

## WOMEN IN ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND AND THE IMPACT OF 1066

Christine Fell, with Cecily Clark and Elizabeth Williams. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.

### Ann M. Hutchison

"She was a very virtuous woman, and renowned for her prudence and justice" – so the 12th-century chronicler, Florence of Worcester, described AEdelflæd, Lady of the Mercians, who, for her sagacity in the building of strategic fortresses, in overcoming invaders, and in forming important alliances, drew praise from contemporary and later writers. Another post-Conquest historian, Henry of Huntingdon, was so inspired by her achievements that he wrote a tribute in verse beginning "*O Elflæda potens.*" This poem continues (in a 19th-century translation), "thou should'st bear/The name of Man" (p. 9), which highlights, as Fell observes, "the paradox of her feminine nature and masculine achievements," a paradox which "seems to strike the post-Conquest writers much more forcibly than it does any of AEdelflæd's contemporaries." (p. 92) Indeed, one of the main objectives in *Women in Anglo-Saxon England and the Impact of 1066* is to show "the complete shift of pattern" that occurs within a single century after the Norman Conquest in 1066. Thus the book concludes with two chapters that give a summary of the post-Conquest situation. The first, an historical overview by Cecily Clark, provides a factual account of how the status of women deteriorates, and the second, by Elizabeth Williams, surveys post-Conquest literature in which women become idealized or fall into conventional stereotypes.

One of the book's strengths is its use of a wide and varied range of source material. In the Introduction, Fell lists the kinds of evidence she uses: archeological discoveries, place names, documents such as contemporary histories, letters, law-codes, wills and charters, vocabulary (particularly when used together with the Concordance which records the context of all Anglo-Saxon words), and literature of the period. On the other hand, evidence of Anglo-Saxon penitentials is rejected as an unreliable reflection of Anglo-Saxon mores, and Fell also warns against using the absence of source material as a basis for drawing firm conclusions.

In the chapters which follow, Fell's intention is to present as complete a picture as possible of Anglo-Saxon women as they emerge from a close examination of the surviving evidence. Though this study covers a great deal of ground, it necessarily centres on the upper classes about whom more information survives and with whom the documents are mainly concerned. Yet despite the paucity of evidence, the first two chapters provide some impression of the period of transition between Romano-Britain and early Anglo-Saxon settlement, and of the routine existence of the lower classes of women. In Chapter 2, the evidence of vocabulary is used to good advantage to show, for example, how the Old English termination *-stere*, which represents a feminine occupational suffix, survives in words like "spinster," in the sense of "one who spins," or the surnames Webster, Folster, Dyster and Lister, referring to weaving, fulling and dyeing cloth. Fell thus establishes a not unexpected link between women and the various skills of cloth production.

For Chapter 3, Sex and Marriage, the source material is richer and the study becomes more interesting. The law-codes provide the main evidence, though they are not consistent and their interpretation is by no means uncontroversial, as Fell herself cautions. What does emerge conclusively, however, is that an Anglo-Saxon woman had legal rights, even in marriage. For one thing there was the *morgengifu*, a gift (originally on the morning after the nuptials) of money and/or land, often very substantial, made by the husband to the wife herself, over which she had personal control. Besides this, wills and charters show that within a marriage the finances were held to be the property of husband and wife, not of husband only. The laws protecting the economic status of a widow stand as further testimony to the age's enlightenment.

Attitudes to women, Fell suggests, seem to be more stringently dominated by their class than their sex. From the literature of the period, she finds that friendship, the key in the relationship between retainer and lord, sets the tone for that of husband and wife. Similarly in the relations among family and kin, documents give the impression that "the feeling of companionableness . . . as distinct from any imposition of paternal or fraternal authority" (p. 86) is paramount. It is also interesting to learn that male primogeniture

was not an issue in Anglo-Saxon society. Such attitudes stand in sharp contrast to those of post-Conquest society which, primarily concerned with land-tenure, was more hierarchically minded.

In the discussion of the powers of royal and noble ladies both secular and religious, the book is at its best. Examples abound of powerful women who were literate, who controlled estates, and to whom men often looked for advice. The much-praised AEdelflæd (d. 918), for example, assumed the leadership of the Mercians when her husband fell ill, and the title she was naturally accorded, *hlæfdige*, was the equivalent of her husband's title *hlaford*. Even more interesting are the double religious houses, a monastery and nunnery side by side, which flourished during the 7th and 8th centuries and which were ruled by an abbess. Probably the best known was Hild (d. 680), who was so successful in making first Hartlepool and later Whitby "into places of serious Christian education" (p. 109), that five monks from her monastery subsequently became bishops. Bede writes that her wisdom was such that she was consulted not only by ordinary people, but by kings and noblemen. Hild, however, was not unique. Fell tells of other abbesses, such as Leoba, Eadburg and Bucge, who were just as impressive if less renowned.

In her concluding chapter on Viking women in Britain, Fell shows how this culture, at the outset heathen, was encouraged by laws to respect the sanctities of the Christian Church. She points to a representative law in the early 11th-century *Law of the Northumbrian Priests* which states: "We forbid that any man should have more women (*wif*) than one; and she is to be legally betrothed and wedded" (p. 138). Fell claims that this admonition pertains to Viking Northumbria and denies, as some have argued, that it is evidence that monogamy was not strictly established in Old English society. A recent article by Margaret Clunies Ross, "Concubinage in Anglo-Saxon England" (*Past and Present*, 108 (1985), 3-34), however, presents a less idealized picture of marriage and the position of women in Anglo-Saxon society. Clunies Ross gives evidence to show that, at least in the early period, a concubine was a recognized member of a man's household. Fell herself cites a 10th-century document witnessed by *ego AEIlgifu concubina regis* (p. 65), but does not follow this reference with fuller discussion. Her concern to point the

contrast between pre- and post-Conquest conditions has perhaps led her to present a more optimistic picture of some aspects of Anglo-Saxon society than can be fully justified. This bias might also explain why Fell merely alludes to, rather than explores fully, the conditions and treatment of slave women in the period.

If *Women in Anglo-Saxon England and the Impact of 1066* is intended for a wide rather than scholarly audience, as the absence of footnotes, its handsome appearance and copious illustrations would seem to indicate, it would have been helpful if Fell had concluded with a summary of her findings and a general overview of the period. She does provide a list at the end

of each chapter of learned books and articles that would be useful to the non-specialist, but the bibliography is not extensive considering the scope of the book. It ignores, for example, *The Women of England from Anglo-Saxon Times to the Present*, edited by Barbara Kanner (London, 1980), which contains two essays central to the study at hand.

What the book does superbly is succeed in making the reader wish to discover more about Anglo-Saxon women, who – at least in the upper classes – emerge from the documents as relatively independent, capable of wielding power, whether it be over a household, an abbey, or a kingdom, and of working with their male

counterparts in an atmosphere of harmony and mutual respect. As one reads the final chapters on the largely male-dominated post-Conquest era, it is tempting to imagine how different life might have been for someone like the Wife of Bath, with her skill in cloth-making, her aptitude for marriage negotiations, her war-like nature, her longing for sovereignty, her intelligence and wide-reading, had she been an Anglo-Saxon. She, like AEdelflæd, might also have been celebrated by the chroniclers for her exploits. The mere passage of time does not necessarily entail an improvement in the status of women!

## WOMEN IN THE MIDDLE AGES AND THE RENAISSANCE

Mary Beth Rose. Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1986.

### Madelyn B. Dick

The collection of essays contained in *Women in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* grew out of a conference sponsored by the Center for Renaissance Studies at The Newberry Library in 1983. This conference and these papers have taken an interdisciplinary approach to the topic of women's history, including literary as well as historical perspectives in their works.

There are eleven studies addressing various problems in the understanding of women's place in history and attempting – with some success – to take innovative approaches to the subject. As a broad theme, the papers have taken the idea that, by the Renaissance period, women's position and participation in public life had so deteriorated under the onslaught of male theories and censures as to be non-existent, so that the women's spheres of influence were restricted to the private sector, which more or less effectively silenced their voices. Women were not unaware of their plight, nor necessarily resigned to it, but the prevailing "tide of history" swept away much of their protest.

The papers included in this book address themselves precisely to that plight and to women's protest against it. So Mary E. Wiesner, in her "Women's Defense of Their Public Role," brings many examples of women "protesting," as for instance, the widows of men who

were master craftsmen and who were prohibited from taking over their husbands' shops. J. T. Schulenburg, in her "The Heroics of Virginité: Brides of Christ and Sacrificial Mutilation," examines the problems of nuns faced with male brutality while coping at the time with the prevailing opinion – derived from patristic teaching – that even an innocent "bride of Christ" was responsible in the final analysis for her own rape. The idea that women were childish, wanton and irresponsible, could occasionally be in their favour (if that is the right word), as William Monter shows in his "Women and the Italian Inquisition:" women were punished less severely for various crimes, as they were deemed to be easily led astray and their opinions did not matter anyway.

Two further essays explore the literary evidence of these opinions, Madelon Sprengnether's "Annihilating Intimacy in *Coriolanus*" and Leah S. Marcus' "Elizabeth I and the Political Uses of Androgyny." Carole Levin, in "John Foxe and the Responsibilities of Queenship," explains that even an admirer of Queen Elizabeth I had a real problem reconciling his evident pride in her accomplishments with his sincere opinion that a public woman was necessarily a "bad" woman.

The remaining essays, Janel M. Muller's "Autobiography of a New 'Creatur,'" Elissa Weaver's "Spiritual Fun," Mary Ellen Lamb's "The Countess of Pembroke and the Art of Dying," Tilde Sankovitch's "Inventing Authority of Origin," and Mary Beth Rose's "Gender, Genre, and History," all discuss women who took to the pen – often with considerable verve – and did so to explain to themselves, to their fellows, and to society

at large that they had opinions, that these mattered and indeed, should matter. If they were prevented from taking their proper place in society – 'proper,' that is, according to their abilities and how they perceived them, then at least they could die well – so the judgment of the Countess of Pembroke.

In their great variety and in their method of inquiry these eleven essays add much to our vision of women and their lives in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Yet there are two points that need to be made in conclusion.

The first derives from the very useful "Introduction" by Mary Beth Rose, in which she writes: "Why do we know so little about women in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance? Until relatively recently, we had never really asked," and further: "... medieval and Renaissance women seemed vague, shadowy presences existing only on the periphery of history..." Yes, I would agree with Rose that we haven't always "asked," but I think that we have always "known..." No one can immerse themselves in the study of the Middle Ages – or the Renaissance – without encountering any number of women bent on doing things. (But then, there is an equally large number of men doing the same and we often pay little attention to them). If, for example, one would explore, as I have, the historical sources of the period roughly between 950 and 1050, the wealth of "known" material about politically and socially active women is enormous, and I might add, not ignored by the modern scholars in that area (as, for instance, Pauline Stafford's *Queens, Concubines and Dowagers: the King's Wife in the Early Middle Ages*, 1983).