The many faces of Duchess Matilda: matronage, motherhood and mediation in the twelfth century
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Introduction
These words by Georges Duby reveal that medieval noblewomen were expected to provide heirs, motherhood being one of women’s most important duties. This demand was no different for Matilda of England (*1156-†1189), the eldest daughter of Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine. In 1165 negotiations for her marriage to Henry the Lion (*1131/1135-†1195), duke of Saxony and Bavaria, were initiated. A charter issued 1 February 1168 mentions that Henry and Matilda were united through the exchange of rings, which has been interpreted to mean that they were then married. Fortunately, Matilda lived up to the expectation that heirs should be brought into the world and provided Henry with a daughter and four sons. Besides recording her progeny, medieval chroniclers writing around 1200 also took the opportunity to commemorate Matilda’s royal descent. She is almost always referred to as filia regis Anglorum (daughter of the king of the English). Considering Matilda’s royal status, it seems strange that no thorough study of her life has yet been published, though modern historians have by no means ignored her existence. Understandably, this is partly due to the fact that her husband, Henry the Lion, is considered more appealing. Historians, art historians, literary historians and numismatists all had an interest in how this duke consolidated and later lost his dominant position in Saxony. The other reason why Matilda has received less attention is probably the result of the scarcity of the written source material, though it does exist.

With regard to the sources, special attention must be given to the pictorial ones. The first reason is that there are few twelfth-century noblewomen who have been depicted as frequently as Matilda. Her image can be found twice in the famous Gospel Book of Henry the Lion. This label is
misleading, since it suggests that Henry was the sole patron. In Chapter 3, I will explain why this assumption is not so straightforward. The duchess was also portrayed in a psalter, of which nowadays only several folia are extant. In addition, her image appears on bracteates: thin silver coins struck on one side. Sixty-three specimens depicting Henry and Matilda were found in Brunswick. In all of these instances, Matilda appears at the side of her husband. Not only was Henry’s status enhanced by including Matilda, but her own position as wife was also defined. This brings me to the second reason for studying visual arts. Through these were are able to understand how Henry and Matilda perceived themselves.

As mentioned, Matilda also left traces in written sources. Her name comes up in three charters issued by Henry, and a record in the Hildesheim Cathedral inventory of donations and revenues mentions her as the donor of several liturgical vestments and two shrines (scrinae). Although Henry the Lion is also mentioned in this record, Matilda’s name precedes it, indicating her importance to Hildesheim. The fact that she is designated as ducissa ecclesie nostre (duchess of our church) led Colette Bowie to suggest that Matilda could have been a patron of Hildesheim Cathedral.

An assessment of the visual and written sources has convinced me that there is more to discover about Duchess Matilda than what has been discussed so far. In this book, I will argue that the varied visual and textual source material provides an insight into Matilda’s duties and responsibilities at her husband’s court. In order to address this question, I have taken the visual and material evidence as my starting point. Studying this evidence in combination with written sources in the context of medieval ideas concerning women and the opportunities they had to participate in society will provide an understanding of Matilda’s activities. Additionally, the revised study of the artworks will also provide a more nuanced view of several previous interpretations concerning their dating and meaning. In order to substantiate my arguments, comparisons with other women are included. Within the scope of this study, the focus is on German noblewomen, queens and empresses. It is my contention that by making Matilda the primary subject of investigation, both her own actions and those of the people with whom she interacted can be examined.

It will become evident that in several crucial ways Matilda’s duties cannot be separated from those of her husband. Not only did the events in Henry’s life affect Matilda’s movements to a large extent, but on a more fundamental level, the marriage itself had a great impact on the duchess. As a result of the marriage, Matilda, like other women, had access to her husband’s ears and was considered a perfect mediator. According to clerical writers, the marital bed was an ideal place for a woman to advise and influence her husband by way of charm. By virtue of the consortium, Matilda shared Henry’s authority and, as his consors regni, was able to exercise power, at least in theory. The origins of the consors regni idea are imperial. Analogous to the biblical Queen Esther, medieval queens and empresses were considered their husbands’ consorts, as is evident from coronation ordines. As such, they shared his sacral rule. With the loss of sacral kingship in the eleventh century, a topic that will be touched upon in Chapter 2, the queen lost her privileged position. This also affected noblewomen, though here the process was more gradual. Such a conclusion might possibly be made from the famous coronation miniature in the Gospel Book of Henry and Matilda, which was donated to the Church of St Blaise at Brunswick. As this will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3, it suffices to say here that the use of imperial iconography in a liturgical manuscript was ‘outdated’ in the sense that – judging from the material that has survived – the last imperial couple (consortium) to be depicted in a liturgical manuscript (ca. 1051) was Henry III and Agnes. That this iconography re-appears in Henry and Matilda’s Gospel Book suggests an appropriation of an imperial theme that emphasised the importance of co-rulership.

The remainder of this introduction discusses how historians have constructed Matilda’s image by discussing her marriage. By way of commenting on their approaches, four themes related to the study of medieval
women are highlighted, since they have been relevant for my approach to Matilda's duties and responsibilities at the court. Next, I will elaborate on the three chapters in this book. As will become evident in these chapters, my interpretations of the visual and textual material suggest that the years 1168-1173 were Matilda's crucial years. During this period she got acquainted with a foreign court, got pregnant for the first time and was one year completely separated from her husband. Some years later, during the period 1178-1181, the opposition against Henry was most powerful and this must also have greatly affected her. She was, for example, forced to flee from Brunswick to the Artlenburg in 1179. Accordingly, the introduction of this study will end with a brief overview of events from 1173 to the time of Matilda's death in 1189.

**Past research: Matilda in her husband's shadow**

As this book is devoted to Matilda's responsibilities as a duchess – not only as co-ruler, but also as a wife, devout woman and patron of arts and literature – Henry's life and deeds are not my primary concern. Many books and articles have been published about the duke. Nonetheless, I will not overlook his actions, as they affected his own life as well as that of his family, friends and followers. As we will see, Henry's deeds gave Matilda an opportunity to exercise authority and perhaps even translate this into power. Moreover, the presence or influence of Henry cannot be denied when examining the works of art commissioned by the ducal couple. Nonetheless, Matilda remains the basis of this investigation, and it is this which sets this study apart from those of art commissioned by the ducal couple. Nonetheless, Matilda remains the basis of this investigation, and it is this which sets this study apart from those that focus on Henry. How historians have dealt with Matilda can best be discussed in the chapters of this book. As will become evident in these chapters, my interpretations of the visual and textual material suggest that the years 1168-1173 were Matilda's crucial years. During this period she got acquainted with a foreign court, got pregnant for the first time and was one year completely separated from her husband. Some years later, during the period 1178-1181, the opposition against Henry was most powerful and this must also have greatly affected her. She was, for example, forced to flee from Brunswick to the Artlenburg in 1179. Accordingly, the introduction of this study will end with a brief overview of events from 1173 to the time of Matilda's death in 1189.

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[…] Matilda, the daughter of Henry, king of the English, a girl of noble character, distinguished and beautiful, who was held to bring glory and honour to both the Roman empire and the English realm. She was born of ancient lineage, most noble and royal on both sides, and gave promise of abundant future virtue in everything she said and did, so that all hoped she might be the mother of an heir.

16 Cited after Chibnall 1991: 26. Chibnall's translation is based on an anonymous imperial chronicle, formerly attributed to Ekkehard of Aura (MGH UU HdL: 111–113, no. 77). The event described here does not concern the wedding of Matilda and Henry the Lion, but instead recounts that of Matilda's grandmother, known as Empress Matilda († 1167), who in January 1114 married Emperor Henry V (r. 1106–1125) at Mainz. In all likelihood, the ducal wedding was less elaborately celebrated than the imperial one narrated here. Yet it gives an impression of how such festivities may have come about in light of the dearth of information regarding Henry's and Matilda's ceremony. Their union was cemented by Bishop Werner on 1 February 1168 in Minden Cathedral, according to a charter issued by Henry. However, no further details are given. The festivities – possibly similar to the ones mentioned above – were held at Brunswick. The chronicler Albert of Stade, writing between 1240 and 1256, mentions that the nuptial feast was magnificently celebrated there. In contrast to the anonymous chronicler quoted above, Albert says nothing more about the marriage. Entries in the Pipe Rolls, however, inform us that Duchess Matilda travelled with the marriage aid (auxilium) of 5,102 pounds silver to Germany. The same source also mentions that Matilda arrived from England in a yacht, accompanied by six other ships. Upon arrival in Saxony, Matilda's belongings totalled a minimum of twenty bags and twenty chests, probably filled with the stated household utensils. All of it was carried by thirty-four pack mules (sumar). Matilda also departed with twelve sables, two large silk cloths, two silk tapestries, three Spanish silk cloths (pani de Musce) and a child, there was enough time for her upbringing and education in Germany. See Chibnall 1991: 24–25.

17 Cited after Nilgen 1995, vol. 1: 299–300. The event described here does not concern the wedding of Matilda and Henry the Lion, but instead recounts that of Matilda's grandmother, known as Empress Matilda († 1167), who in January 1114 married Emperor Henry V (r. 1106–1125) at Mainz. In all likelihood, the ducal wedding was less elaborately celebrated than the imperial one narrated here. Yet it gives an impression of how such festivities may have come about in light of the dearth of information regarding Henry's and Matilda's ceremony. Their union was cemented by Bishop Werner on 1 February 1168 in Minden Cathedral, according to a charter issued by Henry. However, no further details are given. The festivities – possibly similar to the ones mentioned above – were held at Brunswick. The chronicler Albert of Stade, writing between 1240 and 1256, mentions that the nuptial feast was magnificently celebrated there. In contrast to the anonymous chronicler quoted above, Albert says nothing more about the marriage. Entries in the Pipe Rolls, however, inform us that Duchess Matilda travelled with the marriage aid (auxilium) of 5,102 pounds silver to Germany. The same source also mentions that Matilda arrived from England in a yacht, accompanied by six other ships. Upon arrival in Saxony, Matilda's belongings totalled a minimum of twenty bags and twenty chests, probably filled with the stated household utensils. All of it was carried by thirty-four pack mules (sumar). Matilda also departed with twelve sables, two large silk cloths, two silk tapestries, three Spanish silk cloths (pani de Musce) and a child, there was enough time for her upbringing and education in Germany. See Chibnall 1991: 24–25. MGH UU HdL: 111–113, no. 77.

18 Edith-Matilda. She went to Germany in 1110 to meet her future husband, Emperor Henry V. On 10 April of that year the formal betrothal took place and on 25 July (Feast of Saint James) she was crowned. Because she was still a minor, the consent of the Roman empress was required for the marriage. See Albert of Stade, Anonymi Stadensis: 346. Although the sum Matilda took with her was significantly smaller than that of Empress Matilda (10,000 pounds silver), it was still large when considering the fact that Matilda's sister, Joanna, brought 4,540 pounds into the marriage with King William II of Sicily. Ehlers 1998: 190.
cloth of samit. Her cargo also included seven gilded saddles covered with scarlet and another seven of gilded leather.21 Chroniclers confirm this account by mentioning that Matilda arrived with large amounts of gold and silver and an impressive dowry.22

Of course, Matilda’s marriage to a duke held a different importance than that of her grandmother’s to an emperor. The account of the earlier wedding, however, is relevant because it shows that relations between the Anglo-Norman realm and Germany – more precisely, the Holy Roman Empire – had existed long before Matilda married Henry the Lion. One of the main differences between the two Matildas is that we know – through charters, seals, coinage and chronicles – that the older Matilda was actively engaged in the politics of her day.23 For the younger Matilda, such activities are less evident. This is partly the result of Henry the Lion’s age and experience, which did not immediately present the very young Matilda with the possibility to act. Since he also outlived her, her chances to actually rule were substantially diminished. At the same time, Matilda’s royal descent set her apart from other women of the German high nobility. Her royal status, considered along with the fact that she had entered her husband’s rule through marriage, suggests that Matilda is very likely to have had opportunities to exercise authority and perhaps even to wield power.

This is not the way historians have dealt with Matilda when considering her marriage, however. Karl Jordan, in his biography of Henry the Lion, discussed the marriage in a chapter concerning Henry the Lion at the pinnacle of his power.24 Clearly, Jordan considers their union against a political background, with Matilda as the young woman who sealed the alliance between the Angevin and German courts. While he admits that Henry the Lion had much to gain from the marriage, he does not elaborate on the quantity and variety of precious goods, nor does he mention the names of the people escorting the princess.25 Where Matilda is concerned, her upbringing at a court where art and culture flourished is used as an argument to emphasise her role as a patron of art. Jordan does not discuss the ways in which Matilda realized this patronage.26 The relation between Saxony and the Anglo-Norman court before Henry and his family went into exile in 1182 was further examined in an article by Joachim Ehlers.27 He discusses the entries in the Pipe Rolls, because they not only inform us about the preparations made for Matilda’s marriage, but also tell us about the content and value of Matilda’s dowry and the marriage aid raised by Henry. Ehlers concludes that the marriage brought Henry financial profit as well as prestige. In his view, the year 1168 should therefore be regarded as epoch-making.28 While he acknowledges that the marriage also provided the duke with opportunities to implement the Anglo-Norman or Flemish traditions to establish new forms of representation, he says little about Matilda’s involvement at court.29 In Jens Ahlers’ study on the connections between the Welfs and the English kings, Matilda is again considered a mediator.30 She brought wealth, and above all, prestige, or as Ahlers puts it: ‘money played a major role in Henry the Lion’s politics’.31 This was also emphasised by Wolfgang Leschhorn in his 2008 lecture on the wedding of Henry and Matilda at Minden. Once again, the Anglo-Norman influence on the cultural climate at the Brunswick court is mentioned.32 Yet no real insight is given into what the court culture at Brunswick would have been like both prior to and after Henry’s marriage to Matilda. This does not come as a surprise, as the lack of sources makes it extremely difficult to gain an accurate perspective of court life. The article’s focus is indeed on the wedding, but it does not address the question of what consequences the marriage may have had for Matilda. This theme, however, is discussed by Laura Brander.33 She examines how the narrations of princely weddings found in textual sources are linked to the later influence of noblewomen at their husbands’ courts. These sources also provide insight into women’s contributions to the construction of the family consciousness. While most aristocratic weddings were not even recorded, the ones that were all share a common denominator: the

21 I thank Catella Bowie for providing this information from the Pipe Rolls. See also Ehlers 2008: 191.
23 There are some other queens as well who outlived their husbands. See Martin 2005: 1154-1171; The reign of the kings was often linked to the reign of the queens. See also Ahlers 1987: 10 n. 28; Marilyn R. Marquardt: ‘Wifehood in thirteenth-century France’, in: Jordan 1979: 235-238.
25 Matilda was accompanied by William of Guasney, Sheriff of Norfolk, William of Audeley, Count of Arundel; Richard Fitz Gilbert of Clare, Count of Striguil, Reginald of Warenne, Count of Surrey, and Wilhelmir of Wermoepy, Count of Norfolk. See Ehlers 2008: 189-190. Matilda probably also had a personal staff, but we know nothing of it. According to the Annalen van Egmond Henry the Lion assigned Prescott Baldwin, the brother of Duke Fries of Holland, to bring Matilda to Saxony. Assen van Eppeln (Chronicon): 250-251.
26 This is evident from Chapter 11. ‘Kunst und Wissenschaft in Urkunden Heinrichs des Löwen’, in: Jordan 1979: 235-238.
30 Ahlers 1987: 66-73 (on the marriage), 44-46 (Reginald of Dassel at the Angevin court), 54 (Matilda’s journey to and arrival at Saxony), 71-72 (the marriage and the mutual benefits for Henry the Lion and Frederick).
31 A discussion of the sources mentioning precious goods Matilda took with her and the assessment raised by Henry for the marriage in Ahlers 1987: 81 and 84-78.
33 Brander 2008: 393-421.
splendour that was displayed. This is also evident from the sources that mention the marriage of Henry and Matilda. Although it is nowhere stated explicitly, Brander’s discussion of women indicates that Matilda’s pedigree had increased Henry’s status.

The five historians discussed here essentially regard the marriage as a political move that was beneficial to both the Anglo-Norman realm as well as Henry the Lion and his cousin, Frederick Barbarossa. There is indeed no denying that medieval marriages were linked to political, economic or social strategies. However, focusing solely on what Henry had to gain and emphasising his role as the mediator between the Anglo-Norman and Saxon courts is only one part of the story. This obscures Matilda’s role, when in fact, an analysis of the written and visual sources most certainly offers information about her. These can be useful when thinking of Matilda as an active participant at her husband’s court; be it as a patron of literature, as the donor of reliquaries, as a co-ruler, or as a devout woman involved in liturgical memoria and works of mercy. In order to investigate these aspects, which in its most basic form can be understood as the study of the lifeways of noblewomen, the marriage of Henry and Matilda will be studied in a different manner when alternative questions are asked. Several important themes that have moulded my thinking are discussed next.

**Women in the Middle: Some Important Themes**

Based on my research question, this study falls under the field of gender studies, which in its most basic form can be understood as the study of the divergence between the roles allotted to men and women in relation to the wider cultural meaning concerning masculinity and femininity. The titles of many studies addressing the subject of medieval noblewomen in Western Europe suggest that the emphasis of their content is placed on women only. Frequently, however, these studies have included their male counterparts, if only because medieval society was largely dominated by men. The study of medieval women has drawn the attention of a variety of disciplines (e.g. history, archaeology, literature and art history). Feminist and gender approaches have fostered interdisciplinary research, which, for example, has led to the study of visual culture. My intention is to focus on the art-historical objects in relation to the life and duties of Matilda – not to theorise about the ways in which medieval women have been studied in the past. I do think it is necessary, however, to acknowledge four themes within the study of medieval women: 1. women in textual and visual sources; 2. authority and power; 3. women as makers of art; and 4. performativity. Gender is the basis that links these themes. Without these topics, the term ‘gender’ – in short, being masculine or feminine – would bear little meaning. The roles attributed to men and women determined, for the greater part, the extent to which they were able and were expected to hold authority, power, and patronage. Admittedly, the portrayal of powerful women is complex. Examining existing sources from the perspective of gender, for instance, reveals that clerics acknowledged that women were able to become ‘masculine’ if the situation demanded, usually because their husbands were away. Power thus had the capacity to re- or degender, as chroniclers testify.

The first theme can be labelled as ‘women in textual and visual sources’. In her article, *Taking a Second Look. Observations on the Iconography of a French Queen*, Claire Richter Sherman admits that, after first having overlooked the miniatures depicting Jeanne of Bourbon (1338–1378) in the coronation book of her husband, King Charles V, she realized these images tell us much about the queen’s position. The mere fact that Jeanne was included in this book affirms that her presence was considered important. She was the king’s consort, and because of this, she enjoyed a certain status. Due to her character and political circumstances, she was able to participate actively in public life. The same has been argued by the historian Anneke Mulder-Bakker, who is critical of historians’ emphasis on sources such as coronation ordinances and their overvaluation of councils and institutions at the expense of information transmitted orally, which, according to the chronicles, was highly important. The stories about women found in narrative sources, such as chronicles and letters, demonstrate that a woman’s consort function entitled her to act. While the extent of their responsibilities could vary (e.g. 37–39)

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35 A good introduction of gender in the medieval world is Smith 2004: 1–21.
36 The importance of studying women in relation to men has been pointed out by Georges Duby in his book on twelfth-century noblewomen. See Duby 2000: 205. Although Duby is interested in women, the focus is often on men.
37 Johns 2003: 3.
39 Johns 2003: 13. Contrasting with what Georges Duby concluded from the chronicles written in Flanders, Bettina Elpers contended that the writers of chronicles concerned with Saxon territories did not consider powerful women – regent mothers – anomalies. See Duby 1995: 73; Elpers 2003: 200. I do not share Elpers’s notion that the descriptions of women in chronicles are not as much gender-based because of the absence of the words mulieres (women), wives, mistresses and feminae (women, female) in German chronicles. See Elpers 2003: 27. The fact that women were described as daughters, wives, mothers, and Duchesses also refers to gender.
taking care of the court, receiving guests, offering access to their husbands), it is evident that women, as consorts, were expected to assist their husbands.41 This has been convincingly demonstrated in Bettina Elpers’s discussion of German noblewomen of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, a study that is important for my research, not just because chronicles and charters are considered from a female perspective, but more importantly, because Elpers makes an effort to establish – by way of summarising her findings – a ‘collective biography’ of territorial princesses.42 This offers an opportunity to reflect on Matilda’s responsibilities and to compare them with women’s behaviour in the Rolandslied. Chronicles and charters are valuable sources that offer insight into the duties and responsibilities of aristocratic women. I would suggest, however, that coins and manuscript miniatures tell a different story than those sources that may be considered more traditionally ‘masculine’, such as charters who were often issued by men and concern issues associated with men (property, feudal relations). For this reason, they must be examined as well.

The second topic, ‘authority and power’, is related to the problems that sources can bring with regards to women. These two words are often used interchangeably, though they do not mean the same for both men and women. This has painstakingly been pointed out by Erin Jordan in her analysis of the action radius of the thirteenth-century countesses, Jeanne and Marguerite of Flanders.43 Admittedly, these women differ from Matilda in that they inherited their father’s patrimony. Jordan’s manner of dealing with the difference between authority and power, however, is relevant in order to obtain a more nuanced view of Matilda’s position as a duchess. To have held authority – either through inheritance or through marriage – did not mean that women were also necessarily able to wield power, defined by Jordan as well as Pauline Stafford, as the ability to act, e.g. allocating fiefs, influencing the appointment of abbots or mediating in and settling disputes.44 Their definition of power differs from that of Georges Duby, who views power (potestas) in relation to the power to command and to punish, thereby connecting it to a male world linked to the public sphere.45 Associating power

with the public sphere excluded women from power since their domain was the domestic sphere. This view has been criticised over the years, for example, by Richter Sherman and Mulder-Bakker. This criticism has been taken to heart and has subsequently broadened the scope of research. Women’s religious patronage has, for example, neither been understood as a personal nor private undertaking, but rather as something that was purposefully and consciously employed by women in order to extend their power, both secular and spiritual. Religious patronage consisted of public actions with political implications.46 In order to assess to what extent Matilda was able to exercise authority and power, I will investigate what mechanisms influenced this.

My third theme is ‘women as makers of art’.47 The art historical interest in medieval women perhaps started with a small exhibition catalogue, published in 1983. The authors pointed out that medieval women participated in medieval culture as audience, patrons and artists.48 Women’s patronage, whether of the literary or cultural sort, has held a great attraction ever since.49 It is therefore somewhat surprising that the male terminology is still employed, rather than the female equivalent matronage.50 In order to underscore that patronage was not limited to men, I will also use the words matronage and matron in this book. In her book, Queens in Stone and Silver, Kathleen Nolan has demonstrated the importance of women’s cultural patronage in crafting the visual imagery for queenship.51 Although it is difficult to assess what Matilda’s share was in the cultural patronage at the Brunswick court, Nolan’s insights can be helpful in thinking about the construction of Matilda’s ducal identity by means of coinage and the Gospel Book. Her findings demonstrate that women’s donations, the objects they commissioned and their relations to religious institutes offer insights into women’s authority and power. More recently, Therese Martin reconsidered this approach when she suggested that the concept of matronage be broadened by studying women as makers in various ways.52 A woman does not necessarily have to be directly involved in commissioning or donating an object: her name in an inscription also testifies to her ‘participation’ as a maker.

42 Elpers 2003.
43 Jordan 2006: 39-49. The emphasis on women’s character means that they are detached from the people they are connected with. This is odd, because women were part of families and their actions were legitimised against this background, Elpers 2003: 4.
45 Duby1995: 69 and 73.
46 Jordan 2006: 5.
47 This theme has been extensively discussed by Martin 2012, vol. 1: 1-36.
48 Sivret and Östler 1983: 4. While this last activity was emphasised, little attention was given to the ways women were depicted. See Havice 1999: 345-373. Although this article presents a good overview of the various media in which historical women appear, it is focused on the description of what can be seen, without relating it to the historical context.
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50 Nolan 2009.
That women can indeed be considered makers – both of art and identity – is brought to light in Gudrun Pamme-Vogelsang’s book, which focuses on the depiction of married royal couples from the ninth to the twelfth centuries. She argues that depictions of husbands and wives in the period concerned commonly result from a religious or secular political situation in which the persons who commissioned the artwork found themselves.53 We need to bear this in mind when thinking about the meaning of the donation and coronation miniatures from the Gospel Book of Henry and Matilda, as discussed in Chapter 3. Pamme-Vogelsang not only demonstrates that changes in society influenced iconographical themes, but also reminds us that women remained an integral part of society, and as such, were included in the visual arts. I have applied the notion of ‘women as makers’ in studying the Rolandslied and the Gospel Book, discussed in Chapters 1 and 3 respectively.

This being said, the fourth subject crucial to my research is the notion that identity is constructed through words and images. Moreover, it is subject to change (e.g. from wife to widow, or from king to monk). Identity in itself is therefore unstable. I have borrowed the notion of identity as a construction from Judith Butler, who argues that gender is the result of performative or constitutive acts (e.g. dressing in a specific manner, having a certain job).54 These actions are often determined by ideas about masculinity and femininity. It is my contention that this seems not to have been very different in the Middle Ages. Looking at the triad ‘those who pray, fight and work’, it becomes evident that these specific duties resulted from gender and, at the same time, constituted gender – that is, a male identity. In this tripartite scheme, no special space was created for women, although their actions also shaped their identity in the same manner that applied for their male counterparts.55 While I will not use Butler’s notions as a framework for my research, I hope to demonstrate that the objects under discussion show that women’s identities were created through all kinds of acts in order to fit in with the male-organised world. Although this suggests that women were powerless, acting according to their fathers’, brothers’ and husbands’ will, it is evident that artworks and written sources reveal that women were not marginalised, but – together with men – stood at the very heart of society. Yet I will not argue that Matilda developed a well-defined strategy to establish or consolidate her position, as Martin has argued for Queen Urraca of León-Castile.56 The fact that Matilda never truly ruled alone and that her power was largely based on her marriage with Henry the Lion makes it quite difficult to view her as ruler in her own right. Nevertheless, the art works and the textual sources tell us something about the way she functioned at court and the manner in which her duties can be looked upon. This has resulted in three chapters, which will be considered next.

**The structure of the book**

In order to evaluate Matilda’s responsibilities and duties at the court and to obtain insight into these aspects for noblewomen in general, the first chapter concerns the version of the Rolandslied, which is dated to the end of the twelfth-century and is housed in the University Library of Heidelberg. This text, yet not necessarily this manuscript, was commissioned by Matilda and Henry around 1173. While it is not the only text associated with Matilda, it is the only one that can be linked to her convincingly.57 A close reading of its epilogue suggests that the text has been too easily attributed to Henry’s patronage. As June McCash has already stated in The Cultural Patronage of Medieval Women, medieval chronicles and charters often credit men as the patrons of art and architecture, when in fact, women were the driving force.58 The Rolandslied not only testifies to patronage, but will also prove useful in exploring medieval noblewomen’s responsibilities. Of course, this epic story about Charlemagne and his fighting heroes is a story written for and about men defending the emperor and Christianity. Yet if we set aside the brutal fights and the way in which the Christians and Saracens try to mislead each other, it becomes evident that women play a role in the story as well. So far, literary historians have failed to acknowledge this. In this chapter, the Heidelberg manuscript containing the Rolandslied is handled both as a source featuring women and suitable for examining Matilda’s matronage.

In Chapter 2, I argue that the bracteates depicting Henry and Matilda are not merely a confirmation of Henry the Lion’s authority, but...
that they communicated the notion of Matilda as a consort as well. This idea is not only supported by the coins’ iconography, but also by the circumstances that gave rise to this coin type being issued. Henry’s long-term absence in the years 1172-1173, which time he spent in the Holy Land, gave Matilda the opportunity to wield authority as his consort. Based on a rereading of a passage from Arnold of Lübeck’s Chronicle (ca. 1210), I suggest that the idea of consors regni, or co-ruler, was put into practice. Both Arnold’s text and the bracteate are sources studied from a gender perspective that facilitates the study of questions regarding Matilda’s authority and power.

As its point of departure, the final chapter takes the idea that the miniatures and dedicatory text in the Gospel Book inform us about the construction of Matilda’s identity. Moreover, this construction can be seen as a performative accomplishment. I have chosen the word ‘performative’ for several reasons. For one, it indicates that it is an act constructing something (gender, class, age etc.). Second, performativity suggests communication, or to be more precise, the words and images in the Gospel Book through which Matilda’s identity is ‘performed’ receive meaning through the audience’s reception of it occurred in a specific time and place. The Gospel Book was donated to the Church of St Blaise in Brunswick in order to be used during mass, providing both place and time. Another issue that will be addressed when discussing the Gospel Book is that of Matilda as a maker, since she was intentionally added to the book in text and image. Of course, without her presence, it would still be a gospel book, but I will argue that her being featured in the book gives it a specific meaning. The Gospel Book is an instructive document, because it underscores the notion that Matilda – like the women in the Rolandslied – was expected to perform several roles.

In all of the chapters, the intended audience of the objects under discussion is a matter that will also be taken into account. Up to now, this issue has received little attention. Another common denominator in all three chapters is that ‘the womb’ – to use Georges Duby’s words once again – was considered a matter of great importance. This may suggest that the visual and written sources can be interpreted univocally and that they do not pose their own specific problems. Of course, this is an illusion. Accordingly, each chapter will address the difficulties in studying the specific

works of art. We must remain aware of the fact that there is no full picture of Matilda, nor are we able to create this by combining the existing sources.60 My interpretations of the visual and textual material support the argument that the years 1168 to 1173 were critical for Matilda. During this period, she became acquainted with court life in Saxony, was prepared for motherhood, became pregnant and remained at Brunswick while Henry set off for the Holy Land. This by no means implies that Matilda’s role was solely limited to these years. Yet this study focuses on the early and formative years of Matilda’s stay in Saxony. Matilda’s life was to change drastically from 1180 onwards.

On 13 April of that year, the Charter of Gelnhausen was issued. Emperor Frederick Barbarossa had it recorded that his cousin Henry had offended the ecclesiastic and secular princes and that he had treated the emperor with contempt. As a result, Henry the Lion was dispossessed of his fiefs Bavaria and Saxony.61 Ultimately, this meant that Henry was allowed to keep his patrimonial properties in Saxony but no more. Moreover, the sentence of outlawry was revoked on the condition that Henry promised to leave the country for a period of three years. It seemed logical that he and his family would retreat to the Anglo-Norman realm, and on 25 July 1182, the family travelled to Normandy.62 Although we hear about Matilda’s whereabouts through the Pipe Rolls and several Anglo-Norman chroniclers, her situation and that of her husband’s had changed dramatically. They were guests whose political leverage had been cut back drastically. The ducal family remained in the Anglo-Norman realm until 1185. Shortly after Michaelmas (29 September), Henry returned to Brunswick, accompanied by Matilda and their eldest son, Henry.63 After Matilda had returned to Germany, her matronage did not stop and she probably still also influenced and supported her husband’s actions. Nevertheless, the period from 1182 up until the year of her death in 1189, do not form the core of my research.64 It is not my intention to provide a biographical and chronological overview of Matilda’s life. Instead, I have singled out what I believe to be three key artworks that can be convincingly linked to Matilda and that are instructive to ascertaining her duties and responsibilities.

60 Stafford 1994: 159.
64 Matilda died 28 June 1189, Gerhard of Stedumberg, Annales et notae Sancti Blasii Brunsvicensis: 824. In the Annales et notae Sancti Blasii Brunsvicensis Matilda is designated as the church’s foundress. See Annales et notae Sancti Blasii Brunsvicensis: 624.