

Imperatrix, Domina, Rex:
Conceptualizing the Female King in
Twelfth-Century England

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THE ONTOLOGICALLY fragmented body, despite its traditional location on the margins of mainstream societies and discourses in the West, is *en processe* of a shift into the center of Western academic discourse. Recent developments in the study of transgender phenomena have shown the generative nature of bodies that have been described as piecemeal, monstrous, or unnatural—leading us to question whether former conceptions of what constitutes a “whole” identity were ever valid. The sociopolitical implications of these studies are vast, and leading scholars of trans studies have also been at the forefront of political activist movements that campaign for legal and civic recognition of trans bodies and genders.

As trans studies expands and shifts in a contemporary global context, problematizing some of the ethnocentric and class-based assumptions that undergirded early work in the field, we must also seek out histories and genealogies of trans phenomena. Susan Stryker has shown that the concept of “trans,” a term referring to a wide variety of transgender and transsexual phenomena, is a moving target between other culturally determined moving targets of sex and gender, a statement which reminds us that trans phenomena are not confined to the postmodern or the contemporary.¹ It is Stryker’s definition of trans studies which guides this study of medieval trans gender:

1. Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore, “Introduction: Trans-, Trans, or Transgender?,” *WSQ: Women’s Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 3-4 (2008): 11-22, 14, www.jstor-org/stable/27649781.

Most broadly conceived, the field of transgender studies is concerned with anything that disrupts, denaturalizes, rearticulates, and makes visible the normative linkages we generally assume to exist between the biological specificity of the sexually differentiated human body, the social roles and statuses that a particular form of body is expected to occupy, the subjectively experienced relationship between a gendered sense of self and social expectations of gender-role performance, and the cultural mechanisms that work to sustain or thwart specific configurations of gendered personhood.²

This study makes a case for the inclusion of the identity of the “female king,”³ specifically through the example of the early twelfth-century Empress Matilda, in trans studies. As scholars are increasingly discovering, premodern texts reveal rich information about cultural forms of normativity. It is well-known that patristic and medieval discourses regarding women treated female morphology and the social woman as aberrant, following the Aristotelian view of the female as a failed male. But Karma Lochrie further complicates our understanding of medieval normativities of sex and gender, showing that medieval medical discourse saw female genital morphology as varied—and that a hypertrophied clitoris (or other genital growths misread as clitorises) indicated a masculine woman, inclined to homoerotic behaviors.⁴ Indeed, medieval trans phenomena reach beyond postmodern normativities, and in some moments may resonate strongly with contemporary ideas of what constitutes “transness.” Conversely, medieval transness may appear foreign from the modern point of view. In both situations, historical scholarship

2. Susan Stryker, “(De)Subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction to Transgender Studies,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), 3.

3. I address the history of this term below.

4. Karma Lochrie, “Before the Tribade: Medieval Anatomies of Female Masculinity and Pleasure,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, ed. Susan Stryker and Aren Aizura (New York: Routledge, 2013), 335–49. Excerpted from chapter 4 of Karma Lochrie, *Heterosyncracies: Female Sexuality When Normal Wasn’t* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 71–102.

itself has struggled with and against the transgender figure, exhibiting symptoms of a methodological and critical blind spot.⁵

While medieval studies has long been interested in the lives of Western kings and queens, the careers and dynamic sociocultural impact of female kings have been neglected. This study turns a new critical eye toward the career of just one female king, the Empress Matilda, who carved out a public trans space in twelfth-century England. By reading the nearest contemporary record of Matilda's life alongside her strikingly unusual royal seal, we see that Matilda's gender status became the liminal site upon which a seventeen-year-long civil war was fought.⁶

Analysis of Matilda's career as a female king necessarily draws on contemporary chronicle sources that are interested in her gender; this creates slippage between Matilda as a self-styled king and as a literary character of sorts, gendered and sexed according to the whims of a chronicler. While it is impossible to extricate the "real" from the literary Matilda, a spectrum of source materials points to the importance of discussing her in a transgender context. This study looks at the most interesting of the chronicle sources from a gender and trans studies perspective: the mid-twelfth century *Gesta Stephani*, with its virulent castigations of Matilda's embodied person, her political allies, and her rulership. On the basis of the *Gesta*, it is also possible to compare testimonies to draw conclusions about societal perceptions of gender and Matilda's failure to engage with her given categories appropriately.

While the *Gesta* insists angrily upon Matilda's trans status and attests to her gender transgression from a third person perspective, we do have a text which is arguably nearer Matilda's first-person perspective. I speak,

5. Mary Weismantel's account of ways in which archaeologists have sought to render non-binary skeletons as normative within a modern Western binary exposes the gendered biases inherent in studies which purport to operate from an objectivist, empiricist orientation. See Mary Weismantel, "Towards a Transgender Archaeology: A Queer Rampage Through Prehistory," in Stryker and Aizura, *Transgender Studies Reader 2*, 319-34.

6. We lack the evidence to argue that Matilda would have personally identified as a man or a woman in the modern senses of those terms. For this reason, I use the term "gender status" instead of "gender identity" to describe Matilda's social gender as far as we can understand it through literary and material evidence.

of course, of Matilda's royal seal, which is the earliest surviving seal of a royal English woman after that of Matilda of Scotland. Extant materials provide rare glimpses of self-representation by women. Matilda's royal seal is a moment of such self-representation, a culturally weighty and, as I will show below, gendered prosthetic which attests to her trans status. The seal itself is antithetical to the design of a typical woman's seal in twelfth-century Norman England. While women's seals almost invariably featured a standing figure on a vesica, or pointed oval, shape, Matilda's seal is round and features a seated figure. This "exceptional" seal has yet to be fully understood in its range of epistemological possibilities: it is an "extensible embodiment" of Matilda herself, a trace of herself, and a transgender object, as I demonstrate below.⁷

Working from a critical orientation attentive to moments of gender construction and disruption, I reread these traces of Matilda's life to argue for the transgender nature of her career. First, I posit that scholarship on Matilda has struggled to navigate her trans position, and as such, Matilda has subverted the gendered assumptions on which modern studies of the medieval are based. By the nature of Matilda's own life, it is necessary to explore representations of her from a de-gendered or re-gendered perspective. Second, I argue that the *Gesta Stephani's* indictment of Matilda does not take issue with Matilda's subversion of gender roles so much as with her gender comportment. This distinction provides a major intervention in scholarship on Matilda's career to date. The final part of this paper shows how indictments of her gender comportment and other contemporary complaints about Matilda are linked to her self-representation as depicted on her royal seal. Matilda,

7. The adjective "exceptional" is taken from Elizabeth Danbury, "Queens and Powerful Women: Image and Authority," in *Good Impressions: Image and Authority in Medieval Seals*, ed. Noël Adams, John Cherry, and James Robinson, British Library Publication 168 (2008), 17-24, 18, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/pdf/1a%20rev%20order.pdf>. My theorization of the seal draws on the work of Brigitte Miriam Bedos-Rezak, "In Search of a Semiotic Paradigm: The Matter of Sealing in Medieval Thought and Praxis (1050-1400)," in Danbury, *Good Impressions*, 1-7, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/pdf/1a%20rev%20order.pdf>. "Extensible embodiment" is a concept theorized by Dorothy Kim, "Reframing Race and Jewish/Christian Relations in the Middle Ages," *transversal: Journal for Jewish Studies* 13, no. 1 (2015): 52-64, 56-7, doi: 10.1515/tra-2015-0007.

fighting to transform the very concept of Anglo-Norman queenship and playing out a gendered drama in the public sphere of her world, reveals the panhistoricism of trans phenomena.

Sovereigns and Gender in Scholarship

Put in simplest terms, Matilda was neither a king, nor a queen. The transgender nature of her career is thus an undeniable aspect of medieval and modern scholarship on Matilda. Historian Charles Beem notes, “The quasi-religious and juridical sovereignty vested in kingship was gendered male; the kings of England were represented as lions, whose image threatened blazingly from the royal arms. Thus, when a woman was vested with the sovereignty of kingship, the state did not temporarily become a queendom; the lions of England did not suddenly shed their manes upon the accession of a female ruler.”⁸ As a historical figure, she cannot be gendered within the existing binary within through which scholarship on English monarchies desires to operate.

This refusal has contributed to her liminal status in studies of both kingship and queenship. Few scholars, until recently, would have thought to place her among English kings. Feminist scholarship has been comparatively attentive to Matilda, though interest in non-royals still dominates studies of medieval women. The studies of royal women that have appeared are still troubled by Matilda’s presence. Queenship studies, for example, have focused (not unduly) on the *consors regni*, the queen consort, who acted as “counselors, intercessors, and authorities, and companions” in patriarchal political systems.⁹ This focus is perhaps justified if we look to the sheer number of queens consort in western European history. As Amalie Föβel states, “female ascension to the throne was rather an infrequent dynastic accident,” an exception to the rule of medieval queenship.¹⁰ Early iterations of feminist medieval

8. Charles Beem, *The Lioness Roared: The Problems of Female Rule in English History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 2.

9. Katherine Olson, “Gwendolyn and Estrildis: Invading Queens in British Historiography,” *Medieval Feminist Forum* 44, no. 1 (2008): 36-52, doi:10.17077/1536-8742.1709.

10. Amalie Föβel, “The Political Traditions of Female Rulership,” in *The Oxford*

scholarship looked to new modes of understanding medieval women and their *common* social roles, a project which led to productive studies of feminine roles such as motherhood and typical queenship.¹¹ Thus, in studies of English queenship, Matilda is consigned to the margins. For example, Lisa Hilton's *Queens Consort: England's Medieval Queens* discusses Matilda under the rubric of Matilda of Boulogne.¹² Hilton seeks to relegate Matilda's presence to the periphery of Matilda of Boulogne's rule. It is revealing, however, that Hilton's study of Matilda of Boulogne becomes a comparative analysis of the two Matildas, showing that the Empress Matilda can neither be dismissed nor wholly integrated into our understanding of English queenship.

The rarity of medieval European reigning queens, and the difficulties scholars have had integrating their presence into the larger historical narrative, point to the queerness of their position in history and in scholarship. It seems, in fact, that their queer historical presence is apt; such presence is indicative of their idiosyncratic appearances on the map of medieval gender. Their high-status positions make them key figures for study, not in the interests of a glamorized view of a historical monarchy, but rather for the wealth of contemporary sources on these complex figures. Extant writings on individual medieval women is limited, but our source materials on royal women are comparatively rich. Female kings thus provide modern scholars with trans-ing women about whom much medieval ink was spilled.

The usefulness of looking at a relatively small segment of society has not been lost on scholars of transgender studies. This is not to claim

Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe, ed. Judith M. Bennett and Ruth Mazo Karras (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 68-83, 77.

11. See John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler, eds., *Medieval Mothering* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), which includes Marjorie Chibnall, "The Empress Matilda and Her Sons," 279-94. Also see John Carmi Parsons, ed., *Medieval Queenship* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1993).

12. Lisa Hilton, *Queens Consort: England's Medieval Queens* (London: Weidenfield & Nicolson, 2008). Hilton, like Charles Beem and Fiona Tolhurst (as I discuss below) has recently picked up the thread of scholarship that brings the transgendered nature of female kingship to the forefront of historical analysis. Unlike Beem and Tolhurst, Hilton's market is decidedly popular. Also see Lisa Hilton, *Elizabeth: Renaissance Prince* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015).

that a modern sexual minority is deeply akin to the medieval English royal minority, but to emphasize the methodological usefulness of drawing conclusions about mainstream societies from minority examples. Stryker has shown:

Ultimately, it is not just transgender phenomena per se that are of interest, but rather the manner in which these phenomena reveal the operations of systems and institutions that simultaneously produce various possibilities of viable personhood, and eliminate others. Thus the field of transgender studies, far from being an inconsequentially narrow specialization dealing only with a rarified population of transgender individuals, or with an eclectic collection of esoteric transgender practices, represents a significant and ongoing critical engagement with some of the most trenchant issues in contemporary humanities, social science, and biomedical research.¹³

Methodologically, studies of queens regnant, or female kings, rub up against studies of modern transgender phenomena. By explicitly pulling the Empress into the orbit of trans studies, we can enhance our understanding of the poetics of medieval gender in key formative years of English history.

Some recent studies have sought to acknowledge Matilda's outlier status as a particularly useful moment for feminist historical or literary study. Enabled by Marjorie Chibnall's landmark biography, *The Empress Matilda: Queen Consort, Queen Mother and Lady of the English*,¹⁴ several historians have brought Matilda into larger analyses of European female rulership. Therese Martin's close study of Queen Urraca of Castile-León (d. 1126) shows that the reigning queen's atypical role can result in her "falling through the cracks of history," since she is not a king nor a proper mediatrix.¹⁵ Martin traces resonating patterns between the three

13. Susan Stryker, "(De)Subjugated Knowledges," 3-4.

14. Marjorie Chibnall, *The Empress Matilda: Queen Consort, Queen Mother and Lady of the English* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).

15. Therese Martin, *Queen as King: Politics and Architectural Propaganda in Twelfth-Century Spain* (Boston: Brill, 2006). In Urraca's case, her transgender career

queens regnant of the twelfth century, Urraca of Castile-León, Matilda of England, and Melisende of Jerusalem, concluding that the twelfth century was the last moment when the model of a queen as king was possible. An additional resonance between Urraca and Matilda is the fact that modern scholars of these figures have indicated displeasure with sexist readings of these rulers. Similarly to Martin's critique of scholars of Iberian medieval studies, Fiona Tolhurst calls for a shift in our readings of Matilda, saying "What is ironic about modern historians' characterizations of Matilda is that she is always wrong: she is both too feminine in her weaknesses and too masculine in her aggressive exercise of power."¹⁶ Tolhurst's *Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Translation of Female Kingship* (2013) and *Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Feminist Origins of the Arthurian Legend* (2012) argue for Matilda's importance to literary studies and build upon the idea of the queen as king.¹⁷ This queer interpretation not only appeared in Martin's 2006 book but also in Beem's study published in the same year, *The Lioness Roared: The Problems of Female Rule in English History*. In this text, Beem coins the term "female king," a term which Tolhurst treats thoroughly in her feminist literary analysis.¹⁸ These studies show an academic move focusing on deconstruction of gender systems rather than their construction.

The designation "female king," as opposed to "queen regnant" or "reigning queen," is useful in its encapsulation of the fragmented, gendered identity of a woman who reigned not alongside a king, but as one. While Beem poses the term as a simple oxymoron, it points to the transgender nature of the position in which Matilda found herself. In

(to use my own term, interpreting Martin's description), resulted in posthumous defamation. As Urraca's behavior did not suit the sensibilities of historians working a century after her death, her career was de-emphasized and her sexuality amplified. Martin, 28, shows that modern historians, excepting Bernard Reilly, have been too distracted by early modern views of Urraca to conduct truly useful scholarship on her. See Bernard Reilly, *The Kingdom of León-Castilla under Queen Urraca, 1109-1126* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982).

16. Fiona Tolhurst, *Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Translation of Female Kingship* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 21.

17. Fiona Tolhurst, *Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Feminist Origins of the Arthurian Legend* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

18. Beem, *The Lioness Roared*, 4; Tolhurst, *Translation of Female Kingship*, 14.

fact, much of the self-avowed feminist scholarship by Beem and Tolhurst point to trans phenomena, although neither writer pursues this vein of critique. Tolhurst highlights some of Beem's analysis which points to Matilda not as a queen, but as a ruler with a gender outside of the normative binary. She affirms that Matilda "went through a gender-bending process, drawing through time upon contemporary notions of manhood and womanhood embodied in the distinct gendered roles of kingship and queenship" and concludes that Beem's analysis of Matilda's combination of male and female roles "reflects the potential fluidity of gender roles in Matilda's time."¹⁹ Indeed, textual and material evidence points to Matilda's insistent participation in multiple gendered behaviors. The transgressive nature of Matilda's status as a female king has not been lost on scholars, medieval or modern, although until now that scholarship has sought to operate from a feminist theoretical perspective. This foundational scholarship allows for the development of a transgender theoretical approach drawing on a close study of Matilda's life.

The cultural matrices of power, sex, and gender are so deeply entrenched in modern, mainstream Western thought that we may be tempted to assume that Matilda's political struggles were based purely on her female sex and her assigned gender.²⁰ The gendered political and social dynamics which Western women politicians must navigate, however, show that there is much more to the question of female power than is reflected in official policy. Henry I's declaration of his daughter as heir was perfectly legitimate and was indeed accepted by his barons prior to his death. An understanding of twelfth-century England's legal system is not a sufficient basis on which to understand Matilda; to approach Matilda herself, we must turn to the sources which most closely approach her unique position in medieval history.

19. Tolhurst, *Translation of Female Kingship*, 23, quoting Beem, *The Lioness Roared*, 8 and 7.

20. As Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore ask, "Hasn't Hillary Clinton been called mannish because she is politically powerful?," introduction to *Trans-, Trans, or Transgender?*, 17. It is undeniable that misogyny and transphobia have informed critiques of both Clinton and Matilda, and productive comparisons can be drawn between the careers of these landmark politicians. Theoretically, there are no official strictures prohibiting a female president in the United States of America and, for Matilda, there were theoretically no political barriers prohibiting a female king.

Gendering Matilda in the *Gesta Stephani*

Matilda's fiercest critic, the author of the *Gesta Stephani*, developed a portrayal of Matilda which, for much of history, stood as the accepted record of why her king/queenhip failed. The text was composed as a political panegyric to Stephen of Boulogne by an anonymous English bishop, perhaps Robert Bishop of Bath, in two major parts.²¹ The first part covers the years 1135 to 1147 and was composed circa 1148; the second part, 1148 to 1154, composed over a period of time after 1153, acknowledges Stephen's defeat while still praising him.²² While the text's author was savvy enough to conclude the chronicle with praise for Matilda's son Henry II, the author staunchly refuses to concede that Matilda performed any good deed in her career. True to its original intention, the text foregrounds Stephen's masculine, cisgender excellence whenever possible. The *Gesta's* beginning and its ending well demonstrate this point.

The text commences with the death of Matilda's father, Henry I, who had declared Matilda his heir and twice had his barons swear fealty to her. According to the *Gesta*, however, England is thrown into chaotic violence after the death of the king, with its people rioting in a state of uncontrollable anarchy. Fortunately,

Stephanus Bulonicensis comes, uir praeclara nobilitatus prosapia, Angliam cum paucis applicuit. Erat enim idem uir pacifico regi Henrico omnium nepotum solus carissimus; eo quod non solum ei germana contribulis lineae consanguinitate coniunctus, sed multi-mode esset uirtutum coruscamine praecipue insignitus.

(Stephen Count of Boulogne, a man distinguished by his illustrious descent, landed in England with a few companions. For this same man was by far the dearest of all his nephews to King Henry the peacemaker, not only because of the close family relationship but also because he was peculiarly eminent for many conspicuous virtues.)²³

21. R. H. C. Davis and R. A. B. Mynors, introduction to *Gesta Stephani*, ed. and trans. K. R. Potter (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), xi-xl, xxxiv.

22. Davis and Mynors, xxi.

23. *Gesta Stephani*, 5.

Like a second Brutus, the purported harbinger of civilization to Britain, Stephen appears on the British shore with a humble retinue and a glorious destiny.²⁴ The *Gesta* implies that Stephen could be a second Henry, an illustrious, peace-making king, and the text is dedicated to upholding this image throughout the historical narrative. Even after Stephen was forced to name Matilda's son rather than his own as royal heir (Stephen's son Eustace, as well as his wife, Matilda of Boulogne, were deceased by this point), the *Gesta* closes with praise of Stephen. Although the last passage notes that Henry II was crowned amid praise and the applause of all, the author slips in one more bit of tribute to Stephen, saying "postquam rex Angliam pacificauit totumque regnum in manu habuit, leui febricula tactus ex hac uita discessit" (the king, after he had reduced England to peace and taken the whole kingdom into his hand, caught a slight fever and departed this life).²⁵ The *Gesta* was composed as a political tool by a bishop whose loyalty to Stephen appears to have wavered very little. The text's portrayal of Matilda, then, is strategically calculated.²⁶

Furthermore, Stephen is portrayed as a beacon of excellence—and ideal gender performance. Upon his arrival in Britain, he hastens to London, the *regina* of the kingdom, which receives him with excitement.²⁷ Postcolonial studies have explored the gendered nature of the colonist/imperialist and his object of desire, the land itself.²⁸ Here this trope

24. The *Gesta* author fails to admit that Stephen's first two attempts to land at Dover and Canterbury were unsuccessful, since, as Orderic Vitalis mentions, Robert Earl of Gloucester controlled both of those castles. The *Gesta's* narrative is much more graceful than the convoluted historical narrative, as *Gesta* editor Potter notes on p. 5.

25. *Gesta Stephani*, 240–41.

26. Compared to the chronicles of William of Malmesbury, Orderic Vitalis, Robert of Torigni, Henry of Huntingdon, Gilbert Foliot, Walter Map, and the Anglo-Saxon chronicle, the *Gesta* is fascinated with and horrified by Matilda. See Chibnall, *Empress Matilda*, 3.

27. *Gesta Stephani*, 4–5.

28. For work on European feminization of the Orient, see Edward Saïd, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 207. Also see Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 192–93, for a reading of how English and Irish medieval texts

manifests as a precursor to the text's depiction of Matilda as transgender: Stephen performs the sexually dominant, masculine role to England's waiting, passive femininity. The king's relationship to the land operates in a strict binary, adhering to the natural order of gender as set forth in a near-contemporary text, Alain de Lille's *De Planctu Naturae*.²⁹ Alain's Nature laments the monstrous nature of men who pervert natural law by subverting what is feminine and what is masculine, but the *Gesta* suggests that Stephen is subject to no such perversions.

The same could not be said for Matilda. Indeed, if Stephen figures as a sexual aggressor, penetrating the willing, feminine figure of London, Matilda's desire to replicate this penetration is precisely the perversion of gender which Alain would come to lament. As scholars such as David Boyd and Ruth Mazo Karras have noted, medieval writers disparaged homoerotic actions, specifically sodomy (or the "unmentionable vice"). However, fear and hatred of homoeroticism was less about the sins of fornication or sexual deviance than about "gender *transgression* and *conflation*" (emphasis added).³⁰ Boyd and Karras show that, for many medieval writers, sodomy disrupted "the "natural" order. The use of male bodies and orifices was condemned, for it turned men into women through the performance of sexual acts. Thus, this disruption of masculine and feminine gender differences becomes an offense not only against nature but against the "natural" social order as well.³¹ Carolyn Dinshaw, following Karma Lochrie, agrees that "nonprocreativity in itself is not—or not the only—criterion of unnaturalness; acts that do not follow the proper position and form of intercourse, man on top performing vaginal penetration, are unnatural, and as Karma Lochrie stresses, these criteria of naturalness have everything to do with proper

represent colonizing impulses as masculine desire for feminine land, whether that land is Emain Macha or the Orient.

29. Alain de Lille, *The Complaint of Nature*, trans. Douglas M. Moffat (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1908), 3-5.

30. Ruth Mazo Karras and David Lorenzo Boyd, "'Ut Cum Muliere': A Male Transvestite Prostitute in Fourteenth-Century London," in *Premodern Sexualities*, ed. Louise Fradenburg, Carla Freccero, and Kathy Lavezzo (New York: Routledge, 1996), 99-106, 106.

31. Karras and Boyd, "A Male Transvestite," 109.

gender roles.”³² Although the *Gesta* does not claim that a woman could not possibly take the crown for herself, the author’s conception of London as feminine *regina* to Stephen as masculine *rex* positions Matilda’s bid for the crown as an expression of lesbian desire in a system that conceived of homoeroticism as an innately trans-ing phenomenon.³³ Thus the desiring, lesbian Matilda becomes a transgender person aspiring to male status and kingship. The *Gesta*’s implied representation of a queen regnant, then, is very much a representation of a female king: a person sexed as female who, through homoerotic desire for a *regina* of her very own, transforms into a man. While Karras and Boyd emphasize medieval England’s anxieties about a man’s potential to lose his superior position and transform into a woman, the *Gesta* reveals deep-seated social anxieties about the potential of a woman to transform into a man.

The *Gesta* author further betrays his anxiety about the delicate nature of gender, and his desire for social maintenance of a gender binary, with a tale about one of Stephen’s allies. Chapters 8–11 of the *Gesta* are concerned with the increasing threat of the rebellious Welsh, who seek to negotiate England’s civil war to their own benefit. The Welsh, overall, supported Matilda’s cause due to their alliance with her brother and staunchest supporter, Robert of Gloucester. The Welsh are portrayed as bestial, more animal than human, and so when the Welsh achieve political sovereignty, they have severely violated proper ontological boundaries. After a series of successful rebellions, the Welsh manage to kill the most powerful Marcher lord, Richard Fitz Gilbert. This victory leads to Welsh possession of baronial lands and castles. The *Gesta* regrets that the Welsh “quibus paulo ante flexa ceruice subiciebantur, eorum nunc uersa uice rigide dominabantur” (were now by a reversal of fortune the stern masters of those before whom a little earlier they had bent compliant necks).³⁴ The Welsh have, almost literally, cast off their yokes. The

32. Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 7.

33. See Karma Lochrie, “Before the Tribade,” 335–49, for a detailed analysis of how lesbian desire was frequently construed as the result of a phallus-like clitoris. This hypertrophied clitoris, according to some medical writers, made a woman manlier in both body and disposition (what we might term gender).

34. *Gesta Stephani*, 18.

racialized hierarchy of human over animal has been violated, just as the gendered hierarchy of man over woman is also in peril.

Just as the *Gesta* posits gender as a source of comforting social order in the text's beginning, with Stephen arriving as the masculine partner to London's welcoming, grammatically feminine arms in the face of England's anarchy, the chronicle presents (strikingly modern) gender role performances as a mode of defense against the subversion of the human-animal hierarchy. In this way, the author seems to offer some recuperation of an ontologically sound world where patriarchal and human/English authority are secure.

As the savage Welsh lay siege to the castle of the recently slain Richard Fitz Gilbert, Richard's wife, the sister of the Earl of Chester, hides and weeps inside. The *Gesta's* appeal to the audience to take pity on the helpless woman is clear:

Fuit ipsius Ricardi quoddam castellum obsessum, inexpugnabili munitione uallatum, in quo uxor eius, soror comitis Cestriae, clausa delitebat, quae multimodo cruciate anxia torquebatur, quia uiri solatio carens, feminea desperatione frangebatur, escarum immunis, ambientibus eam cum plurimo suo collegio inimicis, strictissime includebatur, totius ad se refugii superuenientis expses, tristitia et maerore atterebatur.

(She was vexed and tormented by all manner of anxieties because through the loss of a husband's consolation she was prey to womanly despair; she was shut up without supplies, by the enemy in great force; [and] was worn out with grief and sorrow at the absence of hope that any succor could arrive.)³⁵

The *Gesta* author has just revealed that the Welsh are ravaging houses and churches alike, killing everyone they encounter and violating women of all ages. In this passage, Richard's unnamed widow behaves properly as a woman without hope, which is to say that she displays womanly weakness. She performs her role well, comporting herself as femininely as possible, enclosing herself, weeping weakly, and lamenting. Luckily,

35. *Gesta Stephani*, 18-19.

Miles, the governor of Gloucester, bravely undertakes her rescue. We learn that “se et suos dedit periculo, interque medios hostes, per opaca nemorum lustra, per montium prominentia capita, ad castellum fortiter iuit, eamque cum suis sane reducens, uictoriose et cum Gloria rediuit” ([he and his men advanced] boldly to the castle through the midst of the enemy, through the fastnesses of dark woods, over the high peaks of mountains, and, bringing her safely back with her company, returned triumphant and with glory).³⁶ Here, the *Gesta* offers a narrative of a military event that follows a recognizably gendered script, closely resembling the realm of romance (a genre emerging around the time of the anarchy). While the Welsh seek to violate the proper hierarchy of power in Britain and threaten the sexual safety of an English woman, an English man reasserts his racial superiority and sexual prowess by rescuing the helpless woman. This episode reflects an emergent chivalric ethos which posits the man as subject and the woman as object, entrenching a deeply binary paradigm of gender in the text.³⁷

This system of gender runs throughout the text, as well as throughout modern societies. The violence and nonconsensual nature of social gendering is garnering increasing academic and social awareness. As Susan Stryker has shown, “A gendering violence is the founding condition of human subjectivity; having a gender is the tribal tattoo that makes one’s personhood cognizable.”³⁸ While Stryker’s critique draws on contemporary practices of infant-gendering, the paradigm that Stryker provides also operates within the practice of textual representation. The *Gesta* itself seeks to enact this violent mode of gendering in its portrayal of Matilda. Although Matilda had performed the gendered roles expected

36. *Gesta Stephani*, 18–19.

37. While medieval discourse of gender as a scientific and spiritual phenomenon did not always reflect a trenchant binary, as Kimberly A. LoPrete has shown, the *Gesta*’s depiction of gender does indeed draw on a binary in its indictment of Matilda. In fact, the *Gesta* seems to be an exception to quite a few of LoPrete’s general statements about lordly women. See Kimberly A. LoPrete, “Gendering Viragos: Medieval Perceptions of Powerful Women,” in *Victims or Viragos?*, ed. Christine Meeks and Catherine Lawless (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005), 17–38.

38. Susan Stryker, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), 244–56, 253.

of her in her marriages to the Holy Roman Emperor and to the Count of Anjou, the *Gesta* does not see the performance of only a few roles as sufficient for the requirements of her assigned gender. The text seeks to continually reify her female, feminine, and subservient societal space. If nonconsensual gendering is the “universal cultural rape of all flesh,” the *Gesta* enacts this violence toward Matilda in an intensified way.³⁹ Not only did the historical Matilda experience the same programmatic gendering that most Western individuals have endured (and she may or may not have recognized this violence as such), but also her historic legacy is built upon an insistent regendering of her figure. Even the *Gesta*’s assigned name for Matilda, *comitissa Andegauensis*, or Countess of Anjou, itself demonstrates the text’s disregard for Matilda as an agentially gendered subject, since she herself used titles such as *imperatrix*, or Empress, avoiding identifiers that positioned her as the wife of a mere count.⁴⁰ Matilda’s desire to emphasize her political status in her choice of self-referential terms went unnoticed by the *Gesta* author in his desire to position her as a submissive feminine object. At no point does Matilda’s most vehement detractor state explicitly that a woman cannot possibly rule, but instead he confines her to the realm of female political leadership that ensures a careful split between the *rex regni* and the *regina consors*: the ruling king and the queen consort.

In fact, the *Gesta*’s representation of Matilda begins by portraying her as a subject who is absent altogether; rather than narrating her actions directly, the *Gesta*’s author introduces her as the subject of conversation between Stephen’s supporters and William, Archbishop of Canterbury, who was reluctant to crown Stephen. William, whom the *Gesta* previously castigated for his penuriousness, balks at Stephen’s request for a swift coronation. Furthermore, “[a]diecit et regem henricum, cum adiuveret, primus totius regni artissimo constrinxisse iureiurando, ne quem post illius discessum, nisi aut filiam” (he added that King Henry in his lifetime had bound the chief men of the whole kingdom with a most stringent oath not to recognize as their sovereign after his death

39. Stryker, “Performing Transgender Rage,” 254.

40. Tolhurst, *Translation of Female Kingship*, 41.

anyone but his daughter).⁴¹ Such an introduction undermines Matilda's authority not only by identifying her first vocal supporter as a sinful miser, but also by relegating the powerful historical Matilda to the position of a passive, non-agential presence in the text. Stephen's supporters dismiss her problematic existence by portraying her in a feminine position in which her very flesh is currency in their male-centered political designs. Stephen's supporters claim that Henry gave his daughter to an Angevin so that her inheritance would unite Normandy and Anjou in the government of England, but that Henry never actually intended that Matilda inherit the crown.

The author of the *Gesta* depicts Stephen's supporters as claiming that "more Ezechielis, in diebus suis pacem reformare, perque unius mulieris coniugium multa hominum mila ad concordiae adsciscere glutinum" (like Ezekiel, he wished to make peace in his own time and by one woman's marriage to weld together many thousands of men in harmony).⁴² The text genders Matilda as a feminine object: a mediator of male authority, deployed as a political tool from her father to her husband. Matilda is entered into the *Gesta*'s representation of the royal register as an economized mass of feminine flesh, a unit of the feminine matter *caro* from which material bodies are made. As a unit of *caro*, then, Matilda resembles the Ur-female/woman who sprang not from the mind of God, but from the mere body of man.⁴³ Her transgendered position as the female heir to a male position discomfits her enemies to the extent that they seek to regender her in order to negate the threat to their gendered ontology. Ultimately, their political and economic positions depend upon the preservation of this gender paradigm.

Even Matilda's most vocal supporter, Gilbert Foliot, bases his praise of Matilda on his admiration of what he perceives as Matilda's submissive, filial actions. As Lisa Hilton puts it,

41. *Gesta Stephani*, 10-11.

42. *Gesta Stephani*, 10-13.

43. Following Augustine, many medieval Trinitarian theologians saw people as composed of the *animus* (masculine mind), *caro* (feminine flesh), and *anima* (grammatically feminine soul), with Eve being the Ur-*virago*; see LoPrete, "Gendering Viragos," 22-23.

Implicitly, Empress Matilda's fitness to rule is grounded [by Foliot] in her obedience, meekness and submissiveness to her father (and, the repeated emphasis conveys, to her Heavenly Father), and it follows that in pursuing her claim she was not acting with a "masculine" lust for power, but motivated by the "feminine" qualities of compliance and duty.⁴⁴

Foliot also suggests that Robert of Gloucester, Matilda's brother and chief supporter, was persuaded to fight for her inheritance after reviewing the Book of Numbers's support of women inheriting from their fathers.⁴⁵ The rhetoric of female kingship, whether produced by Matilda's political allies or enemies, was rooted in a concept of divinely appointed and performative womanhood, which Matilda herself seems to have rejected entirely.

This widespread convention of rhetorically couching legitimate female power in subservient femininity plays a major role in the *Gesta's* presentation of a queen consort. In a strange narrative twist, the *Gesta* presents Stephen's Queen Maude of Boulogne as a foil to the Empress Matilda.⁴⁶ It seems that the *Gesta* acknowledges with pleasure the idea of a third gender, under very specific conditions. The Queen consort, unlike the so-called "Countess," wields power in the name of her patriarchal governors and functions as the *Gesta's* ideal *virago*: a powerful woman who operates in the service of men and upholds feminine attributes, but relinquishes her manliness at her first opportunity to do so.

When Stephen has been captured and the Empress Matilda has declared herself Queen in London, Queen consort Maude, "astute pectoris uirilisque constantiae femina, nunciis ad comitissam destinatis, pro uiro ex carcerali squalor eruendo, filioque illius ex paterno tantum

44. Hilton, *Queens Consort*, 81.

45. Hilton, 78.

46. Both the Empress and Stephen's queen consort share the given name Matilda/Maude. For the sake of clarity, I have chosen to use the Latin name Matilda for the Empress and the vernacular name Maude for the queen consort. Scholarship often uses the name Matilda to refer to both women. To add to this complication, Empress Matilda's mother is also named Matilda; I follow the convention of referring to her as Matilda of Scotland.

testamento hereditando, enixe supplicauit” (a woman of subtlety and a man’s resolution, sent envoys to the countess and made earnest entreaty for her husband’s release from his filthy dungeon and for the granting of his son’s inheritance, though only that to which he was entitled by her father’s will).⁴⁷ Queen Maude is manly in her resolution, though this gendered transgression extends only so far as to lead her to make demands on behalf of her father, husband, and son. When the Empress turns the Queen away with insults, the Queen musters an army and prepares to attack London. But because the Londoners disliked the Empress as “quia noua illa domina discretionis metas transcendens immoderate se contra eos erigebat” ([this] new lady of theirs was going beyond the bounds of moderation and sorely oppressing them), they aid the Queen in expelling the “Countess” from the city.⁴⁸ Queen Maude’s transgressive actions, after she succeeds in chasing the Empress from London, are highly praised. The *Gesta* comments, “[r]egina autem a Londoniensibus suscepta, sexusque fragilitatis feminaeque mollitiei oblita, uirileter sese et uirtuose continere” (The queen was admitted into the city by the Londoners and forgetting the weakness of her sex and a woman’s softness she bore herself with the valor of a man).⁴⁹ The *Gesta* insulates its narration of Queen Maude’s manly behavior in reminders of her dedication to father, husband, and son, thus excusing and even praising her gender transgressions as evidence of her elevated mental capacities. After all, her first actions in London are gathering allies to free her husband the King from his prison. Although the *Gesta*’s portrayal of the Queen seems to suggest that gender transgression is a laudable action for women, who are the inferior sex and naturally aspire to masculinity, such actions are in fact praised only for their serviceability to male-born men. Stephen’s Queen displays manly valor at moments, but remains safely in the realm of women, never seriously questioning the binary gender system of her society.

In contrast, Matilda’s refusal to affirm this ontological split quickly becomes a significant irritant to the *Gesta* author. According to this

47. *Gesta Stephani*, 122-23.

48. *Gesta Stephani*, 122-25.

49. *Gesta Stephani*, 126-27.

text, her gender transgression was consistent, insistent, and unapologetic. The problematic nature of her own identity spread to her court as well—implying that she imperiled Britain itself. To return to an example given above, but to reread what seemed to be a lesbian narrative of Matilda penetrating a feminized city, Matilda's presence in London, at the apex of her political career, indicates to the chronicler that the geographical center of England is a transgender dystopia. At the text's beginning, Stephen entered the feminine London to praise and applause. After defeating Stephen in battle, imprisoning him, and winning many of his supporters to her side, Matilda accomplishes her own penetration of London. According to the figuratively gendered system of the *Gesta*, Matilda's entry into supreme political power entails her girding herself not only with arms, but also a phallus. In medieval terms, she figures here as a hermaphrodite, possessing multiple sexes and genders in one body.⁵⁰

With a phallus-bearing woman on the throne, corrupt courtiers (some as ontologically troubling as she) flock to her side. Other former opponents of Matilda are forced to concede defeat. This is the result of the regime shift:

Istis itaque, sed et aliis nonnullis, qui regi paruerant, mutabilem infelicis fortunae aleam perpressis, aliis quoque sponte nulloque cogente ad comitissae imperium conuersis, (ut Robertus de Oli, ciuitatis Oxenefordiae sub rege praeceptor, et comes ille de Warwic, uiri molles et deliciis magis quam animi fortitudine affluentis),

50. For various premodern uses of the term “hermaphrodite,” see Marian Rothstein, *The Androgyne in Early Modern France: Contextualizing the Power of Gender* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 1–3. Also see Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, “The Hermaphrodite and the Orders of Nature: Sexual Ambiguity in Early Modern France,” in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1, no. 4 (1995): 419–38. The concept of hermaphroditism, today known as intersexuality, usually drew on the concept of an individual's sex and gender operating on a sliding scale from whole man to whole woman. An intersex individual was so centrally located on this spectrum as not to be recognized as fully male or female. For a study of modern transgender senses of materiality and bodily being, see Gayle Salamon, *Assuming a Body: Transgender and the Rhetorics of Materiality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

illa statim elatissimum summi fastus induere supercilium nec iam humilem feminae mansuetudinis motum uel incessum, sed solito seuerius, solito et arrogantius procedure et loqui, et cuncta coepit peragere, adeo ut in ipso mox dominii sui capite reginam se totius Angliae fecerit, et gloriata fuerit appellar.

(So when these and likewise a good many other adherents of the king had endured the hazards of ill fortune, and others of their own accord and under no compulsion had transferred their allegiance to the countess (like Robert de Oilli, governor of the city of Oxford under the king, and the well-known Earl of Warwick, effeminate men, whose endowment lay rather in wanton delights than in resolution of mind) she at once put on an extremely arrogant demeanour instead of the modest gait and bearing proper to the gentle sex, began to walk and speak and do all things more stiffly and haughtily than she had been wont, to such a point that soon, in the capital of the land subject to her, she actually made herself queen of all England and gloried in being so called.)⁵¹

The text accuses Robert de Oilli and the Earl of Warwick of being soft, weak, or effeminate. The gendered implications of the term “molles” are even clearer if we look at similar insults in the text. In a passage immediately preceding the one above, the author describes Miles de Beauchamp as an “vir laxus et effeminatus,” (a dissolute and effeminate man), who properly loses his title and fortune.⁵² The only two named courtiers who join Matilda transgress their own gender boundaries. If the term *virago* could sometimes be deployed as a compliment to women who *trans*-cended their feminine weaknesses, the concept of effeminacy could never be complimentary if applied to men. Caelius Aurelianus’s *On Chronic Diseases* compares effeminate men with “tribades,” women with hypertrophied clitorises.⁵³ The historical baggage of male effeminacy in the learned Latin tradition and its appearance in the *Gesta* places masculine/morphologically “male” women in close proximity to feminine

51. *Gesta Stephani*, 118-19.

52. *Gesta Stephani*, 116-17.

53. Lochrie, “Before the Tribade,” 340.

men. London, after its subjection to Matilda's transsexual penetration, is a de-gendered, or perhaps re-gendered, dystopia.

The *Gesta's* view of the corruptly gendered court is developed by means of a keen scrutiny of Matilda's body. The text accomplishes this scrutiny with strong emphasis on Matilda's gender comportment, an emphasis which has been interpreted as either an accurate representation of her personality flaws or as a misogynist take on her failed efforts to appear authoritative.⁵⁴ I provide a reading of Matilda's gender comportment as represented in the *Gesta* aiming to demonstrate that Matilda's detractors may not have hated the theoretical political idea of a crowned woman nearly as much as the reality of a masculine woman on the throne.

While many contemporary lay and ecclesiastical figures of varying social status did not see Matilda's kingship as a violation of her proper gender role (showing that theological misogyny did not always translate to the lived experiences of royal women), almost every extant source on Matilda takes serious issue with her gender comportment.⁵⁵ Comportment, both modern and medieval, refers to bodily performance especially as relating to gender and includes microperformances including vocal tone and inflections, bodily language such as leg crossing, and modes of engagement with clothing, such as how one wears high heels.⁵⁶ Since gender comportment is a culturally and socially specific way of measuring material iterations of abstracted beliefs regarding gender categories, it follows that what an element of comportment signifies in one society (or sub-society) will signify something quite different in another.

Matilda's transgressive comportment is clear in the passage above. After her entrance into London, she behaves differently than she had

54. Tolhurst reviews the tradition of focusing on Matilda's supposed personality flaws in *Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Translation of Female Kingship*, 21-23.

55. This is not to suggest that female kingship was generally accepted, only that it was acceptable enough to a sufficiently numerous amount of people for Matilda's career as a female king to exist. Her supporting roles as daughter of Henry I, Empress to the Holy Roman Emperor, Countess of Anjou, and dowager queen to Henry II were readily accepted in a way that her kingship never was.

56. This definition is developed from the one provided by Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (Berkeley, CA: Seal, 2008), 12-13.

originally (though the question of how the *Gesta* author was familiar with her typical comportment is left unanswered). She puts on, or clothes herself, with a haughtiness that supplants the humility of expected feminine behavior. Her *motum* or *incessum* (gait or bearing), which Potter also translates as “demeanour” (in an apt rendering of the Latin sense), is distinctly masculine. Her physical body performs transgressively: she walks incorrectly, speaks incorrectly, and her general body language reads incorrectly. According to conceptual metaphor theory, developed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, humans yoke materially unrelated concepts together in order to make sense of the world.⁵⁷ The medieval (and arguably modern) conceptual metaphor of Man/Masculine as greater than Woman/Feminine clearly plays here. If modern historians seek to pay compliments to medieval women by characterizing them as having “transcended the social and political limitations imposed on their gender,” scholarship must be attentive to the verticality of the gendered system which we study.⁵⁸ Conceptual metaphor theory shows that the *Gesta* links Man with Up and Woman with Down and depicts Matilda in unrelenting terms of excess in her determined Upwardly behaviors. Therefore, Matilda’s haughtiness is not merely a defect of personality but a distinctly masculine mode of comportment.

This general masculinity intensifies as the *Gesta*’s perspective moves closer to Matilda, bringing her body more closely into the reader’s view and allowing for clearer scrutiny of her material embodiment. Matilda’s very facial expressions are suddenly the text’s focus. While in London, she is petitioned by citizens who request reparations for possessions lost in the war. But, “[t]alia his modis ciuibus prosequentiibus, illa, torua oculos, crispata in rugam frontem, totam muliebris mansuetudinis eversa faciem, in intolerabilem indignationem exarsit ” (When the

57. For a foundational overview of how conceptual metaphors function, see George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980). This conceptual metaphor operates by positioning the conceptual domain of Man vertically above that of Woman. For a study of how these conceptual domains manifest in linguistic and social terms, see Mel Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 23-56.

58. Beem, *Lioness Roared*, 4.

citizens expressed themselves this way she, with a grim look, her forehead wrinkled into a frown, every trace of a woman's gentleness removed from her face, blazed into unbearable fury).⁵⁹ This scrutiny of politically significant bodies, while not unusual in twelfth-century chronicles, is rare in the *Gesta* itself.⁶⁰ Even as a critique of Matilda's refusal to forgive the citizens who had previously done her injury in favor of Stephen is implicit, the critique of her gender comportment is explicit. Her eyes, forehead, and general facial movements transgress the correct gendered behavior of those features. The text may be concerned with Matilda's political policies, but is more interested in her lack of femininity, the erasure of her gender from view. Her bodily actions as well as her presence as a female king figure her as a trans ruler, ontologically transgressive and thus repulsive.

The *Gesta's* hyper-awareness and criticism of Matilda's gendered behaviors eventually devolve into outright mockery when Matilda's tenure in London comes to an end. Eventually, the Londoners drive the Empress from the city, and Matilda faces a series of military defeats. At one point, she and her allied barons are forced to flee. The *Gesta* here points to the Empress's transgender behaviors to mock her failure to live up to masculine standards of bravery. The *Gesta* author writes: "Sed et ipsa Andegauensis comitissa, femineam semper excendens mollitiem, ferreumque et infractum gerens in aduersis animum, ante omnes . . . confugit" (The Countess of Anjou herself, who was always superior to feminine softness and had a mind steeled and unbroken in adversity, was the first to fly).⁶¹ The text constrains Matilda within the position of wife by designating her as countess and then revels in Matilda's military failure. Unlike William of Malmesbury's depiction of Matilda's mode of retreat from London as a calculated and peaceful move, the *Gesta* represents her as over-eager and cowardly in retreat.⁶² Her masculine identity, constructed in violation of gendered boundaries, is of little use

59. *Gesta Stephani*, 122-23.

60. For example, see William of Malmesbury's *Chronicles of the Kings of England*, ed. and trans. J. A. Giles (London, 1866), which describes the physical appearances of various royals, including William Rufus (308) and Henry I (446).

61. *Gesta Stephani*, 134-35.

62. Chibnall, *Empress Matilda*, 105.

in this particular military situation. Not only is Matilda defeated, but she reveals herself to be a feminine ruler, after all, and in the worst sense of the word. In a text riddled with the figure of the weak, weeping woman such as the widow of Richard Fitz Gilbert, her eager flight reveals her to be not as unlike these women as she would have had others believe.

Thus far, this paper has focused on the *Gesta's* representations of Matilda's identity as a female king. In sum, the *Gesta* desires Matilda to behave as a feminine woman and expresses disdain for her trans-ing actions, which include the penetration of London and unacceptably masculine gender comportment during her time there. The remainder of my analysis focuses on Matilda's self-representation through evidence which most nearly approximates Matilda's representation of herself. This evidence, most notably Matilda's royal seal, suggests that the Empress realized the power of gendered expressions of authority and negotiated them in strategically transgender moves.

Matilda's Seal

Typically, historians have looked at Matilda's charter signatures as the key means by which we can understand Matilda's self-representation. The question as to whether or not Matilda ever called herself queen, for example, is decisively answered in Chibnall's discussion of the charter Matilda signed in preparation for her coronation in London. Chibnall observes that Matilda refers to herself as "daughter of King Henry and Lady of the English."⁶³ While the *Gesta* claims that Matilda did indeed haughtily name herself queen, no written evidence exists that Matilda officially claimed this title.⁶⁴ As I discuss above, historians have identified Matilda as *comitissa*, a title which she rejected. Later in her career, Matilda's signature preceded her son Henry's on charters, even after his crowning in England. According to Chibnall, Matilda set much store by ceremonial representation, a personal interest which Henry respected in his lifelong treatment of his mother as an honored dowager empress.⁶⁵

63. Chibnall, *Empress Matilda*, 104.

64. *Gesta Stephani*, 119.

65. See Marjorie Chibnall, "The Empress Matilda and Her Sons," in *Medieval Mothering*, ed. John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler (New York: Garland

As far as the historical record attests, Matilda was not eager to claim the title of *regina*, even with the modifier *consors* either explicitly or implicitly attached to the title; instead, she sought to rule indendently as *imperatrix* or *domina*, subverting English conventions of gender and power. Furthermore, she wished to operate as *rex*, while maintaining her grammatically feminine titles.

While literary scholarship might look to signatures as the key sign of Matilda's self-representation, I argue that we must turn to the rich significations that her royal seal reveal. This multidisciplinary approach brings together gender theory, medieval history, and material culture studies. As Tara Hamling and Catherine Richardson state, a "plurality of representations" on a single topic "signals a telling penetration of ideas into different social situations and a self-consciousness about them which gives us a sense of their contemporary social visibility."⁶⁶ While no literary writing by Matilda survives, she has left us a work which contains text and image, as well as tactile and visual experientiality. Subhadra Mitra Channa and Kamal K. Misra remind us that "[n]o one ever created anything that was of no use where 'use' refers not just to the instrumental but to symbolic and emotional purpose as well."⁶⁷ In the case of medieval women, whose opportunities to leave behind written materials for posterity were relatively rare, we must be especially attentive to the symbolic and emotional purposes of those objects which we have.

To my knowledge, scholarship has yet to fully acknowledge the remarkably transgressive and transgender nature of Matilda's seal. Feminist literary scholarship, however, has taken some note of the seal. Tolhurst notes that the shape of Matilda's seal is unusual for a seal of a queen consort, following Elizabeth Danbury's observation, and critiques the fact that Beem does not discuss Matilda's seal at all, while Chibnall is more interested in a lost seal, one which would have accompanied the charter by which Matilda famously became *domina anglorum*.⁶⁸

Publishing, 1996), 279-94, 288.

66. Tara Hamling and Catherine Richardson, eds., *Everyday Objects: Medieval and Early Modern Material Culture and its Meanings* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate 2010), 10.

67. Subhadra Mitra Channa and Kamal K. Misra, ed., *Gendering Material Culture: Representations and Practice* (Jawahar Nagar, Jaipur, India: Rawat Publications, 2013), 4.

68. Tolhurst, *Translation of Female Kingship*, 41; Chibnall, *The Empress Matilda*, 103.

The cursory treatment of Matilda's seal, compared with the amount of scholarship spent on chronicle representations of Matilda, supports Danbury's general statement that little has been made of medieval women's seals.⁶⁹ While Danbury makes this observation as part of a call for more expansive sigillographic research in general, Matilda's seal is a rich source of information regarding her strategic representation of herself as a female king. A material culture perspective may clarify the role that this seal played in Matilda's life. Working from a semiotic paradigm of medieval sealing in tandem with a theorization of gender prosthetics, I develop a theory of how a premodern transgender object can function. Ultimately, the seal emerges as a transgender object, mirroring Matilda's transgressive self-representation, and showing us that Matilda was aware of her transgender position and strategic in her manipulation of that position.

The seal's distinctiveness must be emphasized. However, the seal may not appear to be unusual to a viewer unfamiliar with medieval English sigillography. The "standard" seal for a royal woman in England seems to have followed a typical design. This standard meant that, almost invariably, a royal English woman's seal took the shape of a pointed oval, or vesica, and featured a crowned woman in a standing position holding either a scepter and orb or a falcon, with a descriptive legend inscribed around the top edges. Prototypical examples include the seals of Queen Matilda of Scotland (1080-1118), Princess Joanna of England (1165-1199), Queen Isabella of Angoulême (1188-1246), Queen Eleanor of Castile (1241-1290), Princess Elizabeth of Rhuddlan (1282-1316), Queen Margaret of France (1299-1307), and Queen Philippa (1314-1369).⁷⁰

69. Danbury, "Queens and Powerful Women," 17-24.

70. Elizabeth Danbury provides images of these seals in "Queens and Powerful Women." For Queen Matilda of Scotland (80 x 56 mm), Society of Antiquaries of London, seal cast case 1, see Figure 1, p. 17; for Princess Joanna (72-46 mm), BM 1897,0508.2, see Figures 11 and 12, p. 22; for Queen Isabella (93x62 mm), SAL, seal case A1, see Figure 8, p. 20; for Queen Eleanor (8.0x5.6), National Archives of the UK, TNA DL 27/196, see Figure 5, p. 19; for Princess Elizabeth (71 x 49 mm), Society of Antiquaries of London, seal case A4, see Figure 9, p. 20; for Queen Margaret (85 x 55 mm), SAL, seal case A1, see Figure 3, p. 18; and for Queen Philippa (80 x 50 mm), Society of Antiquaries of London, seal case A1, see Figure 4, p. 19. Queen Eleanor's seal is only partially preserved, accounting for its diminished

These seals are vesicas with a woman standing in the center, crowned and holding one or two objects. The later seals are notably more elaborate and conspicuously feature family arms, as we see in the seals of Queen Phillipa, Princess Elizabeth, and Queen Margaret. For example, Margaret's seal features a standing woman flanked with two shields, one decorated with a field of fleur-de-lis and the other with a lion. This difference reflects a trend of placing heraldry on the queen consort's seal, a practice that arose in the middle of the thirteenth century.⁷¹ Another variation can be seen in Joanna's two-sided seal: one side portrays her as seated with a cruciform, while the other side shows her standing with a fleur-de-lis. However, these samples are all immediately recognizable as a set of queen's seals from medieval England in the eleventh through fourteenth centuries.

While Matilda of Scotland's seal is the earliest example of a woman's seal in England, Danbury suspects that the practice goes back further than we can tell. Since the seal of Henry I's sister, Cecilia, Abbess of Caen, is similar, there may be an earlier prototype, perhaps belonging to Matilda of Flanders, wife of William the Conqueror and mother of Cecilia and Henry I.⁷² Even with the relatively few surviving examples of women's seals from medieval England, we can draw conclusions about the standard design of a royal woman's seal. To discuss the period at hand more specifically, one survey has found that 87 percent of twelfth-century Anglo-Norman noblewomen's seals were vesica or oval. While noblemen's seals were round, and ecclesiastical bodies and laymen could employ both shapes, women's seals of the twelfth century were almost exclusively vesical in shape and nearly invariably featured a standing woman.⁷³ Even Joanna's seal, a variation from the norm in its representation of Joanna as seated, depicts her as standing on its reverse side.

measurements. The characteristic vesica shape and standing woman, as well as an obverse side with arms, is still clear.

71. Danbury, "Queens and Powerful Women," 19.

72. Danbury, 17.

73. Danbury, 17. Gradually, the standard royal woman's seal did change; late medieval and early modern seals became round and featured arms instead of a representation of the woman herself. See images of examples as provided by Danbury: Queen Elizabeth Woodville (20), Cecily Neville (22), and Lady Margaret Beaufort (23).

Matilda's seal, then, represents a deviation from a strongly held tradition of seal design for royal women. The seal cast, kept by the Society of Antiquaries of London, is an unremarkable 63 mm in diameter.⁷⁴ It reveals a *round* seal with a *seated* figure bearing a scepter in the right hand and the left arm bent in front of the torso, palm upwards. A legend runs along the seal's circumference, encircling the enthroned and crowned Matilda. The only blank edge is at the seal's bottom, where a step for the figure's feet occupies the edge of the seal.

The seal would be mundane from a historical point of view if it had been owned by a male ruler. However, this is clearly not the situation: Matilda's seal clearly replicates the design standard for male kings of England while featuring a female figure where the man would usually be. What we have in Matilda's seal is a woman wielding a man's seal. It is undeniable that Matilda's seal follows in the tradition of seal design for English male kings. The Great Seal of Edward the Confessor, the purported predecessor of William the Conqueror, features the king seated and crowned on a round double seal, as do the Great Seal of William the Conqueror, Matilda's grandfather, and the Great Seal of Henry I.⁷⁵ Matilda made a conscious choice to utilize a seal which harked to the male line of authority in which she was determined to participate. When faced with the choice whether to enact her authority through a symbol like that of her father, Henry I, or her mother, Matilda of Scotland, Matilda made the decision consistent with her entire career. She adopted a male symbol of authority, just as she enacted masculine modes of rulership and gender comportment. Matilda's seal confirms the testimonies of contemporary chroniclers who attest to Matilda's masculinism. In a powerful, material way, Matilda asserted her identity as a female king.

Although the medieval seal did function in a mundane, bureaucratic way, material culture scholarship shows us that these objects were much more than that. A semiotic paradigm of medieval sealing reveals the constellation of social and spiritual truths that a medieval seal carried

74. Danbury, 18.

75. John Cherry, "Heads, Arms and Badges: Royal Representations on Seals," in Adams, Cherry, and Robinson, *Good Impressions*, 12-16, 12. Image in Joseph Noël de Wailly, *Eléments de paléographie*, vol. 2 (Paris: Imprimerie royale, 1838), 369-70, Plate R.

with it. As Brigitte Miriam Bedos-Rezak has shown: “Medieval seals . . . did not merely reflect the organizing principles of medieval culture and society nor did they simply represent reality; they were involved in creating a reality, that is, *veritas*, truth,” and in medieval culture, “truth was reality.”⁷⁶ Seals were markers of an abstract idea manifesting as a new truth within the reality of the world. The physical body’s role in the creation of a new truth was key to the function of seals. The language of charters frequently referred to the impressing of the seal itself, an action which physically signified the signatory’s *auctoritas* in enacting the abstract ideas contained in the document. In this way, Bedos-Rezak shows, the seal itself figures as body:

Such contemporary insistence on the seal as imprint highlights its indexical nature as the trace of an actual contact, not only between the matrix and the wax, but also between the seal and its user. The wax applied to the seal user’s matrix embodied his person as the true originator of the act in question—his presence often rendered even more tangible by the inclusion of bodily marks in the seal, such as finger prints, bite marks, or actual hairs plucked from his beard.⁷⁷

Bedos-Rezak discusses only male kings here, and in these examples, the gendered nature of the seal is clear. Not only does she use masculine pronouns, suggesting that her sample set drew only on the seals of men, she also points to ways in which men imprinted their masculine *auctoritas* on these *veritas*-making seals. The example of a tooth-seal comes from a charter of a Norman knight (ca. 1150) who states that he will impress his teeth into the wax in lieu of a seal.⁷⁸ This seal is not merely a mark of a bodily action, but the mark of the body itself—suggesting that the purpose of a seal was indeed to stand in for the body. In these cases, the bodies were male. The presence of beard hairs in a wax seal acts similarly; the seal functions as a proxy for the male body with all its secondary sex characteristics and social/spiritual *auctoritas* in society. Additional

76. Bedos-Rezak, “In Search of a Semiotic Paradigm,” 1.

77. Bedos-Rezak, 2.

78. Bedos-Rezak, 6.

research on women's seals, especially in England, is needed to augment our understanding of a semiotic paradigm of medieval sealing, but it is clear that a seal not only functioned as an extension of the body, but of a specifically gendered one.

Far from being abject castoffs of a corrupt mortal body, medieval seals signify a political Truth only achievable by means of physical representation. The signification of reality by means of physical objects has not been lost on scholars of medieval materialisms. Scholars such as Dorothy Kim have theorized how modes of extensible embodiment, or racial prosthetics, functioned in medieval discourses concerned with the material body, showing that mundane objects like the codpiece and the handkerchief have been used to create the *veritas* of identity itself.⁷⁹ Such studies of how ethnic or racial identity functions materially (but not bodily) show that objects are key tools in our understanding of the physical body and its various identities. Like the physical property of wax itself, identity is malleable, able to be shaped and reshaped at will with the aid of external material forces, whether a codpiece or a seal cast. In twelfth-century England, a seal was not a simple visual icon, but was an extensible embodiment of *auctoritas* in its sexed and gendered corporeal manifestation. A seal, like that of Empress Matilda, can thus contribute to our semiotic paradigm of medieval sealing, since it functions as an extensible embodiment, both indicating and formulating the social and spiritual *auctoritas* of Matilda's body upon her material and spiritual world. The new theorization of medieval seals that I propose here argues that physical manifestations of *auctoritas* did not function in an ethereal void, but in a material world where a body's sexed and gendered status *mattered*.

This concept was not lost on Matilda, whose transgressive gender position was treated as a target by her detractors, the most vocal of whom to have survived throughout history is certainly the author of the *Gesta Stephani*. The seal that she used to represent herself is itself transgender, a combination of traditionally male and female markers which aptly

79. Kim, "Reframing Race," 56-57. Kim draws these particular objects from Will Fisher, *Materializing Gender in Early Modern English Literature and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 25.

resonates with William of Malmesbury's positive characterization of Matilda as having both her father's masculine *fortitudo* and *industria* and her mother's feminine *religione* and *pietatem*.⁸⁰ If we keep in mind the concept of the seal as a gendered extensible embodiment capable of imprinting itself on the material and spiritual world, Matilda's seal becomes a unique symbol of the concept of the female king in medieval England. By deploying her authority through what I term a transgender object, Matilda worked to consolidate and legitimate female kingship.

The seal's design is exceptional, as Danbury attests, in three main ways, two of them described above.⁸¹ In the remainder of this essay, I will discuss these exceptional traits—shape, visual representation, and legend—in more detail to demonstrate how the seal functions as a transgender object. The seal's legend is not as visually striking as its other features, but certainly signifies in a notable way. The legend is unusual in its relationship to other extant evidence of Matilda's titles and styles; it reads “+ MATHILDIS DEI GRATIA ROMANORUM REGINA,” which diverges from her typical signature of “Matildis imperatrix regis Henrici filia,” sometimes followed by “eg Anglorum Domina” after her crowning in London in April 1141.⁸² The seal's legend references her favored title of *imperatrix*, which she gained through marriage to a Holy Roman Emperor, but it is unclear why Matilda approved this deviation from her standard operating procedure. Perhaps Matilda saw the two titles as functionally identical, but it is difficult to imagine Matilda allowing for slippery or careless title inscription.

The seal's legend does not name Matilda as queen of the English, but does indeed include the highly feminine title of *regina*. Since Matilda does not seem to have embraced this title in general throughout her career, its inclusion on her seal warrants some explanation. I posit that the title, placed prominently over the scepter and crown of Matilda's representation, insists upon the transgender status of the object itself, thereby signifying Matilda's female kingship itself. At first glance, the

80. William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, vol. 1, trans. R. A. B. Mynors, ed. Rodney M. Thomson and Michael Winterbottom (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 783.

81. Danbury, “Queens and Powerful Women,” 18.

82. Danbury, 18.

seal looks like that of an English king. By including the title of *regina*, any witness of the seal is confronted with Matilda's unflinching determination to be recognized as the bearer of powerful, masculine *auctoritas* even while acknowledging her status as a social woman. While the seal offers up visual information to be *received* quickly by a witness, it also requires the witness to *perceive* its written information. A witness must comprehend the seal in two ways: the faculty of reception attests to the seal's masculinity; that of perception attests to its femininity. By imprinting a feminine title (which almost always came with an implicit *consors* attached) upon a man's seal, Matilda manipulates the relationship between gender and authority and forces the witness to rethink the often-assumed masculinity of rulership. For Matilda's contemporaries, this transgender seal would have attested to the possibility of female kingship.

As I state above, the seal's shape is highly unusual, rejecting the feminine vesica in favor of the masculine circle. Although Danbury refutes the argument that the vesica was used for women's seals because of its ability to fit the shape of a standing woman in it, she offers no alternative explanation, saying only that "whether there may have been other reasons for the use of the vesica shape for women's seals is not clear."⁸³ In terms of shape, the vesica resembles conventional depictions of the wound of Christ, which in turn resembles visually and figuratively female genital morphology.⁸⁴ It is possible that the vesical seal resonated with cultural figurations of the feminine body, just as the round seals of men could resonate with figurations of the masculine body. The extent to which the vesical seal was associated with the female body itself is unclear, though this shape was indeed associated with women.⁸⁵ The

83. Danbury, 17.

84. Karma Lochrie, "Mystical Acts, Queer Tendencies," in *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken, and James A. Schultz (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 180-200, 190-96.

85. In addition to being a convention characteristic of women's seals, it could be used for bishops, corporate ecclesiastical bodies, and some laymen; however, round seals could also be used for corporate bodies and laymen, as indicated by Danbury, "Queens and Powerful Women," 17. The vesical seal's association with abstinent and/

seal's shape is perfectly conventional, then, if we think of Matilda as a female king—which, in all practical ways, she perceived herself to be, for much of her career.

The final element of the seal to be discussed represents Matilda's own body. The practice of imprinting the royal body upon the seal was usual for both men and women, but as I argue, Matilda strategically designs her own body as a transgender icon of political authority. Sartorially, Matilda's icon differs from that of her father, Henry I. While Henry I's icon features a bearded man with exposed legs, his long robe tossed over a single shoulder and arm, Matilda's icon actually resembles that of Matilda of Scotland. Both figures are draped in robes which fully cover the legs; both have wide, sweeping sleeves which hang from the forearms; and both women wear large, prominent crowns. However, Matilda's posture—which we might term compartment, based on what we know about her physical presence and body language from the *Gesta*—mimics that of her father and grandfather. She sits, feet upon a low footstool and toes pointed outward, with her knees spread apart, raised slightly above her hips. This representation clearly mimics that of Henri I, with the simple addition of a woman's robes covering the legs.

To further contextualize the exceptional design of Matilda's figure on her seal, we must remember another social valence to the seated figure of a woman. Danbury states that this visual icon “almost invariably represented not an earthly sovereign, but the Virgin Mary” on seals in England after 1100.⁸⁶ This means that not only did Matilda deliberately follow the seal design conventions of English kings, but also that she did so in a cultural milieu that would have associated her transgender seal with images of the Virgin Mary. It seems that Matilda here makes a reference to the ultimate source of feminine power: the Virgin herself. However, Matilda melds this reference to a symbol of male authority, bringing together signs of feminine and masculine power in crafting the seal by which her own power would be exercised. The seal is both

or abstract ecclesiastical male bodies intensifies the shape's resonance with the wound of Christ.

86. Danbury, 18.

kingly and feminine, a transgender object which serves as an appropriate extension of Matilda's own body, that of a female king.

Although feminist scholarship has made gains in our understanding of Matilda's difficult social and historical position, it is necessary to approach Matilda on her own terms. If her seal is any clue to Matilda's identity, as new materialist theory and traditional sigillography show it may be, we must think of Matilda as a female king, inconvenient though that category may be to historical research. It is highly appropriate that her seal be as exceptional, and potentially troubling to a binary gender system, as Matilda's own position was.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I offer a final anecdote. As I show above, the *Gesta* complains that Matilda's behavior, especially while ruling from London, was highly inappropriate for her gender. One particular scene from the *Gesta* well illustrates Matilda's transgressive comportment, which always accompanied her transgressive political actions. When the King of Scotland, the Bishop of Winchester, and her brother Robert of Gloucester visit her court, the three being "totius regni primos" (chief men of the whole kingdom), she reacts to their respectful kneeling with a display of bodily transgression.⁸⁷ Although these three make their requests accompanied by bodily shows of deference, by kneeling and bowing, Matilda refuses to rise (*assurgere*) for them. Within the *Gesta*, this description of her physical refusal to enact ideal feminine behaviors is designed to undermine her kingly authority. While Matilda's career as a female king was indeed challenged and ultimately undermined, her seal fittingly represents her as seated. It is tempting to imagine that Matilda's seal illustrates the very scene which incited the *Gesta* author to such anger: when she refused to stand in respect and deference for visitors to her London court. Just like the historical Matilda, the iconic Matilda refuses to follow the gendered protocol set before her. This image of Matilda, which was used to extend her *auctoritas* through its embodied prosthesis of her own identity until the end of her life, represents her as

87. *Gesta Stephani*, 120-21.

obstinately sitting, positioned in a network of transgender associations. Ultimately, this category-troubling seal stands as an apt representation of the female king herself.

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