of the earl. Her seal was important since her son is not yet knighted, and the implication is that this is the reason why he has no seal.

The negotiations behind the eventual confirmation charter are evidenced in the Abingdon Chronicle in a way that the charter alone does not reveal, and thus neatly illustrate one problem of charter evidence, that often the long series of negotiations which they validated and settle are lost. In the text of the charter, which survives only as a cartulary copy, the language used is non-gender-specific. The joint verbs of actions convey a sense of joint comital authority. The ordering of names in the opening clause gives Richard's name first: *Ricardus Cestrensis comes et Ermentrudis comitissa, mater eius* gave greeting to Nigel d'Oilly and Roger fitz Ralph and all the barons of Oxfordshire. The major verbs of action use the plural in simple donation verbs like *concedimus*, and the barons are clearly *nostri baroni*. No sense of female dependence is conveyed, only joint authority. The formal negotiation evidenced in the preamble in the Abingdon Chronicle is left out of the text of the cartulary copy of the charter, possibly because the charter records the basis on which legal claims could later be built. Ermentrude continued to maintain a powerful interest in Abingdon as her status changed from wife to widow – in the context of religious patronage at least, she maintained a continuity in her public role. As mother of the heir Ermentrude clearly had wardship of his body if not his lands, and the sources emphasise that she played an intercessory role as well as acting with joint authority, since Richard was still a minor. The author of the Abingdon Chronicle felt that the security of the gift was important and included a sealing clause to emphasise her authority. If she did acquire a seal she did so when widowed, and this reflects her greater involvement in business. There is no evidence to show whether Ermentrude remarried, and likewise owing to lack of sources it is difficult to know how long she survived Hugh.

An instructive comparison with the case of Ermentrude is that of another high-status noblewoman, Adeliza, the wife of Gilbert fitz Richard (d. 1114 × 1117), who acted with her children to confirm the gift of an

undertenant to the church of St Mary's and St Botolph's, Thorney, c. 1136–38.²² This charter shows that Adeliza as mother acted with her sons and daughter: Gilbert, Walter, Baldwin and Rohais were included in the address clause and witnessed the charter. This charter has long been recognised for the genealogical information it reveals, but it is also important in that it shows that Adeliza and her sons and daughters acted conjointly in lordship to confirm an undertenant's grant. Most important of all it shows that Adeliza was using a seal at the relatively early date of 1136–38. There is other evidence of Adeliza's involvement in religious patronage: the cartulary of Thorney records that she gave to Thorney one hide in Raunds (Northamptonshire) at the concession of her son and heir Hervey.²³ The copyist gives the opening address clause as Adeliz a *mater*, with *comitis* added in a later hand. By this concession she was entered into the abbey's confraternity list; in another grant to Thorney she gave 5s worth of rents.²⁴ This charter was placed upon the altar in token of its security *et scripto sigillato super altare posuit confirmavit*. Adeliza also patronised Castle Acre: in a thirteenth-century cartulary copy of her original grant, given at the concession of her son Earl Gilbert, she is called *quondam uxor* of Gilbert fitz Richard.²⁵ Mother and son were linked as benefactors of Castle Acre in a conjoint gift where Gilbert fitz Richard and Adeliza gave the tithes of various mills. The cartulary copy of Adeliza's surviving charter is an almost exact rendition of the original wording, suggesting that the second thirteenth-century copy of her *acta* giving her rents at Raunds may also be a reliable copy. This is important because it shows that the status of Adeliza as patron was defined at different times by different address clauses which stress her relationship to her male kin, by different abbeys. She is defined as mother in the majority of her charters, which suggests that this was the empowering role in her life cycle. It also shows that these clauses were variable and flexible, reflective of the changing social position of a widow, since the most important consideration of an abbey was the accurate identification of individual patrons. For noblewomen this could be identification through the marital family, which illustrates the importance of patrimonial kindred structures through marriage in the process of the accurate identification of individuals. When Adeliza co-granted and sealed documents it was her authority that gave the grant validity and security, symbolised by the authentication of her seal.

LUCY

Adeliza's contemporary, the countess Lucy of Chester, was a considerable heiress to land in Lincolnshire.²⁶ She was married three times

and had four children by her various marriages. She outlived all her husbands. Her position as heiress made her an attractive marriage partner. It was as a widow that Lucy was most independent of family control. The 1130 Pipe Roll shows that she fined with the king, paying 500 marks for the privilege of not marrying within five years; she also fined £266 13s 4d for her father's lands and paid all but £100 of this sum. She also paid 100 marks for doing 'right' in her court, indicating that she had control of her court and exercised the rights of lordship when administering her lands.²⁷

Lucy managed to further the interests of her favourite religious foundation, Spalding Priory in Lincolnshire, throughout all three marriages. Ivo Taillebois, her first husband, founded Spalding in 1085. During her third marriage, to Earl Ranulf I, she acted as co-alienor in 1123–29, granting to Spalding the churches of Belchford, Scamblesby and Minting, which may have been her inheritance.²⁸ Lucy as heiress may have maintained some intrinsic interest in their alienation – her consent or involvement in the act was necessary, but the gift probably also reflects her initiative. It was confirmed by Henry I at the request of both Ranulf and Lucy, so here Lucy acted as intercessor in the royal court with her husband. The continuity of her interest is striking. As widow Lucy augmented these gifts to Spalding when in 1135 she granted the manor of Spalding to the monks in free alms as she herself had held it in the time of Ivo Taillebois, Roger fitz Gerold and Earl Ranulf. The precise wording of the charter indicates that Lucy had held the manor herself during all three marriages and that she retained some administrative control, which explains her role as co-alienor when married to Ranulf.²⁹ The Spalding cartulary shows that Lucy augmented this gift, possibly on the same occasion.³⁰ In all these charters Lucy is described as *comitissa*. In the charter co-granted with Ranulf she was *Lucia comitissa uxor mea*, and in her widowhood she retained the use of the title. It is significant that public status derived from marriage to an earl was thus retained by his widow.

As the founder of the convent of Stixwold in 1135 Lucy is one of the few aristocratic women of the late eleventh and twelfth centuries to achieve the role of independent lay founder. Her gift was made independent of royal support, thereby differing from earlier foundations made by other powerful widows.³¹ A fragment of her foundation charter is still extant.³² More details of the foundation are provided by a letter to two sons, the half-brothers Ranulf of Chester and William of Roumare, which shows that she granted all her land in Stixwold, Honington and Bassingthorpe.³³ This letter, in which Lucy asks her sons

to uphold her gift, superbly illustrates the difficulties associated with the maintenance of a gift after the death of a benefactor and especially the particular problems of female monastic communities.³⁴ The language in this letter is interesting. Lucy addresses her sons as *karissimis filiis suis*. The writ/letter changes half-way through from standard writ form to an epistolary and an almost emotional appeal. Lucy as mother begs her sons to honour her gift: she stresses that the maintenance of the gift would benefit them all when they were before God. Lucy was able to further her own aims more effectively during her widowhood, exercising greater control of her lands. Like any magnate Lucy attempted to ensure the security of her gift after her death. Thus there is a continuity in her role in religious patronage. As a wife she had used her influence at both the royal court and that of the honour to act as intercessor for Spalding Priory, then as a widow she founded her own religious institution. In the context of religious patronage Lucy shared her husband's comital authority, building on, but not simply restricted to, the interest she had brought to the marriage as an heiress. Husband and wife collaborated in religious patronage through their comital authority. She used this to further her own aims and used her greater powers as widow to reinforce her previous patronage.

MATILDA

Public activity during both marriage and widowhood is also evident within the charter evidence relating to the next countess, Matilda, who was a granddaughter of Henry I by his illegitimate son, Earl Robert of Gloucester, and Mabel, daughter and heir of Robert fitz Haimo. She was thus a niece of the empress Matilda. She was involved in Earl Ranulf II's campaigns of 1141 – acting as the decoy in a ruse by which he seized Lincoln Castle.³⁵ During her marriage to Ranulf, Matilda witnessed his charters, granted her own, and was a recipient of lands from her father. In 1141–47 she granted a bovate of land in Woolsthorpe (Lincolnshire) to Belvoir Priory, granting the service of Joscelin and his wife. The charter opens with a clause which closely follows that of her husband's practice in which Matilda greets the 'constable, sheriffs, barons, castellans, justices, bailiffs, officials and all men both French and English'. The grant was confirmed by her husband during the same period, probably on the same occasion, as both have the same witness list.³⁶ Since the grant concerns land that Ranulf had only recently gained during the period after his capture of Lincoln Castle in 1141, the unusual circumstances of the 1140s may well explain this charter. Matilda was granting land acquired thanks to Ranulf's seizure of Lincoln Castle,

in which she had played a central role. Matilda's grant of the land to a religious beneficiary may reflect that she had been given some interest in the land by Ranulf, possibly as dower. However, according to Glanvill, a woman had no legal right to claim dower in her husband's acquisition 'if nothing was said about acquisitions when the dower was originally assigned'. Further, Glanvill states, 'It should be known that a woman cannot alienate any of her dower during the life of her husband.' He is silent on the subject of a woman alienating a portion of her husband's acquisitions irrespective of the status of the land in question.³⁷ It has been pointed out that Glanvill was concerned with the rights of heirs, and that he considered acquisitions more freely alienable 'inside or outside the family'.³⁸ Matilda's grant suggests that there was more flexibility in the arrangements that families made, irrespective of formal custom.

Out of eight charters which Matilda witnesses, four concern grants made by her husband in favour of ecclesiastical foundations.³⁹ The other four are *acta* granted by her son during her dowager period, some of which confirm his mother's grants.⁴⁰ Matilda participated in, and was associated with, the *honor's* public affairs in a supportive capacity for her husband and son. Matilda also granted land to one of her servants, which indicates her ability to make independent gifts as a wife, although the grant was confirmed by her husband.⁴¹ Matilda also granted a charter in favour of the church of Repton, a grant confirmed by her husband.⁴² Ranulf's confirmations resemble those of a lord confirming a vassal's grant to a tenant, which may well therefore have been normal honorial practice. Matilda also conjointly granted with her son a confirmation of a gift made by her husband in favour of Bordesley Abbey in 1153, which was probably granted shortly before Ranulf's death the same year.⁴³

Politics impacted upon Matilda's land holding. She received lands in *maritagium* from her father, so resolving a politically sensitive situation. The lands in question near Chipping Campden in Gloucestershire had been part of the Chester land holdings since 1086. Possibly the manor had fallen to Matilda's father, the earl of Gloucester, during the civil wars following the landing of the empress Matilda in 1139.⁴⁴ Chipping Campden was a valuable manor, strategically important to both Robert of Gloucester and Ranulf of Chester: the gift to Matilda as part of her *maritagium* was thus used by her father as a way of returning the lands to the control of her husband as part of the traditional *honor* of Chester. Ranulf's charter confirming the gift of Earl Robert to Matilda may also have been the earl's public acceptance of his wife's *maritagium* to resolve a political and familial dispute.

Matilda was a widow for thirty-six years, a considerable period. According to the *Rotuli de Dominabus*, she was more than fifty years old in 1185, yet she must have been nearer sixty than fifty, since it is possible that she may have been no more than a child when married, and was thus widowed at perhaps only twenty-eight to thirty. In 1185 she had dower in the manor of Waddington worth £22.⁴⁵ Matilda is most visible during Hugh's minority, which lasted from 1153 to 1162, which implies that she had a definite public role when acting as representative of the heir. In 1159 the farm of the *honor* was fixed at £294, of which Matilda and her son Earl Hugh were allowed £30, which was subsequently increased to £40.⁴⁶ This allowance was part of her dower and implies that, in having wardship of the body of Earl Hugh, for tax purposes they were assessed as one unit. Out of six charters issued by Hugh as a minor, Matilda witnessed four and was a co-alienor with Hugh in two.⁴⁷ One of them attempted to repair injuries to the church for which Ranulf II had died excommunicate. Here Matilda was acting to care for her husband's soul. The second is part of Henry II's attempt to normalise relations at the start of his reign.⁴⁸ The charter was issued at London in 1155 and Earl Hugh, aged six, was evidently at the great meeting of the important magnates held by Henry II, along with his mother. Matilda functioned in some capacity as his representative, which engendered the right to attend the royal court. It must be noted, however, that the Chester lands were administered by the king's officials, during Hugh's minority, although Matilda had received her dower, since the charter states she is restoring lands from it to Walter of Verdun.⁴⁹ Matilda witnessed four charters during her marriage and four as dowager countess. Her own charters reveal the same patterns of participation as wife and widow: she issued six in total, three during marriage and three as a widow. Matilda's earliest charter dates from c. 1141–47, whilst Ranulf was still alive.⁵⁰ One possibly dates to c. 1153, may have been granted when Ranulf was on his deathbed, and confirms Ranulf's grant.⁵¹ The other dates from 1150–4 but may possibly be a charter from her widowhood.⁵² Thus possibly two of these charters were granted at a period close to the change in Matilda's status and position that occurred when Ranulf died. This underlines the fact that her power was greatest when she was a widow. The context of the change in power and uncertainties of the new political situation both with the *honor* and the kingdom as a whole is also significant.

As dowager countess Matilda continued to fulfil a religious role as benefactor: during her dowager period she issued three *acta*, all in favour of ecclesiastical foundations. She founded a priory at Repton

shortly after Earl Ranulf's death.⁵³ She stipulated that the convent at Calke should be moved to Repton and that Calke should be subject to Repton. Matilda acquired a seal in the period 1164–72 to authenticate another charter to Repton.⁵⁴ In 1172 she endowed Repton with lands in Great Baddow, Essex, that she had received as *maritagium*.⁵⁵ As widow she asked for and received permission from her son (who attained his majority in 1162) to augment her previous patronage of Repton in 1164–72.⁵⁶ Even as a powerful widow, as a landholder she had to seek permission of her 'lord' to alienate lands that she held by right of *maritagium*. In 1178–81 Matilda was present at the making of a charter in favour of St Werburgh's, along with her daughter-in-law Bertrada and her grandson, the future Ranulf III.⁵⁷ Here Matilda was present in her role as dowager countess in the context of a public ceremony of reaffirmation of family support for St Werburgh's. This confirmed the possessions and rights of the abbey, but also confirmed the change in status that occurred to all the family members, both the dowager countesses and the future earl: he was now the future authority in the earldom, and his participation in the confirmation of the previous ancestor's grants was important. It is in the context of religious patronage that Matilda's own policies can be seen: each countess as widow thus fulfilled a socially acceptable public function, which was predicated upon powers to alienate land and marital status.

As with Ermentrude and Lucy, differences in Matilda's role and function occur in matters of degree. This must be related to a change in function from wife to mother of the heir, roles sometimes evidenced within the charters by the titles accorded each countess. In all her charters Lucy is referred to as countess of Chester; thus, despite her position as heiress, she kept the title acquired through her third marriage. Matilda likewise in all charters is entitled *comitissa*, yet when she was present at the making of a charter in favour of St Werburgh's, discussed above, her position in the family was more closely identified, as was that of her daughter-in-law Bertrada. Both are defined by their relation to Earl Hugh. Matilda is *mater comitis*, Bertrada is *B. comitissa sponsa eius*. They precede the heir Ranulf (III) in the list of those named who gave their consent. In her son's charters Bertrada is listed as *comitissa mater mea*. When Bertrada made her convention with Troarn she was Bertrada *relicta comitis Cestrensis*. As a witness her status was defined always as countess, and sometimes in relation to either her husband or her son. Bertrada's example shows that there was little difference in her witnessing activity despite her progression through the female life cycle.

BERTRADA

Bertrada, wife of Hugh of Chester, was, like Matilda, a widow for a considerable period. She was born in 1156, married to Hugh at the age of thirteen in 1169, and widowed at twenty-five in 1181. In 1185 she was recorded as having been allocated dower of the earl of Chester's demesne by Henry II. Both *maritagium* and dower were overseas.⁵⁸ She lived until 1227 and died at the age of seventy-one. Thus she was a widow a total of forty-six years. Bertrada, like Matilda and Lucy before her, participated in the affairs of the *honor* during both marriage and widowhood. Yet her role during marriage is less visible in the charter evidence: she appears in only four charters. In 1169 she acted as both witness and petitioner in a grant by her husband to one of her servants of a boat for fishing on the river Dee.⁵⁹ She witnessed the important grant of the church of Prestbury to St Werburgh's in the period 1178–81. This was a grand family restatement of public support for this institution, and which was made in the presence of Matilda, Earl Hugh's mother, Bertrada and Ranulf, Hugh's son.⁶⁰ Thus all prominent members of the comital family were present. In 1169–73 she witnessed a charter of routine nature when Earl Hugh granted lands to Godfrey, his homager.⁶¹ She was also a witness to a charter of 1178–80 which made a marriage agreement for her husband's illegitimate daughter Amicia. The role of a wife such as Bertrada was to support her husband's policies, and it is possible that she may have had some role in arranging this marriage.⁶²

During her forty-six-year period as dowager countess Bertrada issued three charters in her own right. One was in favour of the abbey of Troarn, in Normandy, in which the appearance of her own chamberlain, the son of her husband's chamberlain, indicates that as widow Bertrada maintained her own household.⁶³ The other grant c. 1200–10 to Ralph Carbonel probably concerns lands which she held in dower.⁶⁴ There is evidence of another charter issued by Bertrada which has not survived in a confirmation charter of her son in the period 1194–1203 in which Bertrada exchanged lands with the canons of Repton.⁶⁵ She also witnessed seven grants by her son.⁶⁶

In the period 1181–89 the coexistence of two dowager countesses, Matilda and Bertrada, who both had claims on the Chester lands through legally held rights to dower of a third, posed a potential threat to the Chester patrimony. The right to dower land did not necessarily entail easy entry to it; indeed, it is hard to discover whether any countess actually received her third.⁶⁷ Thus one possible method of avoiding the dispersal of patrimonial lands, as in the case of Bertrada, was to delay

the widow's entry to them. Indeed, the lands in Lincolnshire which were used as dower lands were brought to the *honor* of Chester by Lucy, and parts of them, for example Waddington, were granted successively to each countess when widowed.⁶⁸ The mould was broken in the marriage between Ranulf III and Constance of Brittany.

CONSTANCE⁶⁹

Constance of Brittany (d. 1201) appears to have had no role within the *honor* of Chester during her tumultuous marriage to Ranulf, which lasted from February 1187–88 until c. 1198. The marriage was negotiated at the same time that Ranulf was knighted by Henry II.⁷⁰ It was exceptional in that Constance's position as heiress to Brittany made her more than a rich prize for an aspiring prince, if it is accepted that this is how Ranulf viewed himself.⁷¹ Constance was the widow of Geoffrey Plantagenet (d. 1186), mother of Arthur, the heir to Brittany, who was a direct threat to King John. Her marriage to Ranulf and the antagonisms between them symbolised Breton resistance to Plantagenet influence in Brittany: it became a microcosm of wider political antagonisms and rivalries.⁷² In 1195–96 Constance was captured by Ranulf and imprisoned by him at the castle of St James sur Beuvron whilst on her way to conclude a treaty with Richard I.⁷³ Her main interest was her inheritance of Brittany: she played no role within the *honor* of Chester and she pursued her own policies and strategies concerning her inheritance. She supported the claims of her son to the duchy and, as mother, she pursued the dream of her son gaining the Angevin Continental inheritance.⁷⁴ Constance was therefore in pursuit of her own political ambition, which she wanted to see realised through her son. It seems that the marriage slowly deteriorated.

Constance and Ranulf were, however, able to put aside their personal antagonisms in the period 1190–95, when they both wrote to Richard bishop of London, asking him to help the canons of Fougères get possession of land in Cheshunt (Hertfordshire). Ranulf's letter was written in support of that of his wife, a rare intervention in the affairs of Brittany.⁷⁵ The land in question was of the gift of both Earl Conan, Constance's father, and Constance herself. It was land of her inheritance, which explains both her interest and the fact that she attached her seal to her letter. She was also defined through her father's name and retained the title countess of Brittany and duchess of Richmond even when married to Ranulf. As heiress she maintained an interest in her patrimony. She took those interests with her when she married Guy de Thouars, her third husband, in 1199. It was Constance who possibly

started proceedings to repudiate her marriage to Ranulf on the grounds of consanguinity.⁷⁶ There is evidence to show that she alienated lands of her inheritance in Richmond shortly before her death in 1201.⁷⁷

CLEMENCIA

Clemencia, the widow of Alan of Dinan, quickly replaced Constance as countess of Chester in September/October 1199. In 1201–4 Ranulf granted a charter in favour of Savigny with her consent.⁷⁸ He augmented this gift in 1220–26, again with her consent, since the lands in question were part of her *maritagium*.⁷⁹ Married for thirty years, she remained unmarried after the death of Ranulf in 1232 until she died in 1252. She confirmed Ranulf's gifts to Savigny as widow, since the abbey was her favourite foundation.⁸⁰ Clemencia had her own seal and counterseal as widow, and this, combined with specific language in her charters, reflects her greater powers of deposition as widow, with the use of phrases such as *in ligia potestate mea* in two of her charters in the period 1233–35 and *tempore viduatatis mee* in her later charter, datable to 1239–52. Such phrases reflect the greater legal definition of a widow's rights which occurred during the thirteenth century.⁸¹ In one charter she revoked a grant made by Ranulf from her marriage portion to Dieulacres, and instead gave the lands to Savigny, despite having apparently freely given her assent at the time of Ranulf's gift.⁸² If there are any conclusions to be drawn from a comparison of the role of Clemencia with those of the earlier countesses, it would seem that the countess, as wife, is less visible in charter evidence. Clemencia, as wife, appears in charters giving her consent, and may have received religious benefits, but she played no role in witnessing her husband's charters, unlike the earlier twelfth-century countesses. It was as a widow that she granted her own charters, again reflecting the greater autonomy of the widow's powers of alienation.

The charter evidence has shown how in the twelfth century the countesses of Chester performed various functions at both the *honor* and royal courts, and shows that there was continuity in an active public role from marriage to widowhood, a role which seems to have been normal and accepted. Through the twelfth century there was usually a change in level of activity rather than in function as the countesses moved through the stages of the female life cycle. They were supportive of their husbands during marriage, and then were representative and supportive of their sons during widowhood. Their religious role was sometimes, but not always, associated with their role as representatives of their husbands and sons. Yet it also reflects their right to alienate

property themselves which they held through inheritance or dower. Thus it could be said that they enacted their own policies and strategies, and the potential for such action was magnified as a widow.

It is striking that Matilda and her daughter-in-law Bertrada remained unmarried for thirty-six and forty-six years respectively. It has been calculated that 43 per cent of dowager countesses married only once; the remaining 57 per cent married for a second time, with a small proportion of these marrying for a third.⁸³ Thus the countesses were somewhat unusual. Neither Bertrada nor Matilda was an heiress, unlike the thrice-married Countess Lucy, which may in part explain their prolonged dowager period. Given the length of the dowager period of Matilda and Bertrada, it is notable that, as with Ermentrude and Lucy, they fulfilled similar roles as wife and widow, that is they acted as alienors, witnesses and so on.

The visibility of the involvement of the countesses of Chester in the affairs of the *honor* may have declined through the twelfth century. A statistical breakdown illustrates this apparent decline. The figures show involvement as either witness or (co-) alienor, since both represent proactive behaviour, authority, recognition and influence. No distinction is made between types of grant, or beneficiary. The earliest record sources show that Ermentrude was involved in three out of her husband's five charters – i.e. a participation rate of 60 per cent. Lucy was involved in 11 per cent of her husband's charters, Matilda in 16.3 per cent – as a widow her participation rate in the affairs of the *honor* was 7.8 per cent. The production of her own charters was the same. Bertrada's participation rate as wife was 19.5 per cent. As dowager countess she witnessed six charters of her son, Ranulf III, before her death in 1227. During this period Ranulf issued 220 charters, making her participation rate 3.5 per cent. Statistical analyses, however, only give part of the overall explanation. Such visible activity may not in fact be indicative of their power and authority, because of a major drawback to charter evidence: conclusions have to be based on incomplete documentation which changed in nature, form, content and style. The apparent decline in participation is not, for example, reflected in Bertrada's power as an alienor – expressed in comparative statistical terms this shows an increase of 200 per cent for Bertrada, 300 per cent for Lucy and no change for Matilda. Both Matilda and Bertrada were routinely issuing charters as dowager countess. They both acquired seals, which is indicative that other charters probably existed which have not survived. Charters show continuities in the roles of the countesses across the various stages in the life cycle, whether as wives or as widows. In addition, in

spite of the dramatic increase in the number of surviving charters, and therefore probably of their production, the participation of the countesses remains significant.

Comparisons and contrasts

Powerful countesses who were active as wives are not unusual. Hawise countess of Gloucester (1150–97) was associated with her husband in the affairs of the *honor* of Gloucester throughout her marriage and as a widow after his death in 1183. She witnessed over 75 per cent of Earl William's *acta*, which compares with 23 per cent for the countesses of Chester.⁸⁴ She issued her own charters alienating land from her marriage portion during her marriage, implying that as wife she had some control over what were essentially her lands, and her husband witnessed the charter.⁸⁵ As a widow she issued five charters in favour of Durford Abbey, Sussex. She granted land of her *maritagium* at Pimperne to Fontevrault, and also to St Mary's, Nuneaton, along with her body for burial, thus giving her body to the religious institution founded by her father, Robert earl of Leicester, c. 1155.⁸⁶ She authenticated some of her charters with her seal.⁸⁷ She also issued a charter of liberties for Petersfield, Hampshire, in 1183–89.⁸⁸ Hawise was active in the administration of the Gloucester lands as wife, yet it was as widow that she was able to enact her own policies and strategies – in her patronage of her father's monastery, for example, rather than those of her marital family, she expressed a cultural choice and familial preference through the conduit of religious patronage.

Likewise, Petronella countess of Leicester (d. 1 April 1212) co-granted charters with her husband and as widow (after his death in 1190) granted and acquired a seal.⁸⁹ Her husband Earl Robert gave land to St Mary's Evreux in 1189–90 for the souls of his parents, Petronella and his children.⁹⁰ There is also evidence to show that, like Matilda, the countess of Chester in 1141, she was involved in the military campaigns of her husband. In 1173–74 she was captured with him at the battle of Fornham when he rebelled against Henry II.⁹¹ Yet it was as a widow that she granted the majority of her charters, all of which were in favour of religious houses in Normandy, France and England.⁹² She held her own court, where her vassals made agreements which she witnessed.⁹³

Hawise countess of Gloucester and Petronella countess of Leicester are two examples of women who, like the countesses of Chester, were most powerful as widows. Charters reveal how powerful women utilised their economic resources. As might be expected they conform to patterns

of behaviour reflective of their rank. In medieval society widows were the most independently economically enfranchised of women of the nobility. Such power was magnified greatly if a widow who was also an heiress could exert influence in her second marriage by retaining some control or influence over her inheritance. Dowager countesses-heiresses had the potential to be among the most powerful independent women in society. They can be considered a sub-set of widows who were a distinct status group who enacted their own policies and stratagems, and had economic power rooted in land tenure and rank. This can be illustrated by the examples of Matilda and Agnes de Percy, the heiresses of Earl William of Warwick, Margaret de Bohun, the daughter and heiress of the earl of Hereford, and Hawise, countess of Aumale, the daughter and heir of William le Gros.

Matilda de Percy countess of Warwick was the co-heiress of William de Percy (II), who died in 1175.⁹⁴ She married, as his second wife, William (III) earl of Warwick, who died in 1184. In 1185 she fined for 700 marks for her inheritance, dower and for not being compelled to remarry.⁹⁵ As a widow she granted twenty charters. Her sister and co-heiress Agnes de Percy was married to Jocelin de Louvain (d. 1180), the brother of the queen. The greater powers of the widow are clearly shown in the charter evidence relating to both these powerful women. Both women were associated with their husband's *acta* as consentors, but both women had their own seals, and most of their charters date from after the death of their respective husbands. Matilda's favourite foundation was Fountains Abbey: over half her charters were issued to this institution. Matilda fulfilled all the roles of a great lay landholder, confirming vassals' gifts and making depositions to favoured individuals, thereby dispensing secular patronage. Of particular interest is her charter in favour of Juliana, her chamberlain, since this shows Matilda had at least one female household retainer.⁹⁶

As a wife Matilda's advice and concession had been sought by her husband when making depositions to Sawley Abbey which concerned her patrimonial lands and familial foundation.⁹⁷ This implies that she had some right to be consulted and involved in the alienation of lands from her inheritance. Sawley Abbey had been founded by her father, William de Percy, in 1147 and was in a state of decline. On 25 March 1189 Matilda took action. At the advice of various clerics, including Julian abbot of Igny and William abbot of Mortemer, William Vavasour, *aliorum proborum hominum et fidelium meorum et totius curie mee*, she re-endowed the monastery.⁹⁸ The witness list included, among others, William Vavasour, Richard Vavasour and Nigel de Plumpton, significant

individuals. The grant was made for the soul of her husband, King Henry, William de Percy, her father, Alice of Tonbridge, her mother, Alan de Percy, her brother, and Agnes de Percy, her sister. The relationship between the two sisters was amicable: they confirmed each other's gifts, acting together to ensure the security of their donations, and Matilda may have persuaded her sister to augment her refoundation of Sawley Abbey when Agnes confirmed her sister's grant of the church of Tadcaster and gave an additional gift of 140 sheep.⁹⁹ They granted land to family members; Agnes de Percy gave pasture for over 600 sheep to her nephew which he then granted to Sawley Abbey.¹⁰⁰ In 1182 Agnes arranged for the future marriage of her illegitimate nephew, William, son of Alan de Percy. This concord dating from 1182 agreed in the king's court gave specified lands to William which were to return to Agnes if she found him an heiress worth between £10 and £12.¹⁰¹ Agnes received a share of over £100 of silver which her husband received on his departure on crusade. She had clearly been involved in this money-raising exercise, supporting her husband's plan to go on crusade. The manor in question had been granted to Jocelin on his marriage to Agnes, so the transaction was depriving Agnes of revenue.¹⁰²

Margaret de Bohun is an example of a woman of this rank who controlled her affairs and retained independence as a widow, exercised the powers of a lay magnate and was important in familial affairs. Margaret was the daughter of Miles earl of Hereford and his eventual heir. She married Humphrey de Bohun, a steward of Henry II, who died in 1177. Margaret held her own court to manage the routine administration of her lands.¹⁰³ As a great lay landholder Margaret enfeoffed military followers, confirmed undertenants' charters and granted over twenty charters in favour of St Mary's Priory, Llanthony Secunda, having acquired a seal to authenticate documents.¹⁰⁴ In 1167 she began her patronage of Llanthony with a ceremonial occasion presenting her grant on the altar of the church.¹⁰⁵ At the petition of her undertenant, William of Stokes, Margaret confirmed his grant by placing a book upon the altar of St Mary's, here acting as lord securing a vassal's grant by symbolic action and cultural patron in the context of religious patronage.¹⁰⁶

Widows sometimes used their role in religious patronage to designate their place of burial in charters, which in effect functioned as wills. Hawise countess of Gloucester willed that her body should be buried at Durford Abbey, her favourite foundation.¹⁰⁷ Alice de St Quintin willed her body to be buried at Nun Appleton Priory, Yorkshire, a priory of Cistercian nuns that she had founded.¹⁰⁸ Matilda de Percy and Petronella

countess of Leicester similarly chose their burial place.¹⁰⁹ Husbands and wives could act together to designate their burial place.¹¹⁰ The designation of an individual's final resting place could prove contentious, and indeed widows did not necessarily enjoy harmonious relations with the religious houses of their husbands and sons. Rohais de Beauchamp was in dispute with the monks of Walden in a squabble over the body of her son, Geoffrey de Mandeville (d. 1166). On his death whilst on campaign against the Welsh the monks attempted to make off with his body without informing the countess. A clerk 'escaped' and warned her. She hurriedly assembled some armed men, and attempted to waylay the cortège, but was foiled in the attempt. Once his body was secured and laid before the altar at Walden the abbot sent to Rohais to invite her to her son's funeral. In retaliation Rohais arranged for all their hangings, furniture and belongings to be stripped from his private chapel to be hung in her own foundation at Chicksand.¹¹¹ As with other countesses already discussed, it was as a widow that Rohais granted the majority of her charters and held her own court, although she did grant lands to Colne Priory c. 1150.¹¹²

Widowhood was the most powerful stage in the life cycle of twelfth-century noblewomen. Increasingly in the late twelfth century, widows who made agreements were careful to stress the legitimacy of their position to do so. This was expressed in a gender-specific phrase in the text of charters which begins to occur in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, becoming more routine as the thirteenth century progressed. The phrase conveyed legitimacy or power through the use of the Latin *potestas*, often accompanied by the words *in legia potestate* and *in viduitate*. The process of identification begins in the address clauses, with the name of the widow granting the charter more frequently followed by the phrase *quondam uxor*, with the name of deceased husband(s), and then the *legia potestate* clause. This closer attention to the definition of noblewomen's status in charters is evidence of changes in documentary forms as a result of the proliferation of documents in the twelfth century. It was also a statement of female identity in a document intended for public consumption. With more individuals granting charters the need to record precisely who was who grew. The development of such clauses occurs after the impact of the Angevin reforms and hence perhaps reflects a greater legal concision in the techniques for recording property conveyances.

For example, if the greater title to land was due to inheritance rights, the opening clause of a charter granted by a woman might contain a *filia* phrase. This is not status-specific: women of all ranks are

described as ‘daughter of’ in their charter opening address clauses. It may be termed a filial description and was applicable to men also. Inheritance rights then give greater status and self-defining gender parity, since in this respect noblewomen’s charters are similar to those issued by males, who as heirs will define themselves as ‘son of’. Matilda of Wallingford gave lands *de hereditate mea* so that her right to alienate land was clear.¹¹³ When in the lifetime of her husband Brian fitz Count she granted a charter it was done with him *assentiente pariter ac laudante*.¹¹⁴ The inclusion of this clause shows that the scribe was careful to stress the legitimacy of his patron’s position. The *in legia potestate* clause is to be found only in the charters of widows. It is thus a gender-specific tool of definition in that it clarifies the legal position of the woman through a declaration of her marital status. In 1202–3 Isabel de Warenne granted a virgate of land to a certain Richard, son of Robert de Combe. She did so as *ego Isabella comitissa War[ennie] post obitum domini et viri mei Hamelin comitis Warennie* and sealed the charter.¹¹⁵ Another good example is in a charter by Hawise countess of Aumâle (d. 1214) which illustrates that the linguistic construction of charters was capable of development to reflect wider legal changes occurring in the twelfth century, often considered to be the age of the definition of the individual. This careful phrasing of charters is illustrated in this charter quit-claiming various important rights to Fulco de Orili, including all her wards *et estagis castellorum*. Hawise greets all to whom the charter may come, and then carefully explains, *Noveritis me in libera viduitate mea et in legia*, and goes on to explain that the gift is made *et gratuita voluntate mea et postquam feci finem meum cum domino J(ohanne) rege Angl*.¹¹⁶ This is a reference to the fine that Hawise made with John of £5,000 to remain single after the death of her third husband, Baldwin de Bethune, in 1212.¹¹⁷ The document carefully emphasised her greater powers of deposition as a widow.¹¹⁸

Charters have shown how aristocratic women such as the countesses were active within the *honor* as wives and as widows. Such countesses were significant individuals who wielded power and authority. Their marital status, and thus the female life cycle, underpinned their power, which was rooted in social status and familial connections as well as political circumstance. Throughout the twelfth century the wives and widows of powerful earls participated within the affairs of the *honor* and the family, as well as wider ‘public’ society. These roles were magnified when women entered the stage of the life cycle which gave them most access to land in their own right – widowhood. However, marriage defined the moment when a woman of the nobility could become a

more active member of society wider than her natal family. A countess, as wife, could assume participation in public affairs to a much greater extent than as merely the unmarried daughter of a noble family. Wives are more visible in the sources as active participants than daughters, who, although they may be seen to give their consent to familial grants and may witness, rarely grant land away as unmarried single women. Maidenhood was not an empowering role in the context of land transfers. It would be possible through a close study of charters to discover whether minors granted charters with guardians who were not relatives. The roles and spheres of activity of the countesses of Chester are typical of their rank. It is clear that one role of a wife of a powerful earl was to support her husband's policies, and this was visibly represented in the public role of witnessing. The participation of the wives and widows of powerful nobles in the transfers of familial lands was not unusual in the twelfth century. Hence powerful countesses are a feature of twelfth-century society, not exceptions within it.

The countesses of Chester were thus not unique in the twelfth century in their public roles as wives or widows. Their public roles were explicitly linked with their position as wife, mother and widow. They attended the royal court. They accessed the rights of lordship, since they derived authority from their position as the wife or mother of the earl. Further, charters show how noblewomen exerted power and influence when utilising the aristocratic prerogative of bestowing patronage. In so doing they melded the interests and influence of their rank with symbolic, practical and cultural roles in the public domain. Further, they utilised a sphere of influence sanctioned by the church and society: the use of wealth for the purpose of religious patronage. This behaviour was traditional, individual, familial and optional. Given the church's claim to afford widows special protection, the cultivation of church support by a powerful widow would not only make sense spiritually but may also have served to create links with churchmen should the widow require their support in the future. More than this, however, the evidence has shown that a countess, as a wife, could participate in the alienation of family land as a witness, a consensor or a grantor. The charter evidence from Chester demonstrates a certain continuity of involvement by the countesses in the public affairs of the *honor* throughout the twelfth century. They appear in their husbands' and sons' *acta* as co-alienors, consensors and witnesses. They granted their own *acta*, acted as guardians over minors, alienated their dower lands as widows, and as dowagers continued to have some involvement in familial acts of donation to religious houses. The charter evidence

shows continuities in their roles despite variable participation rates. These roles, of course, had long been a function of high-ranking women. Charter evidence suggests that countesses were most prominent in the sphere of religious patronage, but this is indicative of the limitations of the nature of the evidence, since religious institutions were more assiduous in the retention and preservation of their charters. There is no doubt that the power and influence each countess could exert were variable. Lordship was an essential element which could empower individuals in the twelfth century; and countesses who as widows acted as lords were thus at the most influential stage in their lives. The power that countesses exercised was fundamentally rooted in the gendered familial role of wife or widow, and this was intimately linked with the female life cycle.

The way that women's power in lordship was constructed through gendered roles as wives and widows in twelfth-century England explains the participation of noblewomen in the functions of lordship. This was a gendered construct, because noblewomen's rights and roles in lordship were circumscribed by the authority of their male kin. As wives their husband was their 'lord'. As widows noblewomen could achieve greater authority which was based on the rights of lordship acquired through land tenure. The female life cycle was the fundamental defining criterion which affected this. Noblewomen during the key stages of the female life cycle as married women and as wives participated in, and accessed rights of, lordship. They did so when they made formal agreements which have survived as charters attached to which are their seals, the visible signs and symbols of lordship which themselves mediated gendered ideas about female roles. More than this, however, all this was underpinned and mediated through the institutions of lordship and the family. The two are inseparable. The family acted as a unit of lordship. There is thus no doubt that the significance of the countesses' roles in the political, economic and social structures of the *honor* was directly related to the impact of the female life cycle within a gendered construct of lordship.

Notes

- 1 P. Stafford, 'Women and the Norman Conquest', *TRHS*, 6th ser., 4 (1994), 221–49, at pp. 228–30.
- 2 Andreas Capellanus, *On Love*, ed. P. G. Walsh (London: Duckworth, 1982), pp. 16–18, 44–7. Status distinctions were also recognised in contemporary literature written for women: 'A letter on Virginity', in Bella Millett and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne,

- Medieval English Prose for Women: Selections from the Katherine Group and Ancrene Wisse* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 7; these distinctions interlocked with spiritual gradations based on virginity, marriage and widowhood (*ibid.*, p. 21).
- 3 C. P. Lewis, 'The formation of the honor of Chester, 1066–1100', *JCAS*, 71 (1991), 37, 41.
 - 4 J. H. Round, 'King Stephen and the earl of Chester', *EHR*, 10 (1895), 87–91; P. Dalton, 'Aiming at the impossible: Ranulf II, earl of Chester and Lincolnshire in the reign of King Stephen', *JCAS*, 71 (1991), 109–34 (esp. p. 109 n. 2); *idem*, 'In neutro latere: the armed neutrality of Ranulf II, earl of Chester in King Stephen's reign', *ANS*, 14 (1992 for 1991), 39–59. For Ranulf III see J. W. Alexander, *Ranulf of Chester: A Relic of the Conquest* (Athens GA: University of Georgia Press, 1983).
 - 5 *CP*, 3, 164–9: a strategic marriage alliance for the earls of Chester and for King John.
 - 6 *OV*, 2, 260–2.
 - 7 *Chester Charters*, no. 2.
 - 8 *Mando tibi, quod de terra, quam erga mei petiisti, locutus sum cum uxore mea et cum baronibus, et inveni in meo consilio quod concedam eam Deo*. She also gained spiritual benefits, since Earl Hugh stipulated that he should be treated as a brother of the house, and that he, his wife and his parents should be entered into the abbey's book of commemorations.
 - 9 *Chester Charters*, no. 28.
 - 10 M. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England, 1066–1307* (2nd edn, Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 156; J. G. H. Hudson, *Land, Law and Lordship in Anglo-Norman England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 163.
 - 11 *EYC*, 2, no. 805 (1125–35); see also *ibid.*, no. 749.
 - 12 *Chester Charters*, no. 28 and nn. 45–7, *VCH Chester*, 3, 133–4. It may have been a precautionary measure to safeguard the abbey's rights and possessions.
 - 13 *VCH Chester*, 3, 133.
 - 14 Lewis, 'Formation of the honor of Chester', p. 55.
 - 15 *VCH Chester*, 3, 133.
 - 16 See below, pp. 61–4, for a full discussion of the role of Countess Matilda.
 - 17 *VCH Chester*, 3, 134.
 - 18 *Chester Charters*, no. 6.
 - 19 *Chronicon Monasterii de Abingdon*, ed. J. Stevenson (2 vols, London: Longman, RS 2, 1858), 2, 68–9.
 - 20 *Quod descriptum sigillo quidem matris signari constitit; nondum militare baltheo cinctus, materno sigillo littere quolibet ab eo directe includebantur. Hac de re quod eo annotatur comitissae potius quam comitis sigillo signatur.*
 - 21 See pp. 126ff.
 - 22 *Northants. Charters*, no. 18.
 - 23 Cambr. Univ. Libr., Add. MS 3021, ff. 206–206r (thirteenth-century) (DBC).
 - 24 Cambr. Univ. Libr., Add. MS 3021, ff. 206–206r, 324v (fourteenth-century) (DBC).
 - 25 Ctl. Castle Acre, BL, MS Harley 2110, f. 81v. (DBC).
 - 26 *HKF*, 2, 154–5. For her disputed parentage see *CP*, 7, 743–6; K. S. B. Keats-Rohan, 'Antecessor noster: the parentage of the countess Lucy made plain', *Prosopon*, newsletter of the Unit for Prosopographical Research, 2 (1995), 1–2, states that Lucy was the daughter of Thorold, sheriff of Lincolnshire.

- 27 *Magnum Rotulum Scaccarii vel magnum rotulum pipae, de anno tricesmo primo regni Henrici Primi*, ed. J. Hunter ([London]: Record Commission, 1833), p. 110.
- 28 *Chester Charters*, no. 14.
- 29 *Ibid.*, no. 16.
- 30 BL, MS Add. 35,296 (Spalding Register), f. 388v; *Chester Charters*, no. 17.
- 31 S. Thompson, *Women Religious: The Founding of English Nunneries after the Norman Conquest* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp. 165–7.
- 32 *Chester Charters*, no. 18.
- 33 *Ibid.*, no. 19.
- 34 Thompson, *Women Religious*, p. 216.
- 35 OV, 6. 538–41 (see above, p. 18).
- 36 *Chester Charters*, no. 53.
- 37 *Tractatus de legibus et consuetudinibus regni Anglie qui Glanvilla vocatur*, ed. G. D. G. Hall (London: Nelson, 1965, repr. 1993), pp. 58–60.
- 38 S. Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals: The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 380–1.
- 39 *Chester Charters*, nos 41, 53, 84, 99. This represents about 6 per cent of the *acta* which can be dated to the period after 1135 which are not writs and are not spurious: although this may seem a relatively low figure, it should be seen in the light of diplomatic practice, in which relatively few men and women witnessed, for example, writ charters.
- 40 *Ibid.*, nos 121, 127, 129, 146.
- 41 *Ibid.*, no. 42.
- 42 *Ibid.*, no. 105.
- 43 *Ibid.*, no. 102.
- 44 *Ibid.*, no. 59.
- 45 RD, p. 15. The marriage had taken place c. 1141; her father was born c. 1090.
- 46 P.R. 6 *Hen. II*, p. 7; HKF, 2. 7–8.
- 47 *Chester Charters*, nos 127–9, 146.
- 48 *Ibid.*, no. 124.
- 49 *Ibid.*, no. 141.
- 50 *Ibid.*, no. 53.
- 51 *Ibid.*, no. 105.
- 52 *Ibid.*, no. 102.
- 53 *Ibid.*, no. 119 (1154–60).
- 54 *Ibid.*, no. 122.
- 55 HKF, 2. 46, *Chester Charters*, no. 173.
- 56 *Chester Charters*, no. 123.
- 57 *Ibid.*, no. 133.
- 58 RD, pp. 15–16.
- 59 *Chester Charters*, no. 185.
- 60 *Ibid.*, no. 133.
- 61 *Ibid.*, no. 184.
- 62 *Ibid.*, no. 193.
- 63 *Ibid.*, no. 251.
- 64 *Ibid.*, no. 331.

- 65 *Ibid.*, no. 272.
- 66 *Ibid.*, nos 206, 223–4, 227, 267, 271, 334.
- 67 Under the developing notion of common law dower widows came to be entitled to a third of her husband's lands that he had held at the time of his death: see J. Biancalana, 'Widows at common law: the development of common law dower', *Irish Jurist*, 23 (1988), 255–329, at p. 299. For a brief discussion of the problem of dowager countesses generally see R. C. DeAragon, 'Dowager countesses, 1069–1230', *ANS*, 17 (1995 for 1994), 87–100, at p. 93.
- 68 *HKF*, 2. 174, 199–200.
- 69 *The Charters of Duchess Constance of Brittany and her Family, 1171–1221*, ed. Judith Everard and Michael Jones (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1999).
- 70 *Annales Cestriensis: or, Chronicle of the Abbey of S. Werburg, at Chester*, ed. R. C. Christie (Record Society of Lancashire and Cheshire, 14, 1887 for 1886), p. 40.
- 71 A. T. Thacker, 'Introduction: the earls and their earldom', *JCAS*, 71 (1991), 15–21.
- 72 Y. Hillion, 'La Bretagne et la rivalité Capétiens–Plantagenets. Un exemple: la duchesse Constance (1186–1202)', *Annales de Bretagne et des pays de l'ouest*, 92 (1985), 111–44.
- 73 M. Jones, 'La vie familiale de la duchesse Constance: le témoignage des chartes', in G. Le Menn with J. Y. Le Moing (eds), *Bretagne et pays celtiques: langues, histoire, civilisation. Mélanges offerts à la mémoire de Léon Flemscot, 1923–1987* (Saint-Brieuc-Rennes: SKOL, 1992), p. 353.
- 74 Hillion, 'La Bretagne', p. 126.
- 75 Ranulf's charter: *Chester Charters*, no. 243; Constance's: BL, Cotton Ch. xi, 45 (*EYC*, 4. no. 83).
- 76 *EYC*, 4. 93; Jones, 'La vie familiale de la duchesse Constance', p. 354.
- 77 *EYC*, 4. 85, granting rents worth £10 to Villeneuve (Nantes), the abbey which she founded in March 1200.
- 78 *Chester Charters*, no. 334.
- 79 *Ibid.*, no. 335.
- 80 *Ibid.*, no. 442.
- 81 Senderowitz Loengard, 'Rationabilis dos: Magna Carta and the widow's "fair share" in the earlier thirteenth century', in S. Sheridan Walker (ed.), *Wife and Widow in Medieval England* (Ann Arbor MI: University of Michigan Press, 1993), pp. 59–80, at pp. 33–58.
- 82 *Chester Charters*, no. 443; for Ranulf's grant see *ibid.*, no. 388 (*assensu et voluntate spontanea Clemencie*).
- 83 DeAragon, 'Dowager countesses', p. 89.
- 84 *Gloucester Charters*; see below, Chapter 5 n. 1.
- 85 *Gloucester Charters*, no. 39.
- 86 *Ibid.*, no. 78, 67; *VCH Warwicks.*, 2. 66–7.
- 87 *Gloucester Charters*, nos 67, 78, 160.
- 88 *Ibid.*, no. 160.
- 89 BL, Add. Ch. 47552, *Danelaw Charters*, no. 322.
- 90 A charter of Earl Robert was issued for his soul, his parents, his children and Petronella: *CDF*, no. 306. She witnessed his charter to Fountains, *ibid.*, no. 417; in 1168–90. Earl Robert confirmed her gift to St Mary's (in Lisieux) for the souls of her parents: *ibid.*, no. 571; in 1198–1204 her son, Earl Robert, confirmed the joint gift of

- Earl Robert and Petronella to the abbey of Saint-André-en-Gouffern (diocese of Sées): *ibid.*, no. 607.
- 91 See above, pp. 19–20, for a discussion of the way that this episode is portrayed in the chronicles of the reign.
- 92 Ctl. Saint-Evroult, Bibl. Nat., MS Latin 11055, ff. 35v–35v (thirteenth-century; a general confirmation charter); PRO, 31/8/140B, pt 1 (Cartulaire de la Basse-Normandie), 300 (copy of c. 1835 by Léchaude d’Anisy); Bibl. Nat., Collection du Vexin, xiii, f. 45v (eighteenth-century copy du cartulaire de l’abbaye de Lire) for the anniversary of her son; Ctl. Salisbury, Wiltshire Record Office, D1/1/2 (lib. Evid. B), f. 109v (thirteenth-century) (DBC); *Sarum Charters*, p. 53; *Records of the Borough of Leicester: Being a Series of Extracts from the Archives of the Corporation of Leicester, 1509–1603*, ed. Mary Bateson, Helen Stocks, G. A. Chinnery and A. N. Newman (7 vols, London: C. J. Clay, under the authority of the Corporation of Leicester, 1899–1974), 1. 10–11, no. 13; Northants. Record Office, MS Finch Hatton 170 (Hatton Book of Seals), f. 2, no. 5 (seventeenth-century facsimile *ex armario cartarum prenobilii domine Katerine ducisse Bucks decimo Iulit anno 1641*) (description of seal as above); PRO, C 56/16, m. 18 (Confraternity Roll, 3 Henry VII); two grants in Reg. Leicester, Bodl. Libr, MS Laud misc. 625, f. 5v (fifteenth-century digest of charter in lost cartulary), and *ibid.*, f. 7v (fifteenth-century) (DBC).
- 93 Cartulary of Woodford of Bretingby, BL, MS. Cott. Claudius A xiii, f. 239v. (fifteenth-century), *ibid.*, f. 242v.; Ctl. Lyre, eighteenth-century transcript by Dom Lenoir Coll. M. De Mathan, Château de Semilly Manche (microfilm AD Eure, I M12 472, no. 48) (DBC).
- 94 *EYC*, 11. 5.
- 95 *P.R. 31 Hen. II*, p. 76; she continued to account for this amount when in 1202 she still owed £159 11s 4d.
- 96 *EYC*, 11. no. 63, nos 38–46, 50–67. For Juliana the chamberlain (no. 63) see below, p. 159.
- 97 *Ibid.*, no. 49.
- 98 *Ibid.*, no. 50.
- 99 *Ibid.*, no. 77.
- 100 *Ibid.*, no. 80.
- 101 *Ibid.*, no. 74.
- 102 *Ibid.*, no. 68.
- 103 The cartulary of Llanthony, PRO, C 115/k1/6681 (sect. 20, no. 250), f. 79 (fourteenth-century), records that an undertenant’s donation to Llanthony was made *coram domina mea Margaret de Bohun*. The same cartulary contains another, similar agreement which lists Margaret as first witness: *ibid.* (sect. 20, no. 251) (DBC).
- 104 ‘Charters of the earldom of Hereford, 1095–1201’, ed. D. Walker, in *Camden Miscellany*, XXII (Camden Society, 4th ser., 1, 1964), pp. 1–75, lists thirty-three *acta*, nos 90–123; in favour of Llanthony Secunda are nos 90–7, 99–102, 104–9, 112–16.
- 105 *Ibid.*, no. 90.
- 106 *Ibid.*, no. 116: *ego ad petitionem ejusdem Willemi eandem elemosinam presenti carta mea confirmavi et super altare sancte Marie per textum posui pro me . . .* (1165–c. 1197; my emphasis).
- 107 *Gloucester Charters*, no. 67.

- 108 *EYC*, 1. nos 541, 543 and notes.
- 109 *EYC*, 11. no. 45; B: Reg. Leicester, Bodl. Libr., MS Laud misc. 625, f. 7v. (fifteenth-century) (DBC).
- 110 *EYC*, 2. no. 847.
- 111 *VCH Bedfordshire*, 1. 390–1. Her first husband, Geoffrey de Mandeville (I), died in 1144; she subsequently married Payn de Beauchamp, who died in 1156: *CP*, 5, 114–17, note g, states that the Walden Chronicle ‘C’ version is the source of the allegations of the dispute over her son’s corpse. This may be an unfounded rumour in an unreliable source, since this version states that he died in 1167 and may be related to disapproval of her foundation of Chicksand Priory, a rival for patronage.
- 112 *Cartularium Prioratus de Colne*, ed. John L. Fisher (Essex Archaeological Society, Occasional Publications, I, 1946), no. 55; *ibid.*, no. 54 (c. 1170). Other benefactions were to Thorney Abbey (Ct. Thorney, pt. 2, Cambr. Univ. Libr., MS Add. 3021, f. 295; *ibid.*, f. 297, fourteenth-century; two grants); and, with her second husband, Payn de Beauchamp, in favour of Chicksand (BL, MS Lansdowne 203 (seventeenth-century copy of Elias Astrude), f. 16; Ct. Newnham, BL, MS Harley 3656, f. 24v. (fifteenth-century; three grants). Her *curia*: Ct. Missenden, BL, MS Harley 3688, f. 165v. (fourteenth-century) (DBC).
- 113 King’s College Library, Cambridge, OGB/23 (Old Deed 17); another example, *ibid.*, OGB/24 (Old Deed 18) (DBC).
- 114 Windsor D and C Muniments, xi, G. 1 (DBC).
- 115 BL, Add. Ch. 24634, pd *EYC*, 8. no. 86 and plate 20.
- 116 Humberside County RO, DDCC/135/1 (Chichester–Constable Deeds); seventeenth-century transcript of the same: *ibid.*, DDCC/135/51 (2) (DBC).
- 117 *P. R. John* 14, p. 37.
- 118 She also granted, for her service, forty bovates of land in Preston to Agnes de Preston *nutrici mee qui me lacte suo nutriuit pro servitio suo*: Humberside County RO, DDCC/76/1 (Chichester–Constable Deeds) (DBC). This shows the personal attachment of Hawise to her wet nurse (for which see Shahar, *Fourth Estate*, p. 140), her obligation to reward her and the potential to do so through a grant of land.