The many faces of Duchess Matilda: matronage, motherhood and mediation in the twelfth century
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Conclusion
As the daughter of King Henry II and the wife of Henry the Lion, Matilda has never disappeared from the scholarly radar. Nonetheless, no serious study has yet been conducted by art historians or historians. Matilda's images in the Gospel Book, as well as in the psalter and on bracteates have served as the starting point for my study into her duties and responsibilities at her husband's court. An art historical analysis of this visual material, combined with approaches from literature, history and numismatics, has revealed that much more can be known about her than has been previously acknowledged. This interdisciplinary approach sets my study apart from others that have dealt with the topic of noblewomen, in which the tendency is to focus exclusively on one or two aspects of their role in medieval society, such as cultural patronage or authority. Moreover, I have made use of literary texts as sources that inform us about noblewomen's lives. Whereas literary historians have studied such texts in order to understand women's positions both in fictional and actual terms, historians and art historians are inclined to overlook them as valuable sources. The current study contributes to a better understanding of Matilda's position as Henry's wife and has therefore nuanced the predominant idea that Henry the Lion alone 'was' the Brunswick court. I have argued that Matilda's duties were manifold, including being a mother, exercising authority, acting as a mediator and proceeding as a cultural matron. Additionally, my research demonstrates that an interdisciplinary approach is a valuable contribution to what is called gender studies, specifically because Matilda is studied in relation to her husband, Henry.

My research confirms that Matilda was expected to fulfil the most fundamental female duty: to provide her husband with heirs. That her responsibility in this regard was stated explicitly becomes particularly evident when closely examining the three charters that mention Matilda in relation to the dedicatory text in the Gospel Book, as we have seen in Chapter 2. Furthermore, the importance attached to offspring, and above all male heirs, was emphasised in chronicles, miracle stories and literary texts. These sources provide evidence that votive gifts were commonly given in order to secure dynastic succession. As such, they provide insight into the problems with which Henry the Lion was faced following the death of his infant son during his marriage to his first wife, Clementia. Although Henry's eldest daughter from this marriage was entitled to inherit her
father’s property, all attention was focused on Matilda, who was expected to produce sons. By actually doing so, she confirmed her identity as mother. In addition, I have argued that the topic of motherhood in the Gospel Book is clearly expressed by various iconographic elements. The aforementioned dedicatory text designates Matilda as the consors thori, literally interpreted as Henry’s ‘partner in bed’. Since this bed was the only place in which legitimate heirs could be produced, the sharing of the conjugal bed refers to pro-creation. This observation, considered together with the emphasis on lineage conveyed in the miniature with the Tree of Jesse, the repeated portrayal of Sponsus and Sponsa, and the absence of any depiction of children, led me to hypothesise that the Gospel Book was produced between 1172 and 1175. It may be seen as a votive gift that was donated to secure the birth of an heir, by preference a son. Through the comprehensive study of the Gospel Book in all of its aspects, art historical research can contribute to a greater understanding of the themes that the medieval nobility considered crucial.

As important as it may be, motherhood was not the only duty Matilda was expected to perform. In Chapter 2, I have argued that the duchess’s presence on the bracteates issued by her husband, Henry, are to be understood as a visualisation of co-rule. Matilda is depicted together with Henry; both are holding a sceptre. The iconographic analysis of images that feature noble men and women holding sceptres has revealed that this attribute appears much less frequently with women than it does with men. This in itself makes Matilda’s ‘portrait’ remarkable. Yet the fact that the sceptre is only found in representations of the queens and noblewomen who exercised authority or succeeded in actualising their power, such as Judith of Thuringia and Bertha of Lorraine, further enhances its significance. Matilda’s portrayal with a sceptre indicates that visual rhetoric can be helpful in understanding women’s influence, authority and power. The extent to which both men and women were able to exercise authority and wield power has often been established on the basis of charter evidence and landholding. Artworks are less frequently connected to these themes. This is surprising, as the public character of these artistic works were certain to have provided excellent opportunities for noblemen and -women to communicate notions of authority and power. Additionally, it is my contention that depictions on coins also shed light on the manner in which a noblewoman’s identity and

that of her family members were performed. Coins and seals made this possible because they employed both word and image. Future research combining an iconographic analysis with the use and dispersion of coins could therefore offer new insights into coins as a communicative medium.

Discussing Matilda as a co-ruler has also contributed to the understanding of the principle of consors regni within the nobility, because a distinction can be made between the consors regni idea, the phrase and women who act in their capacity as co-rulers. The clause’s absence from charters does not necessarily imply that consors regni no longer prevailed in idea and reality. Furthermore, an exploration of the charter material has shown that one can trace the changes in status and responsibility that women underwent during their lives by examining the manner in which they are designated (e.g. as a daughter and heir, fiancée, wife, duchess and lady). While the charter material for this particular research is scant, it remains an issue that deserves more extensive study.

Because the visual and textual sources that shed light on Matilda do not reveal everything we would like to know about the duties of medieval noblewomen, the Rolandslied was used as a source for study. This text was suitable for two reasons. For one, it is the only one for which we can establish that Matilda was actively involved as a matron or maker. She therefore acted in the context of cultural matronage – i.e. the commission and/or donation of literature, art and architecture – an endeavour in which women played a significant role. With regard to literature, it has even been posited that women served as pioneers when it came to the commissioning of vernacular texts. Indeed, it seems that the decision to translate the French Chanson de Roland into German was made at Matilda’s instigation. Perhaps Matilda even instructed Konrad to emphasise the importance of women in the text. While this remains hypothetical, the more prominent presence of women in the Rolandslied provides us with the opportunity to study it from a female perspective. Until now the German text was not studied within this context. The actions of Aude, Ganelon’s nameless wife and the pagan, Queen Bramimonde, demonstrate that women were able to perform many roles: fiancée, wife, mother, advisor, mediator, as well as co-ruler and regent mother.

It is difficult to assess whether the intended audience appreciated their behaviour. Yet the ways in which these fictional women were understood is certain to have varied, depending on the horizon of the listener’s
expectation. Although we might expect this horizon to be unambiguous for the courtly audience, we must not forget that people also had their own ideas based on their personal experiences, beliefs, ambitions and gender. Viewing these fictional female figures in the *Rolandslied* as merely marginal figures in the story therefore oversimplifies matters. On the contrary, they provide us with an opportunity to understand the duties and responsibilities that were expected of women like Matilda and her fellow noblewomen. There is no doubt that this entailed more than the fundamental task of childbirth.

The issue of the intended audience has also been raised in my discussions of the bracteates and the Gospel Book. Although it is difficult to establish exactly who made up these audiences, let alone gain insight into their responses, it is possible to create a picture of the possible audiences by examining the people who attended the Brunswick court, the organisation of the Collegiate Church of St Blaise, and the function of the bracteates in the town of Brunswick. In so doing, we can come to a better understanding of the communicated messages and the relevance of the construction of identity.

More than has hitherto been acknowledged, Matilda's contribution to the construction of Henry's identity was significant. The duchess turned out to be a 'maker' of identity, even more than art. Her presence in word and image, emphasising her royal birth and prestige, profoundly contributed to the way Henry's identity was shaped. One could say that the duke's family consciousness, though already present, is certain to have been stimulated by his marriage to the noble princess. Her royal lineage evoked the display of his imperial ancestry.

In the interest of identity, the investigation of whether images of Matilda's can be attributed with the same agency in later medieval art would be a worthwhile undertaking. Can the images of Henry and Matilda from the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries tell us something about the effect Matilda's presence had on her husband's identity and that of their two families? The 1223 charter issued by her son Count Palatine Henry and the tomb monument in the Church of St Blaise in Brunswick (ca. 1240?), suggest that in the first half of the thirteenth century, Matilda was still considered essential to the family consciousness. In the fifteenth century, Henry and Matilda appear on a painted memorial panel, in a small tapestry cycle, a wall mural painting and the *Croneken der Sassen*. Although these artworks vary significantly, both in content and context, my study has demonstrated the value of focusing on a variety of sources. Artworks (including coins and seals), chronicles, charters and literary texts are invaluable to any assessment of whether Matilda's twelfth-century image continued to exist in the following centuries. It is precisely this image that I have set out to construct. From it, future enquiries should be able to determine the degree and nature of Matilda's success in remaining a key figure in the construction of the Welf identity as the daughter of the English king.