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Twelfth-century women's paradox: Power and perceptions

Medieval women are often viewed as weak and powerless, but some had intensely powerful political roles. Two such women had claims to the English throne; Matilda the Empress, also known as Maud (d. 1167), and Matilda of Boulogne, also known as Matilda III (d. 1151). Maud was the daughter and designated heir of King Henry I (d. 1135) and as such sought power untraditionally in her own right. Matilda, the wife of Stephen, Henry's nephew who usurped the throne upon Henry's death, wielded power through the traditional role of queen consort. The conflict between these women creates a visible example of women in positions of power. Maud spent the majority of her life fighting for her throne. This fight entailed reshaping the expected gender roles to convince her followers of her ability to perform the duties of monarchy. Matilda III spent the majority of her life defending her husband's possession of the throne and her place as his queen. I explore gender stereotypes and how these women manipulated stereotypical gender imagery to their political and personal benefit. Maud at first attempted to 'act as a man' and adopted the traditional trappings of monarchy. Later, she presented herself in more traditional roles. Matilda III often acted in typically masculine ways, but never fully stepped outside of the set boundaries. My research focuses on women's political activity within and outside of the normal boundaries of female behavior. Maud's and Matilda's progression through gender roles, their choices regarding conduct, and the kingdom's reaction to their self-presentations offer insight into the power of medieval women. I compare the acceptable modes of behavior for women and rulers to the lives of Maud and Matilda. They absorbed, transgressed, and created roles. These women wielded great amounts of autonomous power and their actions played leading roles in the major political events of their time.