

CHAPTER 2

THE FEMALE FACE OF ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND

There is no doubt that Old English society allowed to women, not only private influence, but also the widest liberty of intervention in public affairs.

--Frank Stenton, "The Place of Women in Anglo-Saxon Society"

Examining the Evidence

A study of women in the Anglo-Saxon literature must begin with an understanding of the position of women in Anglo-Saxon society. Searching the incomplete physical and written evidence for roles, customs, and the attitudes towards women is a fascinating quest, as enough pieces exist to yield a distinguishable picture, but by no means a comprehensive one. Again, several cautions must be kept in mind. Finke and others who have studied the position of women of the Middle Ages point out that women's experiences varied greatly in different contexts, most appreciably across class lines.¹ Just as the historical period cannot be thought of as static in its ideologies, rituals, or other cultural practices, the Anglo-Saxon world cannot be thought of as one unified or centralized realm. Originally composed of a number of small kingdoms, each ruled by different kings, England as a centralized monarchy did not exist until the coronation of Edgar the Peaceable at Bath in 973 AD; dialects of the language varied by region, and so did the specific laws regarding property and the conduct of citizens. Given a common background, some modest generalizations are possible, such as Doris Stenton's reserved conclusion to her survey of early English women that Anglo-Saxon

¹ *Women's Writing in English: Medieval England*, p. 22.

men and women lived on terms of “rough equality” with one another.² What she meant by ‘rough’ and ‘equality’ have been taken up by later scholars concerned with establishing a more precise (and sometimes not as optimistic) picture.

Archaeological evidence

Of all the evidence that exists to inform later ages of the life and times of the Anglo-Saxon woman, one might think that the archaeological remains, particularly burial practices and grave goods, could provide us with the most objective information. However, even this evidence can be tantalizingly unclear. Like many other historians treating the archaeological remains, Henrietta Leyser, in her survey *Medieval Women*, focuses on burial practices and cemetery evidence, which is more available and more easily interpreted than other evidence such as settlement remains. She begins with the warning that burial practices are not merely a “reflection of social reality,” but, like our own practices, may disguise or distort that reality.³ Nick Stoodley, in his own work on early Anglo-Saxon burial sites, surmises that funerary rituals were a way to articulate the ideal structure of the society, which might have in fact varied from the actual behavior.⁴

Though these cautions may seem to impair the validity of any testimony drawn from burial artifacts, some assumptions do seem safe to make. Stoodley was able to identify two distinct burial assemblages: weapons and sharpening instruments comprised one assemblage, and collections of dress accessories, girdle articles, and weaving tools made up the other. From his observations that the first assemblage usually belonged to graves occupied by identifiable males, while the dress assemblage in almost all cases belonged to females,⁵ we might logically speculate that a man’s moveable property consisted of his weaponry, while a woman’s consisted of her jewelry, toiletry items, and household goods. The frequency with which thread boxes, spindle whorls, and weaving batons appear in female graves suggests women were the producers of cloth, and the appearance of cooking vessels indicates an equally pivotal role in feeding the family.⁶ Certain items in early Anglo-Saxon graves, however, present mysteries. Leyser

² *The English Woman in History*, p. 28.

³ See p. 5, where her discussion of the Anglo-Saxon archaeological evidence begins.

⁴ *The Spindle and the Spear*, p. 139.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

⁶ *Mate, Women in Medieval English Society*, p. 14.

speculates upon the possible magical or supernatural powers of thread boxes containing herbs or crystal balls which seem to have no practical use; these items are found only in certain graves belonging to women and there is no explanation in the literature.⁷

Stoodley makes the interesting observation that his evidence does not imply a strong gender hierarchy in the fifth and sixth centuries but, by the seventh century, the balance of power had shifted in favor of the male. In the earlier burials, inequality between the sexes is difficult to identify based on the burial evidence; both male and female remains have equal incidents of hypoplasia (caused by poor diet or periods of starvation), the males show more instances of osteoarthritis (caused by hard labor or involvement in hazardous physical activities), and the shorter life expectancy of the female is probably due to the dangers attendant upon pregnancy and childbirth. Evidence for immigrants and natives living side-by-side as well as epigenetic traits that indicate intermarriage between races and communities indicates to Stoodley that women played an important part in the migration, first by mingling with the colonizers, then moving between communities and kin-groups to establish connections through marriage.

Stoodley suggests that gendered gravesites and burial objects served to elaborate and affirm an ideal social context founded on and reinforced by an ideology where men and women played an equally valued role. However, beginning in the seventh century, he observes a deterioration in the health and wealth of the female remains. As burial monuments with a visible masculine symbolism began to predominate, the females showed a decreasing life expectancy and an increasing incidence of hypoplasia. He notes a coinciding trend in the law codes that define a woman in relation to her menfolk and, in particular, require the obedience of a woman to her husband. Stoodley suggests that, as smaller communities bonded together in the formation of nation states, the construction of a social elite—symbolically defined by the male assemblage of weaponry—contributed to a more pronounced gender hierarchy that favored the man as central to social rule and restricted public opportunities for women.⁸

⁷ See pp. 15-17 of Leyser's *Medieval Women*.

⁸ *The Spindle and the Spear*, pp. 136-143.

Several scholars would extend this trend in the devaluation of women into the twelfth century.⁹ Dietrich in particular notes that the English woman post-Conquest might have had some cause to be wistful looking back at the status of her Anglo-Saxon ancestresses, whom she would have seen “possessing rights, exercising alternatives, and wielding power that she [herself] could barely attain in the best of circumstances.”¹⁰ Though reluctant to call it a golden age, Dietrich’s assessment seems to concur with Stenton’s view of rough equality and is agreed to by both Fell, who concludes that “the Anglo-Saxon wife was both valued and respected, enjoying economic and marital rights, her independence safe-guarded and her interests protected,”¹¹ and Liebell, who says of the Anglo-Saxon woman that “[h]er dignity was respected, her ability was acknowledged, and her freedom was unquestioned.”¹² The evidence upon which these scholars base their opinions that the Anglo-Saxon woman had not quite reached the nadir of self-agency and self-determination might indicate that, even within the emergent hierarchy that Stoodley observed, some sort of resistance (or action?) was taking place on the part of women to preserve a sphere of influence or at least find a way to remain active—and valuable—members of the society. To this end, other artifacts such as legal documentation can provide a useful corollary to the archaeological remains.

Legal and Linguistic Evidence

The law codes are often the first place scholars begin when attempting to reach any objective conclusion about the status and roles of women, since these legal promulgations reflect not only the ideal standard in the behavioral requirements they outline, but also suggest actual practice through the punishments they propose to correct those activities not in harmony with the ideal. Cautions must apply here as well, for as Mate observes in her survey of the Anglo-Saxon law codes, it is possible that the codifications were only necessary as corrective actions, and the existing customs which

⁹ C.f. Echols and Williams’ *Women in the Middle Ages* and *A History of Women in the West: Silences of the Middle Ages* (vol 2). Schictman and Gordon-Wise also address it in their respective studies on the character of Guinevere and literary treatments thereof. Curiously enough, the twelfth century also witnesses the birth of the *fin’ amor* topos and an explosion in the popularity of the cult of Mary.

¹⁰ P. 43.

¹¹ *Women in Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 73.

¹² *Anglo-Saxon Education of Women*, p. 7.

were obviously understood by contemporaries would not have been documented.¹³ As with other evidence from the Anglo-Saxon period, what we do not know sometimes seems to surpass what we do know, and the lack seems to impede all but the roughest conclusions.

Studies of the law codes and other legal evidence seem particularly susceptible to the modern fallacy, which regards our contemporary society as the model for civilized behavior. Often it seems that feminist investigations of equality are based on modern terms, where ability to pursue a career, sharing of household tasks such as child-rearing, ability to own and dispose of property, and freedom of choice of sexual partner are the standard. Looking at Anglo-Saxon womanhood through this lens cannot help but present a very distorted picture. In our modern struggle for equality we tend to measure female rights by the extent that they have the same freedoms given to the males; if a male has the ability to inherit property, and a female does also, we make the claim that inheritance laws are equal and even enlightened. This approach tends to fall into the same trap as that previously attributed to the authoring of history, that of viewing and valuing everything on male terms. First, we can avoid a modern tendency toward anachronism by keeping in mind that Anglo-Saxon gender roles were more often determined according to a distribution of labor which did not have the benefit of our modern technological or mercantile advancements.¹⁴ Second, we should avoid a wistful, romanticized vision of a valiant society where men and women were equally fierce as much as we should avoid the 'Dark Age' assumption that so-called 'traditional' gender roles are the primordial slime from which our modern consciousness has evolved. Third, we must understand that the ideologies upon which Anglo-Saxon society were based grew out of a set of contingencies quite different from what we face today.

Alexander points out that just as poetry meant something different to the Anglo-Saxons, relations between the sexes meant something different from how our modern mind understands it. Early English society was formed as a collection of close-knit clans called *cynns* with a strong sense of *communis sententia* expressed in the person of the

¹³ *Women in Medieval English Society*, p. 19.

¹⁴ This viewpoint is in keeping with that expressed by, among others, Rosalind Miles and Keri Sanburn.

clan-chief or leader, who won his position through ability and influence, not just birth.¹⁵ We live in a society long saturated by Christian rationalizations for the subordination of women, justified by the crime of the first mother, Eve, which formed an ideological groundwork for the legal, emotional, and spiritual subjection of women over centuries.¹⁶ The worldview underlying the laws and customs of Anglo-Saxon society evolved in a culture initially unassociated with Christian thought and which lacked the leisure for philosophical speculation due to the more pressing concerns of sustenance and defense. Our modern society is based on the autonomy of the individual and the concept of the self, with hugely centralized administration, where political threats are distant and wars are waged overseas. Anglo-Saxon society was based on a hierarchical and interconnected system of relationships formed in response to ever-present and immediate dangers of war, which required a strong sense of community. This context is important when it comes to assessing the law codes and other historical evidence, for it demands that we overcome our modern bias that individual autonomy is the ideal. This bias surfaces in debates over whether the laws can be seen as “protecting women from violence and safeguarding their honor” or must be interpreted as subjecting women to male authority and ignoring their individual identities.¹⁷ The critical disagreements over whether women were treated as independent beings may lose sight of the nuances of cultural values which defined a self as *through* and not separated from one’s relations. Our modern world stands on divisions between public and private spheres and the formation of a concept of selfhood that were not constructions familiar to Anglo-Saxon society.¹⁸ Certain habits of tradition reflecting what may perhaps be an expedient division of labor based on the practical concerns of biological capability and mobility should not be confused with a patriarchal ideology that rests on a formulated differentiation in psychology, disposition, and spiritual destiny between men and women.

¹⁵ See the introductory chapter of *The Earliest English Poems* for his full discussion.

¹⁶ I do not intend to suggest that Christianity is solely responsible for medieval or modern misogyny; there are plenty of examples in the Old Testament of the subordination of women, and Alcuin Blamires observes in *The Case for Women in Medieval Culture* that Virgil and Ovid contain formulaic jabs at feminine weakness (see the discussion on pages 128-129), hinting at a classic tradition of misogyny as rhetorical device.

¹⁷ The first opinion is expressed by Doris Stenton in *The English Woman in History* (here quoted in Mate p. 17) and the second by Anne Klinck in “Anglo-Saxon Women and the Law” (Mate 17).

¹⁸ I am indebted to Keri Sanburn’s thesis “The Indexing of Medieval Women,” where she makes this point.

With that in mind, the exploration of the contemporary transcript for the Anglo-Saxon woman inevitably begins with the first-century work of Tacitus, since his ethnographic survey *On Germania* has for so long been considered as a near-accurate or at least highly informative record of the social customs of the tribes known collectively to the Roman world as the Germani. Since the tribes that migrated to post-Roman Britain belonged to the Germanic branch of the language family, Anglo-Saxon scholars often look to Tacitus as a valuable account of pre-Christian rituals and customs. J.B. Rives, in his recent translation, cautions us to regard the *Germania* as a “mix of accurate observations and unexamined assumptions,” reminding us that while it contains much of interest, it also contains the rhetorical flourishes and commonplaces that were standard fare in the ethnographies of his day.¹⁹ Once again, we must sift through the rhetoric and the author’s intentions in order to find the particles of truth.

The most-quoted observations are the following: the Germans take their women and children into battle and put them on the sidelines to cheer the troops; they consider that women have a gift of prophecy and consult them for counsel; they have a high opinion of marriage and, except in the cases of the most noble families who practice polygamy, their valuation of marriage is the most praise-worthy part of their culture; it is not the wife who delivers a dowry to her husband, but the husband who acquires a wife through practical gifts; they frown on adultery, but value chastity, and no matter how beautiful or young a woman might be, if she is known to be impure, no husband will have her.²⁰ Most relevant to our discussion are the ideas (in §18.3) that a woman is her husband’s partner and “ally” and knowingly agrees to share his fortunes in peace and in war. In fact, her token of giving him a weapon as a marriage gift seems to indicate that she “does not think herself exempt from aspirations of valour and hazards of war.”²¹ Likewise, in §20.2 the idea appears that neither are young men urged into adulthood nor are young women hurried into marriage, but rather, “of identical age and similar height, they match their mates in strength;” a captivating notion, when compared to the Roman customs of marriage where the woman was the lesser in stature, age, and education.

¹⁹ See *Tacitus: Germania*, p. 41; the entire Introduction contains much useful information on the author, the ethnographic tradition, the work’s rhetorical purpose and reliability, and its enormous influence.

²⁰ See §8.1, §8.2, §18.1, §18.2, and §19.1 (pp. 80, 84, and 85 of Rives).

²¹ Rives, p. 84.

However, when he goes on to note that the offspring of such unions “reflect their parents’ vigour,” Rives suspects Tacitus is calling on a Roman notion that men should wait to have sex until they are at least twenty (and women, of course, must wait until marriage) because the adolescent seed may produce small or deformed children.²² Given the visual picture of naked, healthy, blue-eyed babies tumbling merrily about in the dirt and filth (health and stature due to the fact that their own mothers nurse them, and not hired maids, Tacitus would like us to know), the cautious reader must wonder how much of this account reflects the ‘noble savage’ commonplace and how much is based on firsthand observation of actual practice.

In any case, Tacitus’ reflections on a society largely egalitarian in respect to gender (except for his observation in §15.1 that the women and old men have the care of “hearth and home and fields” while the warriors “loll about in a stupor,” which Rives suspects may be another standard ethnographic commonplace²³) indicate to historians examining the woman question that the Germanic woman enjoyed a full and participatory citizenship—remarkable in light of the fact that such a circumstance would not return to the Western world for another 1800 years—and, apropos of Anglo-Saxon studies, these attitudes would have migrated to Britain with them.

The law codes of the Anglo-Saxon kings can tell us which of these early customs survived and which ones eventually changed, reflective of evolving concepts of womanhood and wifehood. Finke observes that throughout European cultures in the Middle Ages, marriage was a woman's chief occupation and “the nature of the marriage contract would largely determine her own condition in life.”²⁴ Angela Lucas shares the thought that marriage was one of those matters in which Anglo-Saxon women benefited from much more freedom and protection than their later Anglo-Norman sisters.²⁵ She goes on to note that to modern readers, the law codes governing marriage practices might shock the sensibilities with their commercial terms, suggesting that the woman was valued as—and treated as—a piece of property,²⁶ though Finke reminds us that the basis for an Anglo-Saxon marriage was indeed financial practicality rather than “mutual

²² See Rives, p. 85 and the commentary on 207.

²³ See §15.1 on p. 83 and commentary on p. 189.

²⁴ *Women's Writing in English*, p. 23.

²⁵ *Women in the Middle Ages*, p. 82.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 63-64.

affection and love.”²⁷ Mate reaches a depressing conclusion: “So long as women had basically only two life choices, to become a nun or to marry, equality was impossible.”²⁸ However, it does not seem from the evidence that the options available to men were any wider. Both sexes were dictated to by tradition, the good of the community, and the need to form family ties. The other options available to women today—the idea of an independent career, for example—might have seemed ridiculous and possibly suspicious to a culture based on the family unit, needless to say.

The law codes throughout the Anglo-Saxon period continue the Germanic custom of marriage as an alliance struck between two parties, where the bridegroom represented himself and the bride’s party involved both her and her family, who had a vested interest in the transaction, which might explain why the bride’s family was customarily wooed with gifts, as was the bride herself. The earliest records within English borders—that of King Æthelberht of Kent (560-616)—do describe marriage in terms of a sale. Just as the Germani of Tacitus’ time had, a man seeking a bride would render gifts to the woman’s family that equaled her bride-price or *weotuma*. The *morgengifu* or morning-gift was rendered to the bride herself the morning after the nuptials.²⁹ Typically any property the wife brought to the marriage, including the marriage-portion given to the couple by the bride’s family, was ultimately administered by the husband, a fact which Klinck interprets as proof of “an entirely male world of affairs.”³⁰ But this arrangement, perhaps, had practical benefits and was not simply instituted because women were supposed to be incompetent or incapable.

Lucas reminds us that the habit of paying the woman directly is a more liberal practice than those known elsewhere, and likewise the customs governing separation are equally practical; if a woman wished to pack up the kids and leave, she was entitled to half the household goods. If she wished to leave the children behind, her share was much less;³¹ apparently this was a culture enlightened about child support. In keeping with the perception of marriage as a familial and communal arrangement, there were penalties for

²⁷ *Women’s Writing in English*, p. 24.

²⁸ *Women in Medieval English Society*, p. 26.

²⁹ Fell’s *Women in Anglo-Saxon England* contains a very complete discussion of the custom of the morning-gift.

³⁰ See her article “Anglo-Saxon Women and the Law,” p. 109.

³¹ Lucas contains a fuller discussion pp. 65-66.

breaking betrothals, as the laws of Ine of Wessex (688-726) suggest, and the laws of Æthelberht impose penalties on men who steal other peoples' daughters or fiancées.³² Wife-capture, Lucas notes, was a custom practiced in all Indo-European societies, but this kind of marriage did not have the benefit of establishing the ties of kinship so important in times of peace as well as war.³³

Those who wish to debate whether these laws recognized women as full citizens can interpret the evidence either way. Both Doris Stenton and Laura Finke are inclined to soften the business-like connotations of the marriage agreement by pointing out that the terms “buy” and “owner” would have carried slightly different connotations than those that strike the modern eye, implying not a commercial value but a system of guardianship and transference of protection. Lucas reminds us that everyone in the Anglo-Saxon hierarchy had a *wergild* or man-price, reflective not so much of gender as of place within the social order.³⁴ Ross holds the belief that the laws neglect to treat women as “full legal persons,” considering that the codes typically specify compensation according to the breach of a man’s guardianship, not precisely an offense directed at a woman.³⁵ However, the fact that the original marriage contract was an arrangement between families might explain why a loss of faith by one party required recompense to the bride as well as her family. Though neither the laws nor the other literature associate a moral shame with an unsuccessful alliance, the monetary penalty for breach of contract does seem to put marriage in “pay for usage” terms, requiring a man to compensate the first husband for a stolen wife or compensate a family for a deflowered maid being returned to them. Though the same evidence does not suggest that sexual experience was either a commercial or a moral handicap to a woman, chastity in a bride did add to her value; this is seen even in pre-Christian cultures, and Tacitus noted it in his ethnography.³⁶

These terms of valuation might be what lead to the implied prejudice, gained from later periods of history, that the terms of a marriage negotiation necessarily ensured that the woman had no voice, was essentially treated like chattel, and was doomed by the commercial circumstances of marriage to a life without respect or mutual affection.

³² See Lucas, *Women in the Middle Ages*, pp. 63-64.

³³ *Women in the Middle Ages*, p. 62.

³⁴ See also D. Stenton, p. 7; Finke, pp. 23-34; Lucas, pp. 64-65.

³⁵ “Concubinage in Anglo-Saxon England,” p. 254.

³⁶ See Rives, p. 85.

Bloch's book *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love* addresses romantic love as a concept that gained currency in the literature somewhere around the twelfth century.³⁷ Wrenn observes that romantic love is a theme alien to the Old English poetry, and, he infers, to the culture as well. Though possessing a strong ethical consciousness marked by a love of moralizing which found expression in the literacy granted by the new religion, the Anglo-Saxon spirit, he concludes, was too practical to accommodate what we in modern terms would call a higher spiritual experience or the basis for marriage.³⁸ Those who tend to find marriage a cold-hearted arrangement for the Anglo-Saxon maiden may be assuming that the practical terms of marriage, created for purposes of ensuring loyalty between kin groups, precluded the possibilities for a woman's choice or personal satisfaction in a marital arrangement or the opportunity for her to have a voice in domestic matters. We have nothing to suggest that affection or even passion were alien to the Anglo-Saxon partnership, and in fact the evidence seems to indicate the opposite. True, we have no way of knowing whether the Anglo-Saxon woman felt that her culture's perceptions towards marriage suited her personal wants or needs. But it is possible, if we believe Wrenn's conclusions, that as a people the Anglo-Saxons valued marriage on terms other than those of romantic companionship.

During the course of the period, the law codes show the influence of Christianity, and the Christian concept of marriage is slightly at odds with the native Germanic one. Where Tacitus observed that the Germanic female was groomed to be the equal and ally of her husband, St. Paul taught that the man was the head of the household and the woman must be obedient to him. Lucas likewise notes that it was difficult for the Anglo-Saxons to accept the idea of marriage as a lifelong monogamous bond broken only by death.³⁹ Though Tacitus seems to suggest that the Germanic tribes practiced single marriages and loyal monogamy as a general state of affairs, early Anglo-Saxon laws have an elaborate system of recompense for adultery and allow divorce merely on the basis of incompatibility.⁴⁰ Concubinage and serial monogamy were standard practices throughout

³⁷ See the introduction to *Medieval Misogyny* for an engaging summary of Bloch's main points.

³⁸ See Wrenn's discussion on p. 12 in *A Study of Old English Literature*.

³⁹ See p. 68 of *Women in the Middle Ages*.

⁴⁰ D. Stenton notes how the Germanic custom of divorce is retained in the laws of Æthelbert; see p. 7.

the period, at least for members of the upper classes.⁴¹ Cnut had a legal wife, Emma, and a recognized concubine, Ælfgifu, a liaison which Doris Stenton politely refers to as an “irregular marriage.”⁴² Nevertheless Ælfgifu agitated just as strongly as Emma to bring her sons to power, in a sort of political stew which Stafford notes was an attendant danger when powerful men took on more wives than they had the property to accommodate.⁴³ The practice of concubinage is also reflected in Tacitus, who says it is not on account of lust but rather personal distinction that certain men are “solicited with numerous matches.”⁴⁴ According to Ross, the flow of letters between churchmen and various Anglo-Saxon kings indicates that the practice of concubinage, ‘irregular marriages,’ and liaisons with consecrated women extended throughout the Anglo-Saxon period, long after and in flagrant defiance of church edicts which adamantly declared that such unions were illegal as well as immoral and the children of them, being illegitimate, should not be allowed to inherit.⁴⁵ What the women in these relationships thought about this state of affairs was either not recorded or has not survived.

Given that her girlhood was spent under the guidance of a father or guardian and her widowhood was spent in dutiful compliance with any reasonable demand of her husband, the only time of her life when an Anglo-Saxon woman approached anything resembling independence and the freedom of self-governance was after both of these stages of her life were behind her. Widows were, through the custom of the bride-gift, provided for; if no portion had been allotted at the time of marriage, she was customarily entitled to one-third of her husband’s estate.⁴⁶ Also, her emotional safety was protected under laws such as Cnut’s, as she could not be forced to remarry. (If she remarried too quickly, in fact, she must forfeit her husband’s property; likely this was a tactic to prevent forced remarriages of endowed and newly-available women.) Both Lucas and Rives tend to think that Tacitus’ observation on the one-man-only custom of the Germanic wives is a plea for his Roman contemporaries to reform their dismissive perceptions about marriage

⁴¹ See Ross for a full discussion.

⁴² *The English Woman in History*, p. 2.

⁴³ C.f. her article “Sons and Mothers” in *Medieval Women*, ed. Derek Baker, particularly pp. 81-82.

⁴⁴ Rives, p. 84.

⁴⁵ Ross, pp. 254 and 267.

⁴⁶ Klinck contains a fuller discussion of the benefits (and drawbacks) of widowhood; see pp. 117-118.

and return to the republican ideal.⁴⁷ Practically speaking, a widow was, for the first time in her life, legally recognized as being able to make a decision for herself; she could marry, remain independent, or retire in a nunnery as it pleased her.

The consequences for adultery are likewise contestable in terms of their indications of the attitudes towards women. Klinck assumes that the pre-Christian punishment for a woman's adultery was death, a brutality mitigated to facial disfigurement and forfeiture of property under the laws of Cnut.⁴⁸ Leyser has the opposite interpretation, perceiving that the laws of Æthelbert, which redress adultery with a system of fines, do not imply the moral offense that is punishable by permanent scarring in the later codes.⁴⁹ Tacitus notes in his *Germania* that the pagan punishment for adultery was that the woman, in full view of all her relations, be stripped naked, shorn of her hair, and chased through the village with a lash.⁵⁰ No specifications are made in Tacitus as to the husband's fidelity or punishment for a lack thereof.

The opposing interpretations of the amount of freedom and acknowledgement of personhood provided to Anglo-Saxon women by the laws that governed them might suggest conflicting forces at work in the progress of Anglo-Saxon society. One current of thought is that the Christian influence worked to soften the brutality of earlier customs, for instance mediating the gravity of certain punishments by turning the ancient practice of revenge and blood-feuds into a system of monetary compensation based on the *wergild*. At the same time, the Church endeavored to sanctify male-female relations, encouraging a moral viewpoint that seems to be missing from the earlier codes, which are more businesslike in nature.⁵¹ Leyser believes that the deepening Christian theology and influence led to stricter limits on the autonomy of women. Klinck believes the opposite; she tactfully challenges Stenton's opinions that women enjoyed a 'rough equality,' claiming that "[a]t no point in the Anglo-Saxon age were women anything like the equals of men."⁵² She contends that, far from lessening or qualifying the pre-Christian and

⁴⁷ Lucas, p. 77; Rives, p. 205.

⁴⁸ See "Anglo-Saxon Women and the Law," p. 111.

⁴⁹ See *Medieval Women*, p. 44.

⁵⁰ Rives, p. 85.

⁵¹ One peculiarity is in the laws of King Alfred (871-99), which refers to the bride-price as "the worth of her maidenhood." This locates the woman's value not in her familial ties or household wealth but in the fact of her virginity (see Lucas, p. 65).

⁵² "Anglo-Saxon Women and the Law," p. 118.

egalitarian practices of the traditional Germanic practices, the Christian influence in the Anglo-Saxon period caused a gradual rise in the status, responsibilities, and decision-making power of women. Though at no point in their lives were women ever *not* subject to the guardianship of men (even widows were ostensibly under the protection of the king), she believes the “acknowledgement of women’s rights over their own persons is to be attributed to the influence of the Church,”⁵³ citing the cessation of the practice of bride-price, mitigation of the punishment for adultery, and stipulations of consent as some of the basic rights that improved, marking an increased protection against the victimization of women and a dispensation of the brutality of the earliest recorded practices.

In general, the clear indications that (except in cases where she was abducted) a woman was not to be forced into marriage, was allowed to divest herself of an ill-fitting husband, could be exempt from punishment if she had no part in her husband’s crimes, and deserved to be compensated if any man betrayed the betrothal contract or a man not her husband took sexual advantage all support the contention that women were in fact full citizens under the law. Though her male guardian, whether father or husband, was legally responsible for her welfare, these laws presumably support the cohesion and operation of a family unit and are not based on an implicit assumption that women are property, baggage, or auxiliaries to a household. The existing land charters indicate, furthermore, that women were allowed to inherit, possess, and alienate property. It is hard to contradict that this particular sort of evidence reflects actual practice, and certain women in Anglo-Saxon England were the sole possessors of bookright, or land granted to them by authority of the king.⁵⁴ Exceptions to the ordinary rule that a woman’s property was subject to her husband, these women were allowed to make sales, bequeath the property to whomever they pleased (daughters as equally as sons), and litigate on their own behalf.⁵⁵ And, validating the fact of ownership, the records indicate that a woman’s land could be taken away as punishment for larceny, treason, murder, or practicing

⁵³ “Anglo-Saxon Women and the Law,” p. 111.

⁵⁴ C.f. Meyer, “Land Charters and the Legal Position of Anglo-Saxon Women” in *The Women of England*.

⁵⁵ Though in most of the surviving cases the women testatrixes are presumably widows, there are wills made jointly between husband and wife, indicating that it was at least possible for some women to have and exercise a voice in familial decisions. See Klinck, p. 117.

witchcraft,⁵⁶ which reinforces that she was personally responsible for her property and her behavior. As with many other periods of history, the possession of property meant the possession of wealth, power, and influence, and thus aristocratic women enjoyed an autonomy not equally available to their lesser-endowed sisters.

Frank Stenton has also noted the existence of certain place-names as indicating a practice by women of owning property or otherwise being remembered in association with a town, field, wood, or stream, which speaks to a certain realm of influence and historical efficacy not likely to be exercised by a social group generally considered less than a full legal person.⁵⁷ Likewise, other instances of the language give us glimpses into careers and occupations pursued by women; Christine Fell notes instances of feminized words for bards, bakers, and brewmeisters, suggesting that women were also known to pursue trades as well as the arts. Though conclusions about whether the levels of influence and agency on the part of Anglo-Saxon women were fact or illusion can be disputed on the basis of law codes or language alone, a fuller impression emerges when one considers the other historical documentation, particularly the chronicles.

Writing By and About Women

Just as the wills and land charters record the doings of propertied women, the annals of history record the doings of powerful women alongside those of the men. Betty Bandel, in “The English Chroniclers’ Attitude Toward Women,” observes that “Anglo-Saxon chroniclers speak of outstanding women in a very casual way;” though most public offices would have been filled by men, there are “a number of rich portraits of women who are not simply lovers, but are also administrators, warriors, or saints,” and Bandel takes the lack of surprise with which these able women are treated as an indication that women were deemed just as capable of being “learned, devout, an able administrator or a brave fighter.”⁵⁸

Some of these women—a good many of them scheming queens—were noteworthy for the bad publicity they left behind them, but the fact that they first managed to conduct themselves poorly and thereafter be held personally responsible for it

⁵⁶ *Women in Medieval English Society*, p. 19.

⁵⁷ C.f. his discussion in “The Historical Bearing of Place-Name Studies.”

⁵⁸ See pp. 113-114.

indicates, as Bandel suggests, the capacity for autonomous action and independent judgment, for good or ill. For example, Eadburh, daughter of Offa of Mercia, so outraged the West Saxons by her attempts to wield influence that they refused to crown queens for a long time thereafter—an understandable response considering that Eadburh’s victims of guile and poison included several followers of her husband Beohtric (786-802) and, eventually, Beohtric himself.⁵⁹ Eadburh had perhaps learned her behavior at her mother’s knee; Cynethryth, Offa’s wife (757-796), had had coins struck with her name and portrait—the only Anglo-Saxon queen to ever have done so—and passed into legend as a tyrannous ruler, though the details of her tyranny, Doris Stenton notes, have vanished.⁶⁰ Ælfgifu, previously noted as the consort of Cnut, while acting as regent of Norway on behalf of their eldest son, ruled with such a heavy hand that her people rose up and overthrew her.⁶¹ Likewise the stories of Eadgifu, wife of Edward the Elder, Ælfthryth wife of Edgar, and Emma, second wife to Cnut as some would have it, all credit these women with ambition, significant influence, and complicated if not downright devious minds—clearly not passive pawns in a game played by men.⁶²

Not all queens were bad queens, of course, though as always subsequent women suffered for the misconduct of a foremother; not only were several successions of Wessex consorts denied the title of queen, but fairly often widowed royals took refuge in nunneries not because it gave them something to do but because it provided sanctuary from the political machinations of others. Some women did not wait for their husbands to die before opting for the religious life; Æthelthryth, daughter of Anna of East Anglia, kept her virginity intact through two marriages before she finally convinced her husband to allow her to withdraw to the monastery at Ely.⁶³ Likewise some kings abandoned their wives and thrones to pursue spiritual careers. At least among the royals, it appears a woman could do anything a man could do, and did; Æthelflæd, daughter of the Wessex Alfred and wife to Æthelbert of the Mercians, took command of the army when her husband fell ill and, ruling in her own right for seven years after his death, was

⁵⁹ Taken from Pauline Stafford, “Sons and Mothers: Family Politics in the Early Middle Ages,” p. 83.

⁶⁰ See *The English Woman in History*, p. 2.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

⁶² Stafford suggests in “Sons and Mothers” that the practice of putting highborn daughters and wives in nunneries was often due more to practical concerns than to spiritual ones; it was a way to neutralize political aspirations and control claims to property and titles.

⁶³ Leyser takes this information from Bede, p. 25.

responsible for building defenses and protecting her country from hostile Danish visitors until her own death in 918. Though we should not imagine her armor-clad and leading her forces, Boudicca-style, into the fray, her influence should not be underestimated. Doris Stenton proclaims that this warrior-queen “may fairly be counted among the few English women who in any period have permanently influenced the course of history.”⁶⁴

The treatment of Æthelflæd’s story is worth mentioning here because it shows how the conditioning of historiographers influences their frame of reference when dealing with previous eras. Early studies of the *Judith* poem propose Æthelflæd as the inspiration for and perhaps the figure being celebrated by the character of Judith, for both are fighting women who protect their people. Timmer disagrees; he feels that it is the Irish Annals of Ulster who enthuse about Æthelflæd, not her native Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, and he credits Henry of Huntingdon for making her into a famed heroine.⁶⁵ Wainwright calls this “a conspiracy of silence;” the West Saxon Chronicle, to which Timmer refers, would have muted Æthelflæd’s accomplishments for political reasons, since the ruler of Wessex, Æthelflæd’s brother Edward, was working hard to absorb Mercia into his kingdom. Wainwright refers to a fragment of the Mercian chronicle, most of which is lost, which gives Æthelflæd a little more credit.⁶⁶ Bandel believes that Huntingdon’s treatment of Æthelflæd as a “nine days’ wonder” reflects that women in Norman times, thanks to increasingly restricted influence and the conventions of courtly love, were already regarded as a special interest group, as they still are today. She feels strongly that the Chronicle’s casual assessment of Æthelflæd’s accomplishments indicates “an apparent acceptance on the part of the Saxon chroniclers of an unlimited range of interests and abilities on the part of women.”⁶⁷ Such has been the power of medieval misogyny that scholars today still regard Æthelflæd as something of a wonder, celebrating her not because she was a shrewd leader but because she was a woman.

In any society, wealth and birth often equal power and influence; that aristocratic Anglo-Saxon women possessed and used these advantages does not indicate an arena of freedom for the Anglo-Saxon woman at large. Likewise the records of women writing in

⁶⁴ *The English Woman in History*, p. 4.

⁶⁵ See p. 7 of his *Judith*.

⁶⁶ See his essay, “Æthelflæd, Lady of the Mercians,” in *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, pp. 44-55.

⁶⁷ Bandel, p. 113-114.

their own hands appear at the hands of women privileged with literacy, which usually, though not always, was accessible only to the well-to-do. Peter Dronke, in his *Women Writers of the Middle Ages*, sees the extant correspondence as evidence of an intellectual life and a psychological perception of self much as we imagine it today, with women engaging in self-awareness and modes of expression that show feelings quite sophisticated and humane.⁶⁸ He notes the “keenly emotional tone” and “high-pitched effusiveness” in the spiritual friendship expressed in the eighth-century correspondence between the missionary Boniface and the women who helped him perform his good works. In particular, the letters of Berthgyth to her brother Balthard resonate with the passionate sensitivity and acute longing found in the poetic laments.⁶⁹ Leoba (700-780), whose “reputation for learning and for sanctity are remarkable in any age,”⁷⁰ was particularly dear to Boniface, so much so that he requested that she be buried in his tomb.⁷¹ The true respect, affection, depth of feeling, and emotional as well as spiritual bonds expressed in this correspondence is of the sort that is only possible between equals in intelligence and education; from these letters we might suspect not only that women were perceived to have and in fact demonstrated intellectual capacities and sensibilities equal to a man’s but also that the Anglo-Saxon temperament was not quite as phlegmatic as certain scholars would have us believe. These poetic expressions belie what is regarded as a characteristic stoicism and must cause us to reject former prejudiced assumptions of dim-witted and savage ignorance.

Rudolf of Fulda’s biography of Leoba is the first Anglo-Saxon biography of a woman; Hugeberc’s *The Hodoeporicon of St. Willibald*, which she began writing in 778, is the first biography written by an Anglo-Saxon woman. Born in Wessex around 740, Hugeberc settled in Germany after 761 and became abbess of Heidenheim. When her kinsman Bishop Willibald, on his deathbed, began telling her about his adventures, it struck her that someone ought to be writing this down. A combination travel guide, biography, and character study, the *Hodoeporicon* is remarkable not for the quality of its

⁶⁸ See pp. viii-xi.

⁶⁹ Dronke, p. 30.

⁷⁰ Petroff discusses Leoba’s influence on p. 84 of *Medieval Women’s Visionary Literature*.

⁷¹ Leyser has more on Leoba, pp. 28-30.

Latin (which, Dronke notes, is so elaborate and tangled as to be quite bizarre)⁷² but for the fact that she is in essence, as Petroff says, inventing a new literary form, and also for the fact of her determination to write despite an acknowledged apprehension as to how her words will be received, given that she is a woman.⁷³ Dronke spends some time studying her preface and the oscillations in tone between “confidence and diffidence;” he wonders if “the elaborate depreciation of herself and her sex” is really “a subtle means of self-assertion.”⁷⁴ Ultimately he concludes that Hugeberc, to our knowledge the first published Anglo-Saxon female author, is admitting not just fear of censure but also defiance and the determination “not to be crushed.”⁷⁵ It is crucial to note of Hugeberc that, whether or not she assimilated the church-supported anti-feminine attitudes to which, as an abbess, she must be exposed, she clearly makes two points apparently substantiating the superiority of her male cohorts; she points out that men alone have access to the “superior dignity” of the priesthood and she refers to herself as “corruptible through the womanly frail foolishness of my sex.”⁷⁶ Her open acknowledgement of possible criticism indicates the rhetoric that was already in wide circulation by her time, though she did not allow it to stop her from writing anyway, a fact for which feminist historians are grateful.

Women in the Church

Hugeberc’s travel book and the Continental correspondence serve as reminders that it was the Christian Church which introduced a new literacy into Anglo-Saxon society and in general caused powerful and permanent changes in the social, cultural, and spiritual way of life. As Wrenn observes, the influence of Christianity is a fundamental part not just of the Anglo-Saxon poetry but the society as a whole.⁷⁷ Although Irish missionaries were operating in England even during the time of the first migrations (St. Patrick is perhaps a shining example), the first missionaries from the Continent were sent

⁷² See Dronke’s discussion of her, pp. 33-35; his translations faithfully represent the complexities of her language, and his analysis also addresses the paradoxical, almost satirical self-ablation of her tone.

⁷³ Petroff’s treatment of Hugeberc abridges the tangles of her language and speculates only briefly on her sources of literary inspiration; see pp. 86-88.

⁷⁴ *Women Writers of the Middle Ages*, p. 34.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁷⁶ Translated by Dronke, p. 34.

⁷⁷ *A Study of Old English Literature*, p. 12.

by Pope Gregory and landed in Kent in 597 AD.⁷⁸ Conversions commenced and the English canon began acquiring saints with all due speed.

The progress of Christianity had a profound impact on the position of and the attitudes towards women; the two major waves of conversion can be located at the beginning of the seventh century and the middle of the tenth. Women played a key role in the early conversion process not only by taking holy orders and participating in the administration of religious houses but also by carrying the faith in a secular fashion to their new husbands and families. When Æthelbert of Kent married a Frankish princess he brought not just Bertha but Christ into his household; their daughter Æthelburh carried the faith to the household of her Northumbrian (and pagan) husband, King Edwin. After their own daughter Eanflæd was born and baptized, Edwin surrendered to the word of Christ and urged many in his household to join him; the widespread ceremony on Easter Day, 627, also included his niece Hild, who was to have a famous destiny and became, thanks to Bede, perhaps the most famous woman of the Anglo-Saxon age.⁷⁹ Bede's history, as Leyser points out, abounds with active and even likeable heroines. Christianity opened up a whole new career path to women whose previous options for a life pursuit had been limited to marriage alone. Says Leyser of the women: "They take up its challenges with alacrity and with evident success. They become saints apace, exercising power in life and in death: in life in positions of influence as abbesses, in death through miracles worked at their shrines."⁸⁰

While the records largely concern well-born women, it seems that well-born women were particularly suited for the task of overseeing communities of people. In administering the double houses, religious women played important roles as cultural patrons and educators and were called upon to act, as were their secular sisters, as advisors, hostesses, and diplomats.⁸¹ During the tenure of Hild, Whitby turned out five bishops, fostered the advancement of Anglo-Saxon theology by hosting important synods, and witnessed the birth (coincidentally, in a stable) of Anglo-Saxon religious poetry

⁷⁸ Meyer, "Women and the Tenth Century English Monastic Reform," p. 34.

⁷⁹ These names frequently arise in any work dealing with Anglo-Saxon women—particularly that of Hild—but here I draw largely from Leyser, p. 22.

⁸⁰ *Medieval Women*, p. 20.

⁸¹ Szarmach's *Holy Men and Women: Old English Prose Saints' Lives and Their Contexts* provides a detailed discussion of the atmosphere of the holy houses in both the early and late periods.

thanks to Cædmon, who was greatly encouraged and supported in his literary compositions by Hild herself. These early religious institutions became, in effect, thriving communities which were able to focus on instruction and the creation of literature and art. As Joan Nicholson observes, it was of no use for women to enter a convent to get away from men; they would have to interact with them anyway, and besides, “in an age of violence and endemic warfare,” an isolated community of women “only invited trouble.”⁸² The remarkable number of women in this ‘Golden Age’ of early Christianity who traveled, wrote, read, listened, advised, and earned the respect of their male counterparts does indeed suggest an operative equality, not the patronizing encouragement of the poor weak woman in her idle pursuits but rather a vital, vigorous interdependence, bearing the lingering stamp of that Germanic spirit Tacitus observed where women were reared and delivered into marriage fully expecting to be equal partners with men—equally capable, equally gifted, equally committed to the preservation of the community, and equally valued in the eyes of the divine powers.

Though this, in practice, was the state of things, Hugeberc should remind us that the published rhetoric was quite different. While the Anglo-Saxon spirit was quick to embrace the positive effects of literacy, new systems of administration, and spiritual community, the patristic teaching of the evil of woman accompanied these changes, though it was fortunately slow to make an impression on the Anglo-Saxon mind.⁸³ Nevertheless, through frequent repetition, the idea did take root. Paul, who conveyed the lovely message “[t]here is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus,”⁸⁴ also dictated that the husband is the head of the wife and, in his exegesis on Genesis, established that woman is the instrument of the devil. Augustine in *De Trinitate* offered a picture of harmony in this message: “Human nature itself which is complete [only] in both sexes, was made in the image of God, and it does not separate the woman from the image of God which it signifies . . . The woman together with her own husband is the image of God, so that the whole may be one image,” and then forever damned women by adding that, “while man alone is in the image of God as fully as when joined to woman, woman alone is not to be

⁸² See her article “*Feminae Gloriosae*: Women in the Age of Bede” in Baker, pp. 15-29.

⁸³ D. Stenton, *The English Woman in History*, p. 12.

⁸⁴ Gal 3:28; quoted in Lucas, p. 9.

regarded as in God's image.”⁸⁵ These opinions, reinforced by frequent borrowings from and allusions to Paul, Jerome, Augustine, Ambrose, and other patristic writers, culminate in the message that, at least where the Church was concerned, womanhood was such a vile state that it could only be remediated through union with a man, either secular marriage or devotion to Christ.

Curiously enough, it seems those early male Anglo-Saxon missionaries who worked side by side with, instructed, learned from, and benefited enormously from female advice, energy, and skill were not disposed either to view or treat their companions as vile, inferior, or somehow unable to achieve God’s grace without them. Aldhelm’s address to the nuns at Barking, for instance, seems full of genuine praise for their learning.⁸⁶ Boniface’s correspondence with Leoba reads like the affection of a true sister and brother in spirit. Bede speaks of Hild with the admiration he would accord any competent, intelligent, good-hearted person; he doesn’t express amazement that she has accomplished so much given her disability, since she is after all a woman.

Quite simply, the early Anglo-Saxon Christians were seemingly free of the idea that woman is inferior, a mal-formed male. Leyser suggests that these particular misogynistic and anti-feminine views of the church fathers can be linked to the second wave of conversion, in the reforms inspired by St. Benedict and later adopted wholesale in the tenth-century, when “changed perceptions of women were used to justify a diminution of their activities and in their role.”⁸⁷ Boniface himself, despite his great reliance on his female companions in his missionary work, cautions in his later letters against the free travel of women. Hugeberc so anticipated outrage over the idea of a woman writing that she was quick to point out all her flaws first and thus defuse criticism.

How the misogyny took root is a question that, for our purposes, we must momentarily consider. As Rosalind Miles notes in her discussion on the creation of patriarchy, there must be something of substance in an idea for it to be so wholly integrated into a society; even when evil is perpetuated, it is likely to answer some fear, ignorance, or need. Were the teachings of the Church not somehow useful to their daily

⁸⁵ Qtd. in Lucas, p. 6.

⁸⁶ He also admonishes them on their love of adornment and warns them against vanity; his work is discussed further in Chapter 4.

⁸⁷ *Medieval Women*, p. 38.

lives, it seems the bulk of the population would manage to simply avoid them, the way kings continued to take concubines or kidnap nuns despite warnings from the priests. As our historical survey shows, women were a substantial part of the population and likely aware of their impact and influence; there must then be some motive that caused a society which trained its women to be the equal of a man to begin instructing its women on their greater weakness, capacity for sin, and the need to be protected. Eve's convenience as a scapegoat could not be the sole reason.

We might suspect that what aided the spread of this idea was a new threat which did indeed make obvious the lesser physical strength of women. Though Archbishop Theodore had expressed disapproval of the double houses as early as 669 AD,⁸⁸ and the movement toward centralization of spiritual and institutional authority in the hands of bishops began in the mid-eighth century,⁸⁹ the Danes were responsible for the destruction of a number of double houses which were never rebuilt and, after the reforms of the tenth century, female communities were strictly cloistered.⁹⁰ To the Germanic spirit, at least as we read it in Tacitus, it was a great crime of the society to lose their women to slavery or as hostages. In fact Tacitus says the surest way of keeping the tribes quiet is to take their well-born maidens as hostages; they might be prone to sacrifice the lives of men and warriors, but not of their women.⁹¹ The Germani women, if we may trust certain accounts, used their fear and hatred of slavery as a means to rally the men to fight and, if they failed—according to Plutarch's version—as an excuse to kill the losers and then themselves.⁹² Though it is risky to assume that this older attitude prevailed wholesale in the later Anglo-Saxon age, the anxiety to keep women constrained to homes and communities could possibly stem from an interest in protecting them.

Nevertheless, the threat of Danish invasion does not alone justify the elaborate and repeated attention paid by certain patristic writers to documenting and explaining the inferior nature of womankind. For that, Rosalind Miles, in searching for the answer for the excessive hatred and sometimes extravagant claims, comes up with another explanation: fear.

⁸⁸ Leyser, p. 37.

⁸⁹ Szarmach, p. 78.

⁹⁰ Mate, p. 8.

⁹¹ Section §8.1 of the *Germania*; page 80 in Rives.

⁹² See Rives' commentary on p. 152.

Schulenberg agrees that a “heightened fear and suspicion of female sexuality” prevailed in the wake of the Benedictine reforms.⁹³ The increasing enclosure, restriction, and control of women was justified by a presumably inferior intelligence and disposition toward sensuality with which women were burdened on account of their anatomy. A woman’s reproductive capabilities connected her to her flesh and gave her an earthly shackle to which men were not subject and which she could only overcome through absolute denial of her sexuality. Where man was reason, woman was unreasoning emotion; where man was resolve, woman was frailty. Condemned to pain and degradation by the sin of Eve, she could only hope to find redemption through another woman, Mary. Man alone was made in God’s image, and the bulk of the patristic writers can’t seem to imagine what men would want to do with women anyway, marriage being the least desirable human condition and complete chastity the epitome of sanctity.⁹⁴ Then again, someone had to carry out their reproductive duties. The inability of the male theologians to delineate a middle ground between the sinfulness of Eve and the purity of Mary within which the ordinary woman could operate earmarks the writings of the early Church. And in the meantime, unconsciously or purposely oblivious to their innate deficiencies, women went on, as they always had, with the duties of their everyday life.

This unintentional resistance was and is perhaps the most effective resistance of all. As Fell observes, throughout the Anglo-Saxon period, these explanations of the evil of woman “seem to have little practical effect.”⁹⁵ The historical records should lead us to suspect that, though widely published, certain dictates of the Christian church did not always prevail over the centuries-old traditions established well before the migrations. We have already observed that Anglo-Saxon attitudes towards marriage did not necessarily mesh with Christian ones. Secondly, the preaching that woman was inferior to man went against the cultural practice of the Germanic tribes, who had, in the early centuries when Rome was only a distant influence, accorded status, protection, and esteem to their women based on their powers of divination as well as their power to bear

⁹³ Quoted in Mate, p. 9.

⁹⁴ Several writers discuss the medieval rhetoric of the church in engaging detail, most notably Lucas in *Women in the Middle Ages: Religion, Marriage, and Letters*, Williams and Echols in *Women in the Middle Ages: Between Pit and Pedestal*, Leyser in *Medieval Women*, and Eileen Power in her *Medieval Women*; Finke in *Women’s Writing in English: Medieval England* and Mate in *Women in Medieval English Society* present somewhat briefer but no less useful discussions.

⁹⁵ *Women in Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 13.

children to the clan. The energy needed to establish, govern, and protect the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms did not make it practical for them to deactivate half of their labor force.

Conclusion: The Anglo-Saxon Everywoman

By and large, Doris Stenton's opinion on the "rough equality" between Anglo-Saxon men and women seems, at least from the preceding evidence, to hold true. Though the law codes do appear to treat marriages and relationships in financial terms, our modern society, with its pre-nuptial contracts and the notion that a person can be monetarily compensated for emotional damage and mental distress, has not exactly evolved past this point of view. The evidence seems to support a perception of marriage as a practical alliance between families, secured with gifts of monetary value and provisions for widows and offspring, with options to freely enter and likewise freely leave arrangements that were not mutually beneficial. In this it seems the Anglo-Saxons regarded marriage as a community-building practice and it was not in the best interests of the individuals of the community to force unsuitable unions. I would suggest that women were perhaps not legally autonomous in the modern sense because this was not a society that imagined autonomy, independence, self-reliance as good things; rather, terms of value were built through relationships which afforded both emotional and physical protection, and isolation was viewed as the equivalent of death.

Likewise, the gender roles that evolved within the society seem largely based on practical necessity to an agrarian-based society governed by collections of kin groups. Men, for the most part more mobile and possessing a greater physical strength, were called upon to perform the duties of communal protection and enforcement of laws; as protectors of families, they coordinated property arrangements and negotiated marriages for themselves and for members of the family. Women were expected to form alliances beneficial to the kin-group and, once married and fulfilling their communal obligations to bear and rear children, took charge of the tasks that would logically fall to the less mobile, the crucial and sustaining duties of producing cloth and food. Though legally she was answerable to male guardians, the ordinary Anglo-Saxon woman was, arguably, treated with some respect to her emotional life; she was not obliged to marry where it did not

please her, she was owed recompense when her personal space was infringed upon, and she could represent herself in court as a reasoning citizen. The evidence indicates that a woman's identity was deeply tied to her family, and since her choices concerning marriage, children, and sexual fidelity had repercussions on the family unit, the family took an active role in her disposal (and her protection). Men were just as closely bound to certain roles, had their own sets of duties and obligations, and were likewise defined by and dictated to by their relationships to kin groups and allegiance to a chieftain or king. Both sexes were tightly bound to a social hierarchy formed for the benefit of the community as a whole. Class lines were the primary determiners of social roles and obligations, and inequality between women of varying classes was probably more pronounced than the gender inequalities that have been observed.

Pauline Stafford effectively closes the question of equality by restating the definition; if power means "the ability to act effectively, to take part in events with some chance of success," then, she concludes, Anglo-Saxon women were indeed empowered. Klinck, however, warns us against entertaining any notions of a "pristine" age where women enjoyed a primitive liberty. Though it is no great error to conclude that on certain points of law Anglo-Saxon women enjoyed an independence their later feudalistic descendants might have envied, the modern woman, with her easy access to advanced medical care, high-speed communications, and world-wide transportation is not likely to trade places with the Anglo-Saxon woman, who faced an average life span of around thirty, a high risk of disease, and the dangers of childbirth with a seemingly admirable tenacity and a determination to survive.