Oxford DNB: December 2022

Welcome to the ninety-third update of the Oxford DNB, which adds seventeen new articles with a special focus on royal or aristocratic wives in the medieval and early modern periods. Six of the lives were formerly ‘co-subjects’ and have now been expanded and updated as subjects of articles in their own right.

From December 2022, the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (Oxford DNB) offers biographies of 64,548 men and women who have shaped the British past, contained in 62,155 articles. 11,926 biographies include a portrait image of the subject – researched in partnership with the National Portrait Gallery, London.

Most public libraries across the UK subscribe to the Oxford DNB, which means that you can access the complete dictionary for free via your local library. Libraries offer 'remote access' that enables you to log in at any time at home (or anywhere you have internet access). Elsewhere, the Oxford DNB is available online in schools, colleges, universities, and other institutions worldwide. Full details of participating British public libraries, and how to gain access to the complete dictionary, are available here.
December 2022: introduction to the update by Louise Wilkinson

The medieval and early modern women in this update were all royal or aristocratic wives. The marriages of elite young women were often arranged by their parents, guardians, superior lords, or the king. In canon law, girls were regarded as being of sufficient age to marry at 12 years and boys at 14. At these social levels, the bride usually went to her husband with a marriage portion in the form of land or, from around 1300, a cash dowry. The groom and his family reciprocated by providing dower, a share of their family's estates that was intended to maintain the bride if she became a widow. Property settlements became more complex in the later Middle Ages, with the emergence of jointure from around 1250 and later the enfeoffment to use.

For members of ruling dynasties and the nobility, matrimony was often linked to political alliance formation. The marriage of Gytha of Wessex (d. 1106/1107), the kinswoman of King Sweyn Estrithson of Denmark, may have been fashioned to facilitate a Danish-Rus' alliance. Similarly, Isabel of Castile's marriage to Edmund of Langley in 1372 strengthened English links to Castile, since Isabel was the sister of John of Gaunt's second wife, Constanza, the heir to the Castilian throne. Among the nobility, marriages where the bride or groom was the heir to an estate were particularly prized. In the absence of a son in the same generation, a daughter could inherit
lands held by knight service in post-Conquest England. From the early twelfth century, in aristocratic families where there was more than one daughter but no son, the inheritance was divided equally between the daughters and their descendants. Matilda Marshal, her sister Eva de Briouze [née Marshal], Eva’s daughter Isabella de Briouze, and Joan de Valence, daughter of Joan Marshal, all became co-heirs to the great Marshal family estates in England, Wales, and Ireland, which were divided from the mid-1240s onward between the surviving daughters and grandchildren of William Marshal (d. 1219), earl of Pembroke, after his five sons died without legitimate offspring.

The wealth and connections that women brought to their marriages, as well as other considerations such as age, health, aptitude, personality, and the nature of marital relationships, all helped to determine the roles performed by royal and noble wives. Admittedly, the lives of elite women in the medieval and early modern eras were influenced by contemporary religious teachings, medical ideas, and legal texts which treated women as morally, physically, and intellectually inferior to men. Yet, royal and aristocratic wives were routinely called upon to assist their husbands in running great households; in working with officials, servants, and associates to promote shared concerns; in exercising cultural and religious patronage; and, ideally, in guaranteeing a dynasty’s future by bearing heirs. Blanche of
Lancaster (d. 1368), John of Gaunt’s first wife, acted alongside her husband as a patroness of Geoffrey Chaucer, who devoted his *The Book of the Duchess* to her memory. Mary Freman (d. 1741), wife of the MP Charles Caesar was a renowned political hostess. Some wives were prolific writers or dictators of letters, like Margaret Paston (d. 1484), who as the wife of John (I) Paston, actively oversaw the defence of their interests. True, not all aristocratic marriages were successful. Maud de Vere, countess of Oxford, provided financial support for her daughter-in-law, Philippa de Coucy, when Maud’s son, Robert, set Philippa aside in 1387. In the sixteenth century, Anne de Vere, countess of Oxford, sought Cardinal Wolsey’s help with handling her financially incompetent husband. Noblewomen shared in the ups and downs of their husbands’ and sons’ political careers. Elizabeth de Ferrers and Alice de Lacy both suffered confinement around the times that their husbands were executed in 1283 and 1322, respectively. Anne Herbert took a vow of chastity after her husband William’s execution in 1469. The Norman Conquest of England in 1066 had devastating personal consequences for Gytha, the mother of King Harold: Gytha lost several sons in battle and eventually died in exile.

As widows, elite women usually took charge of their own affairs, heading households, governing estates, maintaining castles, and appearing at their most visible in the written
sources. Ladies like Agnes de Valence (d.c. 1310), who outlived one or more husbands, cut formidable and influential figures in landholding society. Even so, widowhood was still a time of uncertainty for some, as Isabelle de Lusignan (d. 1300) discovered when she encountered difficulties collecting a pension from her half-brother, King Henry III. The varying experiences of the women featured here illuminate the richness of female lives.

Louise J. Wilkinson is Professor of Medieval Studies at the University of Lincoln. Her books include The Household Roll of Eleanor de Montfort, Countess of Leicester and Pembroke, 1265 (The Pipe Roll Society, 2020).

December 2022: summary of new articles

The marriage of the Danish noblewoman Gytha (b. c. 1010, d. after 1068), was arranged by the king of England, Cnut, to his most important English earl, Godwine (d. 1053). She was mother of King Harold II. In widowhood she held extensive lands in her own right. After the Norman conquest, and the confiscation of her landed wealth, she went into exile in Flanders. Her granddaughter, Gytha of Wessex [Gytha Haraldsdottir; Queen Gytha the Old] (b. in or before 1062, d. 1106/1107), daughter of Harold II, was possibly born on one of the Sussex estates of the Godwineson clan. After her father was defeated at the battle of Hastings, she fled to
Denmark where her marriage was arranged to Vladimir (Volodimir) Monomakh (d. 1125) of Rus’, facilitated by pre-existing kinship ties between Denmark, England, and Rus’. She thus became royal consort of Rus’, a vast land comprising much of Belarus’, Ukraine, and European Russia.

Matilda [Maud] Marshal countess of Norfolk and Surrey (c. 1129-1248), who outlived both her husbands and all five of her brothers, went on to become one of the wealthiest heiresses in England. She was described in a celebratory biography as ‘favoured by God with wit, generosity, beauty, grace, charm and all the qualities ... a noble woman should possess’. The noblewoman Eva de Briouze [Braose] [née Marshal] (c.1203-1246), was a powerful landowner in mid- and southern Wales. Her husband, the largest Anglo-Norman landholder in Wales, was the rival of Llywelyn ab Iorwerth, prince of Gwynedd, and was executed by Llywelyn during negotiations for a marital alliance. On her death her lands were distributed among her daughters. The eldest, Isabella de Briouze (c. 1222-1247), noblewoman and princess, was married to Dafydd ap Llywelyn, the son of her father’s adversary. On Dafydd’s accession Isabella became a princess of Wales. Isabelle de Lusignan, lady of Craon and Chantocé (d. 1300), noblewoman, was the daughter of Isabelle d’Angoulême, queen dowager of England, and through her mother she was the half-sister of King Henry III of England. She maintained good relations with the crowns of both England and France
to maintain the relative independence of both her natal and marital families. The noblewoman, **Joan de Valence**, countess of Pembroke and lady of Wexford and Goodrich (c.1230–1307), was raised in the royal nursery. King Henry III arranged her marriage to his youngest half-brother, William de Valence. In addition to managing her vast estates during William’s frequent absences on royal business, she probably co-negotiated the marriages of her surviving children. She was an important participant in the political, cultural, and social worlds of thirteenth-century Britain. Through her second marriage to Daffyd ap Gruffudd, the noblewoman **Elizabeth de Ferrers** (1238?–1285?) became a princess of Wales. The magnate **Agnes de Valence** (1250–c.1310) married three times and accumulated extensive wealth and lands in England and Ireland. Using her political and diplomatic skills, she ensured that she continued to receive her revenues and protect her lands during her lifetime. The early deaths of her two brothers left **Alice de Lacy, countess of Lancaster, countess of Leicester**, suo jure **countess of Lincoln, suo jure countess of Salisbury** (1281–1348) as the heir to her parents’ extensive estates, which stretched across most of England and into Wales. She married Thomas of Lancaster, the nephew of King Edward I. The noblewoman **Blanche of Lancaster** (1340x1347-1368) was co-heir to one of the wealthiest men in the kingdom. The lands she was to inherit provided her husband, John of Gaunt, with a valuable
northern power base. She was the subject of Geoffrey Chaucer’s The Book of the Duchess. The noblewoman Maud de Vere [née Ufford], countess of Oxford (1345?-1413), married the heir to the earldom of Oxford, and was widowed in her mid-twenties. Financially secure, she chose not to remarry. During her long widowhood, she occupied significant portions of a noble family’s estates. The reputation of Isabel [Isabella] of Castile, first duchess of York (1355-1392), who married the fourth son of Edward III, was posthumously damaged by the slurs of chroniclers. The evidence of her will, however, suggests conventional piety, pride in her Castilian lineage, an intelligence inherited from her mother, and affection for her husband and children. Among her bequests were illuminated books. The landowner Margaret Paston [née Mautby] (1421?-1484), was the most prolific letter writer in the Paston family. Her correspondence is of especial significance because of its contribution to an understanding of gentry life in fifteenth-century Norfolk, and for the unique insights it provides into women’s and domestic history. She was among the first English women writers in the vernacular. The noblewoman and vowess Anne Herbert [née Devereux], countess of Pembroke (c.1433-1486), who married the first earl of Pembroke, played a significant part in the Wars of the Roses. She ran Raglan Castle alone during her husband’s absences and oversaw many of the extensive building projects which undertaken there. In 1461 the child Henry Tudor, later Henry
VII, was entrusted to her care at Raglan. On the death of her husband, she was the subject of a poem of consolation in her widowhood by the Welsh poet, Guto’r Glyn. The noblewoman Anne de Vere [née Howard], countess of Oxford (d. 1559), formed an economically and politically advantageous marriage to the heir of the thirteenth earl of Oxford, though after her husband’s succession to the title and lands she had cause to complain of his mismanagement of the estates, and bad conduct towards her. In widowhood she successfully negotiated the religious changes of the period, but latterly became erratic in running her estates, and was the subject of lawsuits. The Jacobite memoirist Mary Caesar [née Freman], (1677–1741), married the Tory Jacobite MP Charles Caesar and shared her husband’s commitment to a Jacobite restoration. In 1724 she began compiling a journal, which came to light in 1949, and which focused on politics and conversations within the Caesars’ Tory Jacobite circle.