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Women and Their Role as Literary Patrons in Chivalric Culture

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The perception of the role of women in medieval sources is largely shaped by gender stereotypes, whether in literature or historical sources. However, with the emergence of the so-called chivalric society and culture women experienced a certain change in their social status and role that is visible to us in the sources. Namely, women within the chivalric society formed a part of the target audience for chivalric themes, while the female characters who appeared in the stories represented a framework for what was expected of members of that society depending on their gender, social status and role. By presenting examples of women who acted as patrons of historical and literary works, this paper will demonstrate how the medieval chivalric society viewed the position of women as well as detect the mechanisms for surpassing their socially imposed role.

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KEYWORDS:

Middle Ages, women, chivalric culture, social conventions, patronage, Crusades

¹ An abridged version of this paper entitled "Rebel, rebel – žene koje ruše društvene konvencije" (Rebel, rebel – women who defy social conventions) was presented at the international scientific conference 14. Riječki filološki dani, 10-12 April 2025.

Following the Aristotelian view of women, the Middle Ages defined them as a form of unstable matter, chaotic and characterless. Men, on the other hand, were viewed from the aspect of a stable form, one that can create new life. Since women are described in this way, they are, as unfinished and imperfect versions of men, viewed less valuable in every respect. Scholars build upon this principle and state that women are biologically inferior to men, and even dangerous, precisely because of their unstable, imperfect and flawed nature.² The view that women were considered faulty versions of men enabled the subordination of women and created a gender hierarchy that was valid for all aspects of society. Such attitude prevented women from exercising the same rights as men.³ Because of their inferior status, women are viewed as weak, lustful, proud, cunning, and treacherous, or everything that contrasts them with the moral and spiritual purity of men.

However, as Christian thought implied and encouraged the act of redemption, women were allowed to rise at least a little from this subordinate position imposed on them by nature. In order to accomplish this, medieval women were expected to follow the example of the Virgin Mary. The Virgin was an ideal role model from whom a medieval woman could learn everything about virtues, but also about positive female influence. To achieve this, a woman, like the Virgin, must be virtuous, free from any matter, especially physicality, and above all, must be willing to sacrifice for love and for the common good. The influence of the Virgin entered all spheres of society and culture, from the Marian cult to the appearance of Mary in art and literature. The most common depiction of the Virgin in manuscripts during the period throughout the eleventh and twelfth centuries shows another virtue that the Mother of God propagates for all her sinful Eves. This refers to the numerous illustrations of the Virgin sitting in a room and reading from a book, sometimes alone in contemplative silence or surrounded by other women, most often saints, who listen attentively. The Virgin therefore symbolically promotes literacy and learning among women.⁴

Medieval women were expected to elevate the Virgin Mary to the ideal of a perfect woman, however whose level can never be fully reached. There

² This is also supposedly proven by manuals such as *De secretis mulierum*. See more in Helen Rodnite Lemay, *Women's Secrets: A Translation of Pseudo-Albertus Magnus' De Secretis Mulierum with Commentaries* (New York: State of University of New York Press, 1992).

³ The Church's interpretation of God's plan for the female population enabled this subordinate position of the female population. In the Book of Genesis, Adam was created by God, and Eve came from his rib. Church scholars from Augustine to Aquinas, as well as many who followed in their footsteps, believed that such a secondary and derivative aspect of the creation of women is what justifies their inferior status. Augustine goes a step further, arguing that there is a duality in the matter of mind and body, because while the mind is associated with men, that is, the incorporeal, spiritual, and therefore good, women are characterized by their physicality, or, according to the medieval view, something bad. Aquinas builds upon this and says that the role of women is to help men. Aurelius Augustinus, *De opere monachorum*, ed. and transl. Harry Browne (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Company, 1887), 524; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, transl. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, Ltd., 1920), vol. I. 466.

⁴ Jacques Dalarun, "The Clerical Gaze," in *A History of Women in the West. II. Silences of the Middle Ages*, ed. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber (Cambridge-London: Harvard University Press, 1992), 24-30.

was a counterexample of Eve and her sin, which, without any influence on it, tainted all her daughters, and that is the creation of Mary Magdalene, who achieves her own salvation, but also that of all women, through her voice.⁵

This paper will demonstrate how medieval women used their voices and influence to surmount their socially imposed status, whether within literature or through cultural patronage.

Women's Roles in Chivalric Literature

Unquestionably, medieval society from the twelfth century onwards was based on the agnatic family system. This is indicated by the increasing organization of feudal structures according to the principle of a hierarchical pyramid, where feudal rights were transmitted by inheritance within closed estates, primarily by primogeniture. These changes also include the emergence and strengthening of cities and urban estates, which correspondingly sought to preserve their newly acquired rights and privileges within aristocratic families.⁶ Accordingly, literary texts began to reflect the new reality, one that represented the norms of this structure, and above all the role of men in it. On the other hand, women in this new society soon realized that the property and inheritance rights and freedoms hitherto guaranteed to them were significantly curtailed, if not completely abolished in favor of men, who became the focal points for the transmission of rights and privileges to their male descendants. Despite their diminished role within the feudal structure, women gained their voice through literature which celebrated their role in society and attempted to accord them the powers and freedoms denied to them by that very society. In this courtly literature, the power symbolically attributed to a woman is primarily the love she shares with a knight, which has the potential to influence the social structure represented by the text. In literature, therefore, a woman is treated as an equal to a man in the feudal structure of the social order.⁷

The portrayal of women in literature represents a dichotomy of the role of women in medieval society. As their rights and freedoms are severely restricted in real life, literature in a way redeems women and awards them those same rights and freedoms over the lives of other female characters, as well as the influence on the overall plot of the text. Women in chivalric romance can find ways to act and even manipulate the story and other characters to

⁵ The medieval Church provides an answer to this by creating a new paradigm for women and the possibility of their redemption, Mary Magdalene, the one who first witnessed the Resurrection of Christ, and whose role in the context of salvation is interesting. Geoffroy de Vendôme, in one of his sermons dedicated to Mary Magdalene, explains not only the role of the saint in redemption, but also the role of women in society. Geoffroy states that, although death came into the world through a woman and her bodily sin, salvation also came through her mouth, her testimony of the most important Christian dogma, which then allows all women the same redemption arc. Geoffroy de Vendôme, *Epistolae, opuscula, sermones* (Paris: Ex Officina Nivelliana, sumptibus S. Cramoisy, 1610), 157; Dalarun, "The Clerical Gaze," 31-42.

⁶ Marc Bloch, *Feudalno društvo*, trans. Miroslav Brandt (Zagreb: Golden marketing, 2001), 115, 172.

⁷ See more in Leslie W. Rabine, "Love and the New Patriarchy: Tristan and Isolde," in *Tristan and Isolde: a Casebook*, ed. Joan Tasker Gimbert (New York-London: Routledge, 2002), 37-74.

their advantage, demonstrating thereby their power and control over fiction, and perhaps over reality if the didactic function of the texts is considered. The texts themselves are aware of the limits that reality imposes on women, so they allow them to move away from these restrictions without entering the realm of the imaginary. Women in chivalric romance rarely if ever engage in martial, manly pursuits such as wars or tournaments, and only a select few are depicted as governing a territory directly. This freedom must manifest itself within the framework of how real society perceives the role of women for it to be taken seriously and truthfully by the audience.

The form of such literary freedom for women is limited and subtle, but its power is not diminished. On the contrary, the manifestation of female power in literature is shown in the way that female characters behave by accepting the roles that real society attributes to them and then imitate them in the text, while at the same time secretly, subversively acting to make their voices heard, even at the cost of their own lives or with the conscious intention of collapsing the system. In order to achieve their goals, female characters use what real society cannot deny them: ingenuity, resourcefulness, intrigue, but also lies, false oaths, threats and even socially condemned actions such as the use of magic. These tactics reveal that women not only understood the constraints imposed upon them by society, but they leaned into the female roles assigned to them to exert influence and showcase their power.

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The genesis of literature and the portrayal of women's roles in it follows the development of their roles in real life societies. In *chansons de geste*, women, who played supporting roles, were often portrayed as passive victims of feudal authority and warfare. Women are further subordinated to male characters in these stories because they do not have their own narrative, but are exclusively tied to the male one, while the female character's function is auxiliary. On the other hand, female characters in novels are allowed a greater degree of participation in the plot, but only in a covert, secret way. This may indicate the fear of women's intellectual abilities, as the characters show how women manage to rise above social conventions and achieve their goals despite socially imposed limitations. However, what these texts show is that in every instance when a woman uses some of the means of influence available to her, this always has social repercussions.⁸

While female characters in the chivalric canon, such as Enide, Isolda or Elaine, demoiselle d'Escalot as well as many others, rise above the socially imposed restrictions with their wits and cunningness, women who were a part of the chivalric society implemented more subtle, but nonetheless equally impactful tactics to mark their place within the chivalric culture and elevate their subordinate status.

Chivalric literature has attempted to redeem women from the subordinate position in which society places them. Reflecting the romantic aspirations of the upper nobility, a target audience of this literature, and

⁸ See more in Joan Ferrante, "Public Postures and Public Maneuvers: Roles Medieval Women Play," in *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, ed. Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (London: The University of Georgia Press, 1988), 213-220.

influenced by the great role now attributed to the Virgin as a spiritual mediator in the process of women's redemption from sin, courtly literature puts women in the foreground. In literature that can be seen in almost every plot where a woman is the object of the knight's desire who, in order to win her love, must overcome a great number of obstacles. This *amour courtois*, for which Andreas Capellanus devised a series of rules, rests on the main premise that love is a driving force and can overcome everything that stands in the way of its realization, including social conventions.⁹

Novels, heroic epics, *chansons de geste* further promoted the ideal of chivalry with their exciting tales of damsels in distress, courtly love (or unrequited and unattainable love of a married aristocratic lady and a young knight), and heroic, knight *errants*. Numerous codes of chivalry that emerged from the thirteenth century onwards refer to historical and literary works and implement examples from them to shape the behavior of their chivalric audience. The nobility that emerged in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries was consequently based on ideas of origin and followed precise guidelines for moral behavior established by chivalric ideals.

The focus on virtues also helped make chivalry accessible to women. The virtues themselves, but also their shortcomings, were occasionally depicted as allegorical figures associated with chivalry and nobility in texts written for a female audience. In Alain de Lille's *Anticlaudianus*, written in the twelfth century, the virtues—harmony, abundance, youth, laughter, temperance, reason, honesty, decency, prudence, piety, sincerity, and nobility—were personified as women of noble birth, endowed by nature to assist in the formation of the perfect man, the knight.¹⁰

Chivalric literature also celebrated women's virtues. The idealized heroines and other praiseworthy female characters in Marie de France's *Lais*, for example, gained a reputation for their good, moral, Christian behavior. They were depicted as courtly, loyal, wise, modest, and chaste young women. As the king's character in *Le Roman de Silence* observed "There is no greater jewel, / nor greater treasure, than a virtuous woman."¹¹

The literature was devised with the intent of influencing members of the chivalric class. Noblemen and noblewomen understood proper behavior as evidence of virtuous life, morality and superiority in this elite society. Appropriate behavior for both knights and ladies was closely linked to social refinement, namely, it was understood as an appreciation of the etiquette of aristocratic culture, and it was taught. Vincent de Beauvais's *De eruditione filiorum nobilium*, written during the reign of Louis IX of France, advised that girls should be taught "good manners and customs,"¹² and dressed "in modesty

⁹ André le Chapelain, *De amore. Traité de l'amour courtois*, ed. Claude Buridant (Paris: Klincksieck, Bibliothèque française et romane. Série D: Initiation, textes et documents, 9, 1974).

¹⁰ Alain de Lille, *Anticlaudianus, sive de officio viro boni et perfecti libri*, ed. and transl. William Hafner Cornog (Philadelphia, 1935).

¹¹ "Il n'est si preciose gemme, / Ne tels tresors com bone feme," *Le Roman de Silence: A Thirteenth-Century Arthurian Verse-Romance by Heldris de Cornuälle*, ed. Lewis Thorpe (Cambridge: W. Heffer and Sons, 1972), v 6633-34.

¹² *in moribus et consuetudinibus bonis*. Vincent de Beauvais, *De eruditione filiorum nobilium*, ed. Arpad Steiner (Wisconsin: The Medieval Academy of America publication no 32, 1938) v55, 178.

and chastity, and in humility and silence and in maturity of manners and gestures."¹³ The *Rules* compiled by Robert Grosseteste for Margaret de Lacy, Countess of Lincoln, outline the necessary managerial duties and responsibilities of an aristocratic lady as a housekeeper.¹⁴

Female Patronage in the Chivalric Culture

A significant role in the representation of women is certainly ensured by the tradition of female patronage, the function of which is twofold. It represents the possibility of female influence on the author, and the text itself,¹⁵ which gives a new perspective on women's issues. Female patronage of literature, which constantly expanded to new members and new areas implied that it was women who determined the transmission of (new) cultural guidelines. By way of example, when they got married and came to a new territory, they brought their libraries with them. A case in point is Isabella of France, sister of the Duke of Berry, who brought her library with her when she married Duke Giovanni Galeazzo Visconti, thus enriching the Italian regions. In order to repay her French roots, she equipped her daughter Valentina Visconti, upon her marriage to Louis d'Orléans, with numerous books that she took with her to France.¹⁶ This influence of female patrons enabled new generations of women to use these works for the purpose of education on issues of emotions, but also on female strength and empowerment within the patriarchal social structure.

From the twelfth century onwards, many members of the nobility acted as patrons for numerous authors of works within the canon of *matière de Bretagne*.¹⁷ The practice of such female patronage paralleled the development and influence of the court and culture of the Plantagenet dynasty. This influence spread well beyond the British realm, causing the proliferation of Arthurian stories and themes, and their popularity within the chivalric framework. The patronage of this type of art gave members of the ruling class the opportunity to exercise their power and influence over the masses, and especially over those who tried to shape their lives following the guidelines of chivalric culture. Patrons not only provided financial support to the authors, but also, due to their status in society and the prestige of their name, helped in the dissemination of the works and the idea of chivalry that such works promoted, even outside court circles, which sometimes made this type of influence more significant than the political one.

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¹³ *in pudicia siue castitate et in humilitate et in taciturnitate et in morum sive gestuum maturitate*. Ibid, v60, 178.

¹⁴ *Walter of Henley's Husbandry, together with an Anonymous Husbandry, Seneschaucie, and Robert Grosseteste's Rules*, ed. and trans. Elizabeth Lamond (London: Longmans, 1890), 121-145.

¹⁵ This is particularly evident in the example of Marie de Champagne and her influence on Chrétien during his composition of *Lancelot*.

¹⁶ See more in Susan Groag Bell, "Medieval Women Book Owners: Arbiters of Lay Piety and Ambassadors of Culture," in *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, ed. Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (London: The University of Georgia Press, 1988), 176.

¹⁷ *Matière de Bretagne* refers to the literature mostly associated with the theme of king Arthur and his court. In addition to this canon, medieval chivalric literature also relied on themes related to the *matière de France*, with subjects such as Charlemagne and the Paladins, as well as the *matière de Rome* with examples from Greek and Roman canon.

It is essential to mention that this form of influence through the development of culture and art began as a *modus operandi* of the Plantagenet dynasty and then spread further to those who had certain family connections with them. The English court, from the time of Adélise de Louvain, the wife of Henry I, and especially Eleanor of Aquitaine, the wife of Henry II, laid the foundations for the development of female patronage of the arts and literature, which would soon be accepted at other courts, especially those with which the Plantagenets had points of contact, or who entered their spheres of interest.

In honor of Eleanor, her protégés dedicated two novels to her, *Roman de Brut* and *Roman de Troie*, and possibly also the *Roman d'Eneas* and Thomas of Britain's *Tristan*. Chrétien de Troyes dedicated *Chevalier de la Charrette* to Eleanor's daughter, Marie de Champagne. Similarly, Gerbert de Montreuil dedicated his work *Le Roman de la Violette* to Marie de Ponthieu, while Girart d'Amiens dedicated *Escanor* to Eleanor of Castile. Adenet le Roi dedicated *Cleomadés* to Marie de Brabant, Queen of France,¹⁸ and Blanche of Castile, the daughter of King Louis IX. These dedications prove that French and English noblewomen highly valued this patronage and connection with the chivalric romances, which they then passed on, along with the tradition of patronage, to their descendants.

Therefore, from the twelfth century onwards, a growing circle of noblewomen, mostly related to each other, started the practice of literature patronage in northern France. In this way, this practice of female patronage of chivalric literature spread from court to court, beyond England to France and further, primarily through dynastic connections. The first to build on the existing tradition and create her own circle of patronage of the arts and especially literature was the daughter of Eleanor of Aquitaine, Marie de Champagne, the wife of Count Henry "le Libéral" de Blois.¹⁹ She demonstrated her policy of patronage of the arts most clearly by supporting Chrétien de Troyes, who in the introduction to *Lancelot* identifies her as the person who inspired him to write this work, thereby elevating her importance beyond the boundaries of patronage to that of a literary muse.²⁰ In addition to Chrétien, Marie de Champagne acted as a patron for authors such as Gace Brulé, Conon de Béthune, Huon d'Oisy and Godfrey de Langy, and possibly the scribe Guiot de Provins.²¹

¹⁸ Queen Marie de Brabant was one of the most prolific patrons of medieval arts and literature influencing the French court. For more on her patronage see Tracy Chapman Hamilton, *Pleasure and Politics at the Court of France: The Artistic Patronage of Queen Marie of Brabant (1260-1321)* (Turnhout: Harvey Miller Publishers, 2019).

¹⁹ See more about the activities of both noblewomen in Reto Bezzola, *Les Origines et la formation de la littérature courtoise en occident (500-1200)*, vol. 3 (Paris: Champion, 1967), 247-311, 373-385. Eleanor and Henry's eldest daughter Matilda also contributed to the development of courtly culture, patronage of literature, and the dissemination of chivalric romances to German territories after her marriage to a Saxon count. According to some indications, Matilda was a patron of the works of Eilhart von Oberg *Tristrant*.

²⁰ More on the connection of Chrétien de Troyes and the patronage of the counts of Champagne in John Benton, "The Court of Champagne as a Literary Center," *Speculum* 36, no. 4 (1961): 551-591.

²¹ Joachim Bumke, *Courtly Culture: Literature and Society in the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

The pioneering contributions of Eleanor of Aquitaine and her daughter, Marie de Champagne, in promoting chivalric romances, and accordingly chivalric culture, had consequences beyond their cultural influence. Namely, the political circumstances of the twelfth century speak of a steady decline in the power of medieval queens, at the expense of the growth of court officials and institutions that tended to separate the king's and queen's possessions. Instead of managing their finances and income independently as before, queens were marginalized in every aspect of court politics. Eleanor of Aquitaine resisted this treatment and used the policy of patronage as something that would provide her with allies, through which she would be able to influence the members of court and beyond. With this intention, Eleanor continued the tradition started by her grandfather and became an extremely powerful patron and protector of medieval artists.²²

By the early thirteenth century, chivalric works were being supported by leading French noblewomen, who were themselves related to the Plantagenets. The first in this circle was Eleanor of Vermandois, a cousin of Marie de Champagne. She was followed by the first expansion of interest in patronage of chivalric works outside France through Blanche of Navarre, Marie de Champagne's daughter-in-law and administrator of the kingdom of Navarre during the absence of her brother, King Sancho VII. While acting as a regent for her minor son and heir to Champagne, Thibaut IV, Blanche was a patron of several chivalric texts, but also of other works.²³

The last patronesses and members of this circle were Jeanne de Flandre and her sister Marguerite, granddaughters of Marie de Champagne. With the marriage of Jeanne de Flandre to Ferrand, the son of the Portuguese king, this cultural exchange between the English, French and Iberian territories was completed, among which an increasingly lively circulation of works on chivalric themes began, primarily those belonging to Chrétien de Troyes, but also those from the Vulgata cycle,²⁴ which further established the importance of patronage from high noble circles.

Outside this circle, and yet somehow connected to it, is Ermengarde, Duchess of Narbonne. Namely, apart from her patronage policy over chivalric literature, what connects her to this circle of patrons is that she is mentioned, along with Eleanor and her daughter Marie, as one of the ladies who inspired parts of the narrative in Andreas Capellanus' work *De Amore*. In it, Andreas Capellanus discusses, among other things, the concepts of love, three of

²² See more in *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Patron and Politician*, ed. William W. Kibler (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976); Sarah Kay, "Courts, clerks, and courtly love," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. Roberta L. Krueger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 85.

²³ These are preserved manuscripts that contain *Roman de Troie* by Benoît de Sainte-Maure, *Fouleque de Candie* by Herbert le Duc, Chrétien's *Conte del Graal*, and some texts on religious themes.

²⁴ Vulgate or the Lancelot-Grail cycle is a thirteenth century Arthurian literature cycle composed in Old French prose. It comprises of five books, *L'Estoire del Saint Graal*, *L'Estoire de Merlin*, the central three-part *Le livre de Lancelot del lac*, *Les aventures ou la queste del Saint Graal* and *La Mort le Roi Artus*. The cycle is sometimes referred to as the Pseudo-Map cycle as it was wrongfully attributed to Walter Map, a writer at the court of Henry II. Plantagenet.

which are attributed to Eleanor of Aquitaine, seven to Marie de Champagne, and five to Ermengarde. In addition to this contact with courtly literature, the Duchess actively participated in the patronage of numerous troubadours and poets.²⁵

With these pioneering steps, a strong tradition of patronage by noblewomen was created, giving women and female audiences the opportunity to exert influence on chivalric culture, which, given the subordinate position of some noblewomen in the twelfth and thirteenth century, even the high-ranked ones, was no small matter. Aware that chivalric literature shaped society and served as the source of chivalric virtues, these patrons made their mark by further popularizing and disseminating such works.

In later periods, this practice of female patronage continued, and on a much larger scale. The tradition of patronage of art and literature by influential noblewomen transcended these twelfth-century family frameworks and spread to all those noblewomen who tried to exercise their power in the society. In addition to nurturing patronage, influential noblewomen also created their own collections of manuscripts, possibly with the intention of forming their own circle of art and literature followers. Among the preserved data on such collections, in addition to manuscripts containing texts on religious themes, there are also numerous examples of manuscripts related to chivalric literature. For example, the Flemish and later Countess of Burgundy and Artois, Marguerite de France, had in her possession several volumes of Arthurian romances and parts of the Vulgata cycle already in the second half of the fourteenth century.

There is evidence that Isabelle de France, Queen of England, lent two volumes of *Lancelot* to the French king who was held in captivity during one of the phases of the Hundred Years' War.²⁶ In addition, manuscripts with books from the Vulgata cycle, or the entire cycle, were privately owned by Marie de Hainaut, Marguerite III de Flandre,²⁷ Jeanne de Vissac,²⁸ Catherine de Coëtiy, Margaret of Burgundy (Margaret of Austria), Anne de Graville, and in England by Elizabeth la Zouche, Margaret Courtenay, Mary de Bouhn, Eleanor of Woodstock, Matilda Bowes, Maud Clifford, Countess of Cambridge, as well as by many other noblewomen.²⁹

Anne de Graville is a particularly interesting example. Not only did she inherit her father's passion for collecting manuscripts with Arthurian tales, but her own life was also a copy of one such tale. While these aforementioned

²⁵ See more in Fredric L. Cheyette, *Ermengard of Narbonne and the World of the Troubadours* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

²⁶ Roger Middleton, "The Manuscripts," in *The Arthur of the French, the Arthurian Legend in Medieval French and Occitan Literature*, ed. Glyn S. Burgess and Karen Pratt (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2006), 58-59.

²⁷ Granddaughter of the Countess of Artois, who inherited most likely seven volumes of Arthurian texts, including *Estoire*, *Lancelot* and *Mort Artus*. The new Countess of Flanders would continue to expand her private collection of texts, bringing the library of the Counts of Flanders to truly enviable proportions. See more in Middleton, "The Manuscripts," 60-62.

²⁸ Jeanne de Vissac also possesses three manuscripts that were written in Italy, as her Tournon family had ties to that territory. *Ibid.*, 69.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 57-81.

noblewomen worked to promote chivalric literature and chivalric culture, Anne de Graville lived out a true Arthurian scenario. Born into a wealthy noble family, she achieved an extensive education through access to her father's library, one of the most abundant of the time. Interestingly, she put this education to good use when she decided to reject the imposed conventions of society and ran away to secretly marry Pierre de Balsac d'Entraigues. After being ostracized from her family and disinherited for this act, Anne supported her family by writing novels herself.

Besides the material benefits, her love of literature would also give her access to royal circles, as she shared similar interests with the French queen Claude de France, who was the first to commission two works from Anne, and then with Marguerite d'Angoulême, the future queen of Navarre. Anne did not give up what she considered her rightful inheritance and made an almost unthinkable move at the time, suing her own father for wrongful disinheritance, and even won the lawsuit. After her father's death, she finally gained access not only to the inheritance but also to his invaluable library, which she left in its entirety to her daughter Jeanne and her son-in-law Claude d'Urfé, a member of one of the most powerful publishing families of the time.³⁰

Among the female owners of manuscripts and patrons of chivalric literature, it is worth mentioning several cases in which one can see the extent to which the owners were preoccupied with the themes of chivalric society. A case in point is the fierce struggle of Blanche of Artois, who ruled as a regent on behalf of her minor daughter in the territories of Navarre and Champagne, and who, by various means, managed to advocate on behalf of their freedom and the freedom to independently choose a husband and heir in these territories for her daughter.³¹

In the Artois area we have the example of Marguerite III de Flandre, who through her second husband Philip II de Bourgogne accepted and applied the ideas of patronage over art and literature, especially those related to the propagation of chivalric ideals and Crusades.³² The fate of Mary de Bouhn, the first wife of the future English king Henry IV, which had in her possession several manuscripts with chivalric themes, resembles one of her Arthurian romances. In the fight for her father's inheritance, the then unmarried Mary was imprisoned in Arundel Castle and forced to enter the convent by her own sister. However, Henry's father, John of Gaunt, stepped in to help her and, through the marriage of Mary and Henry, secured her ownership of her father's estates.³³

There are several other examples of female ownership of manuscripts and possible patronage policies of chivalric literature in

³⁰ See more in Middleton, "The Manuscripts," 73; also in Catherine M. Müller, *Graville, Anne de*, in *Encyclopedia of Women in the Renaissance: Italy, France and England*, ed. Diana Robin, Anne R. Larsen, Carole Levin, (Santa Barbara - Denver - Oxford: ABC - CLIO, 2007), 173-174.

³¹ Theodore Evergates, *The Aristocracy in the County of Champagne, 1100-1300* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 56-57.

³² Richard Vaughan, *Philip the Bold: The Formation of the Burgundian State* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2002), 320.

³³ Anthony Goodman, *John of Gaunt: The Exercise of Princely Power in Fourteenth-Century Europe* (New York-London: Routledge, 2013), 276.

England. For instance, there is Elizabeth la Zouche, the wife of Nicholas Poyntz, a member of the family of the Duke of Normandy, whose ancestors, like himself, repeatedly demonstrated their connection with chivalry by supporting almost all the Plantagenet rulers, except for John Lackland, and in that case actively participated in the baronial rebellion against the king.³⁴

When considering women's role within chivalric society and culture one cannot overlook the example of Christine de Pizan who composed lyric poetry, debate poetry, political biography and allegory in French in the early fifteenth century.³⁵ Among others, Queen Isabella of Bavaria, the wife of Charles VI, encouraged Christine in her writing, and by 1399 she wrote more than 100 poetic works.³⁶ Christine dedicated her works and presented luxurious copies of them exclusively to a royal and aristocratic clientele who handsomely reimbursed her in return. For more than two decades she wrote letters advising kings, dukes, and the queen, on the Continent and in England.³⁷ Her body of work, supported by royal and aristocratic patrons, included works on politics and warfare, in addition to her autobiography. Duke Philip the Bold of Burgundy commissioned her to write the biography of his brother Charles V.³⁸

She wrote many didactic manuals, one of the most prominent ones being *Le trésor de la cité des dames*, written on commission for Margaret of Burgundy.³⁹ She defended women by engaging publicly in a year's long debate, the so-called *La Querelle du Roman de la Rose*, with Jean de Meung, the author of the second part of courtly poem *Roman de la Rose*.⁴⁰ Most unusual for a medieval female author is that Christine de Pizan compiled a military manual with instructions on strategy, tactics, and technology of medieval warfare, *Le livre des faits d'armes et de chevalerie*, relying on Vegetius's *De re militari* but also on Frontinus's *Strategemata*.⁴¹

³⁴ Charles H. Browning, *Magna Charta Barons and their Descendants* (Baltimore: Clearfield Company, 1991), 75.

³⁵ Born as the daughter of Thomasso da Pizzano, a personal physician and court astrologer for the French king Charles V, Christine lived very well in the circle of the nascent renaissance thinkers at the Valois court until first her father and then her husband died, leaving the family destitute. Thomasso's courtly connections opened the royal library and other collections to his daughter so that she apparently read most of the literature available at the court.

³⁶ Her three most prominent writings are *Livre de la cité des dames*, *Le trésor de la cité des dames* also known as *Livre des trois vertus*, as well as the *Livre de l'advison Cristine*, all involving chivalric themes.

³⁷ For more on her life see *Christine De Pizan - A Casebook*, ed. Barbara K. Altmann and Deborah L. McGrady (New York-London: Routledge, 2003).

³⁸ Christine de Pizan, *Le Livre des faits et bonnes mœurs du sage roi Charles V*, ed. Eric Hicks and Thérèse Moreau (Paris: Pocket, 23 mai, 2013).

³⁹ Christine de Pisan, *Le livre des trois vertus*, éd. Charity Cannon Willard and Eric Hicks (Paris: Champion [Bibliothèque du XVe siècle, 50], 1989).

⁴⁰ See more in Rosalind Brown-Grant, *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defence of Women: Reading beyond Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Katherine Kong, *Lettering the Self in Medieval and Early Modern France* (Gallica: Boydell & Brewer, 2010), 109-149.

⁴¹ Christine de Pizan, *Le livre des fais d'armes et de chevalerie*, ed. Lucien Dugaz, (Paris: Classiques Garnier [Textes littéraires du Moyen Âge, 64], 2021).

Female Patronage and the Crusades

According to the ownership of the manuscripts containing the Vulgata cycle, as well as the previously presented practice of female patronage of chivalric romances, a general observation can be made that the audience for which these texts were intended came from the ruling and high noble circles. Furthermore, as Elspeth Kennedy emphasizes, the very theme of the works related to chivalry indicates that they were intended primarily for an audience interested in such content. This could generally refer to knights and ladies who tried to lead their lives according to the guidelines of chivalry. Since there was some kind of symbiosis and mutual influences between the literary work and chivalry, it is easy to assert the previous argument. Namely, chivalric ideals are carried out through the text itself and therefore influence the dissemination of these ideas among the audience. However, at the same time, descriptions of, for example, knightly tournaments or feasts in the works become inspiration for tournaments and feasts in real life, which adapt their protocols to what can be found in the texts.⁴²

With its focus on violence and power, chivalry is defined primarily as a masculine social ideal in both medieval literature and real life. Carrying weapons and participating in knightly forms of combat were primarily intended for men; it was considered unnatural for women to take part in them.⁴³ However, aristocratic ladies, admittedly, are allowed to join certain aspects of chivalry and chivalric culture in almost the same way as men.

40 Since one of the inevitable aspects of chivalry and its culture is the Crusades, it is possible to use this example to demonstrate the influence and role of women in challenging their socially imposed roles. Various works, from historical to literary, testify to the participation of women in the Crusades. Descriptions of women's activities during the Crusades come from both male and female authors. They present us with rare examples when women displayed the sign of the cross as a true *crucesignati*, but also about those slightly more common examples when women participated in collecting financial aid for the Crusaders, financially supported the chivalric orders and especially their women's houses, created political marriage alliances to help spread the Crusader ideology, and fashioned themselves as patrons of authors and works dealing with Crusades.

The perception of women was therefore sometimes associated with the Crusades which surmounted their socially imposed role. Although there are a few examples indicating that women were part of military operations during the Crusades, their exploits were not insignificant. Florine of Burgundy, Ida of Formbach-RatelInbert, Cecilia of Le Bourcq, Melisende

⁴² Roger S. Loomis, who argues that today's British Grand Order of the Garter was created according to the principle of the Arthurian Round Table, proves how far-reaching this was. See more in Roger S. Loomis, "Chivalric and Dramatic Imitations of Arthurian Romance," in *Medieval Studies in memory of A. Kingsley Porter*, ed. William R. W. Koehler (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1939, reprint 1969), 81-97, and Roger S. Loomis, "Arthurian Influence on Sport and Spectacle," in *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages: A Collaborative History*, ed. Roger S. Loomis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959, reprint Sandpiper Books Ltd., 2001), 553-559.

⁴³ Louise J. Wilkinson, "Gendered Chivalry," in *A Companion to Chivalry*, ed. Robert W. Jones and Peter Coss (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2019), 219-240.

Queen of Jerusalem, Ermengarde of Anjou, Margaret of Beverley, Margaret of Provence participated either in military operations or in diplomatic negotiations during various Crusades.⁴⁴

There are also records that inform us on how women took the sign of the cross on themselves, although it is not entirely clear from the sources whether their intention to be involved in a Crusade was more related to their pilgrimage vow. As Suger's *Historia Gloriosi Regis Ludovici VII* informs us, Eleanor of Aquitaine took the sign of the cross immediately after her husband Louis VII in Vezelay. In a similar way, Marie, wife of Count Baldwin IX of Flanders, took the sign of the cross in public ceremonies, as did Eleanor, Countess of Montfort, Beatrice of Flanders, and Marie de Champagne. Sometimes women took up the Crusader vow in place of their husbands. One example is Alice of Blois, who took up the Crusader vow and went to the Holy Land, thus replacing her husband John of Chatillon, who died before he could fulfill the vow himself.⁴⁵

At the same time, there are many records that inform us how women financially supported the Crusades and certain chivalric orders. Although the Church largely criticized women's participation in warfare, this does not mean it did not seek their help. For example, in his bull *Quod super his* from 1200 Pope Innocent III directly addressed women, asking them to pray for a successful outcome of the war, as well as to donate money or sponsor a knight, in return for which they would secure spiritual rewards in the form of absolution of sins. Agnes of Harcourt writes in her biography dedicated to Isabella of France that after the death of her father Louis VIII, Isabella used a part of the inherited money to equip a dozen knights who were then sent to defend the Kingdom of Jerusalem.⁴⁶

Women also acted independently as patrons, especially for chivalric orders that eventually included women among their members, most often in the role of knights's caregivers, which are in the sources often referred to as *sorori et donate*. There is evidence that from the end of the thirteenth century, such women's houses, that were part of a chivalric order, operated under the patronage of wealthy women who invested in the maintenance of these women's knightly houses, such as Margaret de Lacy, Countess of Lincoln, who was the patron of the Knights Hospitaller,⁴⁷ or Agnes, Countess of Bourbon, the daughter of John I of Burgundy, who continued her father's policy of sponsoring the orders.⁴⁸ The more prominent chivalric orders,

⁴⁴ Natasha R. Hodgson, *Women, Crusading and the Holy Land in Historical Narrative* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2007).

⁴⁵ See more in Helen J. Nicholson, *Women and the Crusades* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

⁴⁶ Agnes of Harcourt, "The Life of Isabelle of France," in *The Writings of Agnes of Harcourt*, ed. Sean Field (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 64-65.

⁴⁷ Helen J. Nicholson, "Margaret de Lacy and the Hospital of Saint John at Aconbury, Herefordshire," in *Hospitaller Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. Anthony Luttrell and Helen J. Nicholson (New York-London: Routledge, 2006), 153-177.

⁴⁸ Penelope D. Johnson, "Agnes of Burgundy: an Eleventh-century Woman as Monastic Patron," *Journal of Medieval History* 15 (1989): 93-104.

Templars, Knights Hospitaller, Teutonic Knights, and the Order of Santiago, Calatrava, and St. Lazarus had women's houses.⁴⁹

Women also sponsored the chivalric orders themselves. For example, Ermengaud of Narbonne, in gratitude to the Templars who had given her refuge when she was exiled from her territories, left them a large part of her inheritance in her will.⁵⁰ Elizabeth of Hungary transferred the ownership of the hospital in Marburg, which she founded, to the Knights Hospitaller.⁵¹ As her *vita* describes, Hedwig of Silesia convinced her husband Henry I to cede a large part of the territory in what is nowadays Poland to the Templars.⁵²

In addition to participating in the work of the chivalric orders and sponsoring them, women also participated in the production of works aimed at recording the recollections of the Crusades. The most common form of such records are the surviving letters of women sent to various addressees. Berenguela of Castile wrote to her sister Blanche of Castile about the military success of their father Alfonso VIII in the fight against the forces of the Almohad Caliphate during the Reconquista. Marie de Brienne, Blanche of Castile, Blanche of Navarre, Countess of Champagne, Margaret of Provence, Beatrice of Vienne, Marie des Baux wrote letters describing testimonies of various events of the Crusades and sent them to their loved ones but also to kings, popes and other officials, therefore becoming official chroniclers.⁵³

Furthermore, women's recordings of the Crusades are also visible through the authorship of historical works. Certainly, the most famous example of an author who dedicated her work to the Crusades is that of Anna Comnena, the daughter of the Byzantine emperor Alexios I, whose biographical work of her father is a chronicle of the First Crusade, viewed uniquely from a Byzantine perspective.⁵⁴ We also have the example of Gormonde de Monpeslier, who in her poems presents the events of the Fifth Crusade and those of the so-called Albigensian Crusades, criticizing the alignment of the nobility of southern France with heretical movements while at the same time glorifying the role of the papacy against the heretics.

Also, female patronage contributed to the production and dissemination of works that were their property and that were related to the Crusades as an inevitable aspect of chivalry and chivalric culture. For example, the wife and the mother of the famous knight William Longespee, Idonea de Camville and Countess Ela of Salisbury, encouraged the recording of his knightly exploits in the official chronicles of Barlings and Lacock

⁴⁹ See more in Myra Miranda Bom, *Women in the military orders of Crusades* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

⁵⁰ Frederic L. Cheyette, *Ermengaud of Narbonne and the World of the Troubadours* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 342.

⁵¹ Helen J. Nicholson, *Templars, Hospitallers and Teutonic Knights: Images of the Military Orders, 1128–1291* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1993), 118.

⁵² Maria Starnawska, "The Commanderies of the Templars in the Polish Lands and Their History after the End of the Order," in *The Debate on the Trial of the Templars*, ed. Jochen Burgtorf, Paul F. Crawford and Helen J. Nicholson (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 300–314.

⁵³ Helen J. Nicholson, *Women and the Crusades* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 143–144.

⁵⁴ *Annae Comnenae Alexias*, ed. Diether Reinsch and Athanasios Kambylis, 2 vols. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2001); Meghan Kelley, "The Good Life of Anna Comnena: First Female Historian and Byzantine Princess," *The Histories* 7, no. 2, Article 3: 9–16.

abbeys, convents of which both women were patrons. Eleanor of Castile commissioned a French translation of Vegetius's *De re militari*, a key military manual on chivalry, for her husband, King Edward I, while they were both participating in the crusader's seizure of Acre. Countess Alice of Blois, who also resided in Acre in the late thirteenth century, is associated with the patronage of the *Histoire Universelle*, a work that, among other things, very positively describes the Amazons as defenders of social order and warriors. Countess Alice of Blois, because of her fulfillment of her husband's crusade vow, accordingly, became the inspiration for the inclusion of Amazon characters in manuscripts written from the thirteenth century onwards depicting the crusades in the area of Acre.⁵⁵

Queen Melisende of Jerusalem and her husband, King Fulk of Anjou, are the patrons of the so-called *Melisende Psalter*, which records the most important anniversaries related to the Crusades, from the conquest of Jerusalem onwards.⁵⁶ Sometimes female influences via patronage are visible in the direct impact on the text about the Crusades, combining historical events and fiction. For example, an anonymous minstrel from Reims writes about Queen Sibyl of Jerusalem, the wife of Guy of Lusignan, who is defended from her enemies even by Saladin himself.⁵⁷ Jean d'Arras, on the other hand, transforms Queen Melisende of Jerusalem into a folklore fairy figure who represents the mythical progenitor of the noble crusader Lusignan family.⁵⁸

Another psalter, the so-called *Riccardiana Psalter* is associated with the patronage of Queen Isabella II of Jerusalem, and celebrates dates related to significant Crusader conquests.⁵⁹ Eleonora of Provence, the wife of king Henry III, owned and often read writings describing the Crusades in Antioch (believed to be *La Chanson d'Antioche*), while the sister of the Scottish king Robert Bruce and wife of the Danish king, Isabella Bruce had in her possession William of Tyre's *Historia*. Eleanor of Gloucester, Countess of Essex, left in her will the *Historie du Chivaler a Cigne*, a poem dedicated to her famous crusader ancestor Godfrey of Bouillon.⁶⁰

Conclusion

The custom of cultivating this practice of female patronage allowed women to overcome the limitations that medieval society placed on them, in order to demonstrate their significance and influence. Although it is not possible to determine with certainty how far-reaching this influence was, and whether it managed to spread and have an impact on society beyond

⁵⁵ Hodgson, *Women, Crusading and the Holy Land in Historical Narrative*, 124, 131-133.

⁵⁶ Jaroslav Folda, "Melisende of Jerusalem: Queen and Patron of Art and Architecture in the Crusader Kingdom," in *Reassessing the Roles of Women as 'Makers' of Medieval Art and Architecture*, ed. Therese Martin (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 429-477.

⁵⁷ Helen J. Nicholson, "'La roine preude femme et bonne dame': Queen Sybil of Jerusalem (1186-1190) in History and Legend, 1186-1300," *The Haskins Society Journal* 15 (2004): 110-124.

⁵⁸ Helen J. Nicholson, "Remembering the Crusaders in Cyprus: the Lusignans, the Hospitallers and the 1191 Conquest of Cyprus in Jean d'Arras's *Mélusine*," in *Literature of the Crusades*, ed. Simon Thomas Parsons and Linda M. Paterson (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2018), 158-172.

⁵⁹ Cathleen A. Fleck, "The Luxury Riccardiana Psalter in the Thirteenth Century: A Nun's Prayerbook?" *Viator* 46, no. 1 (2015): 135-160.

⁶⁰ Nicholson, *Women and the Crusades*, 142-152.

the circle of high nobility, what can be concluded is that the choice of patronage of this type of literature demonstrates the desire of the female audience for active participation in the chivalric society. While on the one hand we can speak of the popularity of this type of literature as an incentive for the inclusion of female patrons, on the other hand the reasons for such patronage have a somewhat more significant background. As pointed out elsewhere in this paper, the intention of the patrons of this type of literature was certainly to achieve greater cultural, and consequently social influence by making audiences aware of the existence of these texts which, in turn, enabled knightly ladies to rise above the stereotypical roles imposed upon them.

The tradition of linking members of a powerful noble family with the patronage of chivalric romances was spreading beyond the areas where such a practice originated. It was obviously an extremely successful and, above all, a gladly accepted formula that ultimately served the purpose of promoting chivalry and the society founded on such guidelines. Needless to say, the success and spread of such stories, as evidenced by the sheer scale of the manuscripts created from the thirteenth century onwards, invokes the principle of double effect. As the dissemination of chivalric literature continued, not only did the popularity of the ideas propagated by chivalric culture spread, but also the reputation and power of the nobles who, through patronage, proved their commitment to the guidelines of such society in the making.

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