

An Analysis of King John's Treatment of Women

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Master's Degrees by Examination and Dissertation

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Abstract

This dissertation will analyse the ways in which King John treated many of the women he encountered and whether he followed the misogynistic assumptions of the time, or treated women as equal to men. It will analyse primary sources which recount King John's reign, including the *Brut Y Tywysogion*, chronicles by Gervase of Canterbury, Roger of Wendover, Ralph of Diss and Roger of Howden, as well as recent research by historians.

Despite King John being perceived as a bad king, it is interesting to note that he treated his mother with respect and was inconsolable when she died. He had great respect for Nichola de la Haye, a wealthy landowner whom he made Sheriff of Lincoln in her own right, and his own daughter, Joan, acted as a negotiator between her husband, Llywelyn, and her father. There are, however, some occasions when King John treated women less respectfully, one example was his first wife, Isabella of Gloucester, whom he divorced after ten years of marriage and proceeded to prevent her from having ownership over her own estates. There are also the numerous women who were rumoured to have been seduced by King John, including married women, and the fact his second marriage was to a twelve-year-old girl, something that was frowned upon by many chroniclers of the time. The worst treatment he subjected a woman to was Matilda de Braose, who spoke out against the king killing his own nephew, Arthur. She was consequently locked away and starved to death with her son.

Was it simply that King John was misogynistic as was the norm of the time, or did he treat both men and women equally, but his behaviour differed depending on if they proved themselves loyal? There is no question that King John was paranoid throughout much of his reign, and rightly so, seeing as his treatment of people in general was a key concern for many, and was one of the reasons for the provision of the Magna Carta. Despite the fact he treated some women badly, it appears that King John only did so when they had wronged him, spoken out against him, or had lands he wanted to keep hold of. Perhaps then, he was simply using the laws and norms of the time to his advantage, rather than being biased against women in general.

Abbreviations

CM – Paris, Matthew, *Chronica Majora*, vol. 2, ed. by Henry Richards Luard (London: Longman & Co., 1874)

CA – Radulphi De Coggeshall, *Chronicon Anglicanum*, ed. by Josephus Stevenson (London: Longman & Co., 1875)

FCL – Rymer, Thomas, *Foedera, Conventiones, Literae, Et Cujuscunque Generis Acta Publica*, Vol. 1 (London: Apud Joannem Neulme, 1745)

HDN – *History Of The Dukes Of Normandy And The Kings Of England By The Anonymous Of Bethune*, trans. by Janet Shirley, ed. by Paul Webster (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021)

LMF – Marie de France, *The Lays Of Marie De France*, trans. by David R. Slavitt (Athabasca: AU Press, 2013)

PR – *The Great Roll Of The Pipe* (London: Pipe Roll Society, 1910 – 1962)

RFOH – Roger of Wendover, *Roger Of Wendover's Flowers Of History: Comprising The History Of England From The Descent Of The Saxons To A.D. 1235*, vol. 2, trans. by J. A. Giles (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1849)

RLC – *Rotuli Litterarum Clausarum In Turri Londinensi*, vol. 1, ed. by Thomas Duffus Hardy (London: G. Eyre and A. Spottiswoode, 1833)

RLP – *Rotuli Litterarum Patentium In Turri Londinensi Asservati*, vol. 1, part 1, ed. by Thomas Duffus Hardy (London: George Eyre and Andrew Spottiswoode, 1835)

Introduction

King John is infamous for many reasons, including his treatment of barons and strategies as a king. Throughout history, he has been named amongst the worst kings England has ever had. Most research into John's rule focuses on his misdeeds as a king, especially towards his nobles, and the events that led to the Magna Carta being signed. In comparison, there has been little research into the women affected by John's reign.

Norgate researched extensively into John's politics, arguing that he had 'superhuman wickedness', however she rarely mentioned women even in relation to their husbands.¹ Turner's work focused on the crises of John's reign, regularly calling him a 'failure', but he admitted that he neglected to analyse the relationship of John and his wife, Isabel of Angoulême.² Warren provided context as to the period in which John ruled, and compared his reign to that of his predecessors, giving him credit where it was due while also critiquing that he 'had the mental abilities of a great king, but the inclinations of a petty tyrant'.³ *King John: New Interpretations* comprised several essays from historians regarding his downfalls and shortcomings, with only two chapters dedicated to the women in John's life, relating to his wife and his mother.⁴ More recently, Bennett Connolly analysed the women who came into contact with John, however it did not reflect the wider relationship of these women with their king, focusing solely on how they influenced the Magna Carta.⁵ This shows a gap in research relating to the women associated with King John, which this essay will delve into.

There is a vast collection of primary sources from the thirteenth century that reveal information on King John's reign. The chroniclers of the time rarely mentioned women, as history was mostly written by monks, making women an afterthought in an age where they were assumed to be inferior to men. The chronicles were based on the monks' own biased opinions, from sheltered lives in religious institutes.⁶ There was good reason for a general bias against John in the majority of chronicles, as the Church put England and Wales under an interdict forcing churches to close for six years, because John disagreed with the new

¹ Kate Norgate, *John Lackland* (London: Macmillan and Co. Limited, 1902)

² Ralph V. Turner, *King John* (London: Longman, 2014), pp. 12, 15.

³ W. L. Warren, *King John* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1961), p. 259.

⁴ Jane Martindale, 'Eleanor Of Aquitaine: The Last Years', in *King John: New Interpretations*, ed. by S. D. Church (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1999), pp. 137-164; Nicholas Vincent, 'Isabella Of Angoulême: John's Jezebel', in *King John: New Interpretations*, ed. by S. D. Church (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1999), pp. 165-219.

⁵ Sharon Bennett Connolly, *Ladies Of Magna Carta* (Yorkshire: Pen & Sword History, 2020)

⁶ For more information on the chroniclers see, Chris Given-Wilson, *Chronicles: The Writing Of History In Medieval England* (London: Hambledon and London, 2004)

archbishop of Canterbury being appointed.⁷ The chronicles contain small amounts of information about the women in John's life, but the bias against John is clear, especially from Gerald of Wales, who described John as outdoing 'all the tyrants whom the present age or the long memory of antiquity can recall, with the detestable deeds of his wicked tyranny'.⁸ Roger of Wendover is remembered for his scrutiny of John, and stated that 'he was infatuated by sorcery or witchcraft', in reference to his queen, Isabel of Angoulême.⁹

Due to the biases that have led to King John being remembered in such a negative light, other less biased documents will be used to gain a more rounded view of John's treatment towards women. The *Pipe Rolls* are particularly useful, described as 'the official Register of all debts of the Crown answerable at the Exchequer', far more trustworthy to provide accurate information than the gossip of the chronicles.¹⁰ The *Pipe Rolls* provide a glimpse into how the king treated women, providing gifts, and using fines and debts to his advantage. Together, the primary sources offer insight into these women and what their lives were like.

Throughout the medieval period, women were known as the 'weaker sex', thought to bring about temptation as Eve had tempted Adam in the bible.¹¹ They were frequently refused entry into religious orders, as they were considered 'trouble', and even when able to join an order, they had to adhere to far stricter rules than their male counterparts.¹² This led to a mass misogyny against women, where they were either described as weaker, or when a woman acted in a role of authority, she would be described as 'like a man'.¹³ From the primary sources, it is obvious that John had numerous interactions with different women throughout his life, from his mother to his lovers and wives, daughters of kings he held hostage, and noble women.

This analysis will delve into the lives of the women who knew King John directly throughout his life and explore how he treated them, comparing his behaviour and actions to the context of the time, whether he was merely following the norm that women were sinful

⁷ 'Annales De Margan', in *Annales Monastici*, ed. by Henry Richards Luard (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, and Green, 1864), pp. 3-42 (pp. 28-29).

⁸ Gerald Of Wales, *Instruction For A Ruler (De Principis Instructione)*, ed. and trans. by Robert Bartlett (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2018), p. 703.

⁹ *RFOH*, p. 207.

¹⁰ *Introduction To The Study Of The Pipe Rolls* (London: Wyman & Sons, 1884), pp. 42-43.

¹¹ Margaret Wade Labarge, *A Medieval Miscellany* (Canada: Carleton University Press, 1997), p. 125.

¹² Linda Woodhead, *An Introduction To Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 145.

¹³ Richard of Devizes, *The Chronicle Of Richard Of Devizes*, trans. by J. A. Giles (London: James Bohn, 1841), p. 29.

and not to be trusted, or if he treated them as respectfully, or disrespectfully as the case may be, as men. Altogether, It will determine whether John's behaviour reflects the negative persona historians through the ages have conformed with, or if he was a better man and king than previously thought.

Chapter 1: How King John's Control of Queen's Gold Gives Insight into his Treatment of Women

This first chapter will explore John's attitude towards queens by analysing his control of Queen's Gold. Queen consorts acted 'as the visible female representation of established male power and authority', far beyond the role normal women played in society.¹⁴ Queen's Gold enabled queens to have their own income, as it was the norm for subjects to pay the queen a smaller sum whenever they were to pay the king. According to the *Dialogus De Scaccario*, written by King Henry II's exchequer, 'those who voluntarily engage to pay coined money to the King, must know that they are likewise bound to the Queen'.¹⁵ This suggests Queen's Gold was in common use by the time of John's father.¹⁶ John used Queen's Gold as a way of rewarding his mother for her support, but he also used it to keep his wife under control, not allowing her to receive her own income, as shall be explored.

In the case of Eleanor of Aquitaine, Henry II's wife, and Richard and John's mother, she continued to receive Queen's Gold throughout her sons' reigns. When John's brother, King Richard I, died and John became king of England, Eleanor fought for John's inheritance despite her age and failing health. According to Turner, John and Richard both 'returned her devotion, and during their reigns she took precedence over their wives as dowager queen, enjoying the status of a queen-regnant'.¹⁷ Some of the letters exchanged show her naming herself, and others naming her, as 'Reginae Angliae', which translates as 'Queen of England' even after King John took the throne.¹⁸ There is no mention that John was unhappy or unaccepting of her title, which suggests he trusted her to remain in a role of such responsibility, rather than have his own wife named as queen. He trusted his mother to make decisions as a queen should, implying he was indeed close to her and trusted her to act responsibly. This reflects positively on John as he must have greatly respected his mother and wanted her to continue to earn Queen's Gold even though she was no longer queen. However, the fact he allowed his mother to earn Queen's Gold meant that his wife and queen,

¹⁴ Danna R. Messer, 'Chapter 1: The Emergence Of The Queen Consort In England, 1066-1307: Power, Influence, Dynasty', in *Norman To Early Plantagenet Consorts: Power, Influence, And Dynasty*, ed. by Aidan Norrie and others (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), pp. 1-16 (p. 2).

¹⁵ Richard FitzNeal, *Dialogus De Scaccario The Course Of The Exchequer*, ed. and trans. by Charles Johnson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), p. 122.

¹⁶ For more information on the history of Queen's Gold, see William Blackstone, *Commentaries On The Laws Of England*, Vol. 1 (London: Wildy & Sons Ltd., 1967), pp. 220-222.

¹⁷ Turner, *King John*, p. 37.

¹⁸ *FCL*, p. 36.

Isabel of Angoulême, would not be able to receive the same tax owed to her. This implies that John was not as respectful to his wife as he was to his own blood relative. Butler observed that the rules of coverture enabled men to have full control and ownership over their wives, and to a degree they could treat them as they wished, including abuse, making their relationships with their wives vastly different to that of their parents.¹⁹ This suggests John's preventing of his wife and queen earning Queen's Gold was acceptable within the laws of the time, with John being able to make decisions regarding her without her input.

Another queen whom John prevented from earning Queen's Gold was his first wife, Isabella of Gloucester. She was betrothed to John in 1176, when they were both young, and remained so for thirteen years, during which time her father died, leaving her as sole heir to the earldom of Gloucester. Being under the wardship of John's father, King Henry II, the king gave the income of her lands to John rather than to her in her own right. When King Henry II died, and John's brother Richard succeeded to the throne, the marriage went ahead.²⁰ This was despite the archbishop of Canterbury prohibiting the wedding as John and Isabella were related.²¹ Unfortunately the marriage proved unfruitful and when John became king ten years later, in 1199, he did not crown her as queen, nor allowed her to earn Queen's Gold. John sought an annulment not long after he became king.²² As Isabella was never crowned, it appears likely that John was already in the process of trying to divorce her and had no ambition for her to become his queen. This meant that in fairness, John's mother Eleanor could maintain her Queen's Gold and dowry, however, upon marrying his second wife, Isabel of Angoulême, John crowned her queen but did not move the right of Queen's Gold to her. This is a similar situation to that of John's brother, Richard I, where throughout his reign, despite having a wife, Berengaria, he never transferred the dowry owed to her, and allowed Eleanor of Aquitaine to continue earning from it.²³

According to the *Chronicon Anglicanum*, Isabel of Angoulême was 'about twelve years old', meaning that she likely did not understand her role as queen at such a young age,

¹⁹ Sara M. Butler, *The Language Of Abuse: Marital Violence In Later Medieval England* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), p. 30.

²⁰ For more information on the betrothal, see Bennett Connolly, *Ladies Of Magna Carta*, p. 141.

²¹ *Gesta Regis Henrici Secundi Benedicti Abbatis: The Chronicle Of The Reigns Of Henry II And Richard I, A.D. 1169-1192*, vol 2, ed. by William Stubbs (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1867), p. 78.

²² Roger of Howden, *Chronica Rogeri De Hoveden*, vol. 4, ed. by William Stubbs (London: Longman & Co., 1871), pp. 119-120; *CM*, p. 462.

²³ H.G. Richardson, 'The Letters And Charters Of Eleanor Of Aquitaine', in *The English Historical Review*, 74.291 (1959), 193-213 (p. 210) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/558439>> [Accessed 05 September 2023].

and John may have been fair in not giving her the full responsibilities of a queen yet.²⁴ King John decreed in a letter that Queen Isabel had all the privileges ascribed to any queen before her.²⁵ This suggests that even though John did no such thing for his first wife, he was fair to his chosen queen after a time, giving her everything that a queen should be entitled to. The letter would have been dispersed across the kingdom to ensure all were aware that Isabel was under John's protection, and should anyone not treat her as a queen, they would have to answer to him. It seems John wanted her to have the same level of authority and dowry as his mother had. However, in reality, Isabel had no real authority over the lands she had been given, and after her father died in 1202, leaving her as the sole heir to Angoulême, her mother and afterwards, John, governed in her name.²⁶ She was still young at this time, so it seems logical for others to govern in her place, but throughout her time as queen, she experienced no real independence, authority or Queen's Gold.²⁷ Despite John's proclamation of her authority, he never let her have what he had promised. Even after Eleanor of Aquitaine's death, she never received Queen's Gold, despite the decree from the king stating otherwise.²⁸

It appears that John followed his brother, King Richard I, in the way he neglected to give his wife what she should have had by right of being queen. Berengaria, King Richard I's wife and queen, did not receive her promised dowry because Eleanor of Aquitaine was still receiving Queen's Gold, despite no longer being queen.²⁹ Throughout John's reign, Berengaria fought for what she believed was owed to her. She met with King John and his new wife, Isabel of Angoulême, to argue her case at Chinon, not long after he had taken the throne. According to Strickland, Berengaria asked for 'the dower she held in England, for two thousand marks per annum, to be paid half-yearly'.³⁰ The first letter John issued to Berengaria after his accession to the throne claimed he had granted a dowry to her.³¹ Believing King John would keep to his word, Berengaria retired to Le Mans where she lived

²⁴ CA, p. 103.

²⁵ FCL, p. 43.

²⁶ Gervase of Canterbury, *The Historical Works Of Gervase Of Canterbury*, Vol. 2, ed. by William Stubbs (London: Longmans & Co., 1880), p. 94.

²⁷ Vincent, pp. 192-193.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 191.

²⁹ Kathleen Nolan, 'Symbolic Geography In The Tomb And Seal Of Berengaria Of Navarre, Queen Of England', in *Moving Women Moving Objects (400-1500)*, ed. by Tracy Chapman Hamilton and Mariah Proctor-Tiffany (Leiden: Brill, 2019), pp. 59-85 (p. 65).

³⁰ Agnes Strickland, *Lives Of The Queens Of England*, Vol. 2, 2nd edn. (Philadelphia: Lea & Blanchard, 1841), p. 38.

³¹ FCL, p. 40.

in an abbey, the only land she had maintained from King Philip of France.³² In a later letter from Pope Innocent, it appears John had broken his promise, just as he had with his own wife and queen, and Berengaria had not received what she was owed.³³ In 1213, the pope sent another letter, this time ordering the king to reconsider and stating matters were far more serious now that he had ignored the pope's requests.³⁴ Eventually, in 1215, John sent Pope Innocent a charter declaring he had made a new agreement with Berengaria, granting her 'a thousand pounds sterling per annum' as well as lands.³⁵ However, by 1216, John sent a letter directly to Berengaria, when he was in the midst of the uprising of the barons, begging her some patience with the money he owed, once again forfeiting on the arrangement.³⁶

During King John's reign, it is unlikely Berengaria would have received much of her dowry, even if John had given it to her, as the Queen's Gold still went to Eleanor of Aquitaine until her death in 1204, and afterwards it appears to have vanished completely. John's wife Isabel of Angoulême was also entitled to it seeing as she was the crowned queen throughout John's reign, which further complicates the issue. It may have seemed easier and less complicated for John to not allow either his wife or his brother's widow to have Queen's Gold. Even so, Berengaria should have received an annual income as dowager queen, and because of John's refusals to pay, Berengaria lived a life of poverty in her abbey, with nothing but false promises. There is no evidence Berengaria ever met the king in person, apart from in the first year of his reign, when he was at Chinon, and so it seems she never had the means to directly petition him. She would not have petitioned the pope to become involved had it not been necessary, and she only fought for what was rightly hers. The fact John initially agreed to the dowry and agreed once again years later, and still defaulted time and again, suggests John never had any intention of paying her what she was owed, using delaying tactics to make it seem that he would eventually pay, to prevent the pope's wrath.

Berengaria's predicament is similar to that of Isabel of Angoulême being promised her dower and never receiving it. The main difference between them being that Berengaria managed to maintain some independence by living away from the country, while Isabel of Angoulême depended entirely on John, with no income of her own. It appears to be a

³² H. Eugene Lehman, *Lives Of England's Reigning And Consort Queens* (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2011), p. 97.

³³ *FCL*, p. 45.

³⁴ *FCL*, p. 49.

³⁵ *FCL*, p. 70.

³⁶ *FCL*, p. 71.

deliberate decision made by John, not to pay either of them anything, believing himself above reproach, that nobody could make him do anything he did not want to do. Even with the pope's intervention on Berengaria's case, John still came up with excuses for Berengaria to be patient with him, that the money would eventually come. However, it did not and when John died in 1216, she had to bargain with the next king, Henry III, for the same dowry she should have had for the last several decades.³⁷ It appears that King John was no worse than his brother, Richard, in the way he treated his queen, suggesting it was the norm for the time, or at least that if his brother could get away with it, so could he. This only furthers the perception that John was a bad king, not following his father's laws, instead following what he wanted to do, and his brother's bad habits.

On the other hand, John treated his mother the opposite to his wife and Berengaria, respecting and trusting her to retain Queen's Gold until her death. This suggests John was not biased against all women, he simply did what suited him at the time. His mother was a powerful figure who had suffered throughout Henry II's reign, and John had a close relationship with her. Isabel of Angoulême and Berengaria were just pawns in his game and he did not feel the need to appease them with the money they were owed. These two contrasting ways of treating women are confusing; however, the positive treatment of his mother indicates John was not as negative towards all women as it first appears.

³⁷ Strickland, *Lives Of The Queens Of England*, pp. 26-27.

Chapter 2: King John's Treatment of Female Prisoners and Hostages

John not only held women as prisoners if they offended him, but he also had several female hostages throughout his reign and put his own wives into confinement so he could maintain control over them. This chapter will explore how John's actions differed to the rulers before him, in relation to imprisoning and taking women as hostages, and whether the literature of the time reveals any reasoning behind John's actions. Did this lead to further misogyny against women, or was there a deeper meaning, treating both men and women as equals?

According to Roger of Wendover, John was entranced by Isabel of Angoulême, which sparked the desire to divorce his first wife, Isabella of Gloucester.³⁸ The annulment was granted easily due to the couple being related.³⁹ Norgate noted that 'their divorce was in fact, like that of Louis VII and Eleanor, a separation by mutual consent'.⁴⁰ Unfortunately for Isabella, being divorced from John did not allow her any freedom. John wanted to keep her close to ensure no enemies could marry her and take the earldom of Gloucester for themselves.

Isabella of Gloucester was taken into John's wardship, meaning that she was confined, having no control over her own lands, nor any revenue of her own. The wardship allowed John to keep all her lands and prevented her from remarrying.⁴¹ This seems harsh treatment for a woman who had been forced into a marriage in the first place with no choice, to find herself in the same predicament as before. This shows John in a negative light, that even after divorce he would not let his ex-wife go.

John's queen, Isabel of Angoulême, spent several years living in the same household as John's ex-wife, Isabella of Gloucester.⁴² It seems that Isabella was expected to take care of the young queen. King John treated Isabel as a child and perhaps thought that his ex-wife could be a good example to follow, seeing as up to this point, Isabella of Gloucester had been

³⁸ *RFOH*, p. 188.

³⁹ Maurice Ashley, *The Life And Times Of King John* (London: Book Club Associates, 1972), p. 43.

For further information on the annulment trials, see Warren, *King John*, p. 66.

For an original source regarding the annulment, see Ralph de Diceto, *The Historical Works Of Master Ralph De Diceto*, Vol 2, ed. by William Stubbs (London: Longman & Co, 1876), p. 167.

⁴⁰ Norgate, *John Lackland*, p. 75.

⁴¹ Bennett Connolly, *Ladies Of Magna Carta*, pp. 141-142.

⁴² *PR 7 John*, p. 12.

a quiet and obedient wife in their ten years of marriage and there seem to be no records stating otherwise. This was not an ideal living situation for Isabella of Gloucester, who was forced to live with John's current wife. Unfortunately, men were superior to women, and there are innumerable examples throughout the medieval period of women being married to men who wanted their lands and titles.⁴³ John went further than this by keeping Isabella of Gloucester close enough that men would need to go through him to gain her dowry, ensuring no enemies could become more powerful through his ex-wife.

Although Isabel of Angoulême was named as queen, no charters were issued in her name during her reign, suggesting that she was queen in name only, unlike John's mother who remained a queen in many ways until her death. Even after Eleanor's death in 1204, Isabel remained without authority or money of her own. It seems John's greed knew no bounds when it came to his wife and ex-wife, giving himself everything, and them only enough to survive on and nothing more. He kept them in close confinement to ensure he had full power over them. He hoped to keep them quiet by giving them extravagant gifts, perhaps so he could enjoy having authority over their lands without feeling guilty. Gifts to his queen, Isabel of Angoulême, included fur in 1203.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, Isabella of Gloucester received income and expensive clothes.⁴⁵ John also bought her a 'loris' or 'leather strap' in 1207, suggesting she was allowed out to ride and her confinement was not strictly indoors and under guard.⁴⁶ In the same year, she was gifted 'tonello uini' which translates to a 'cask of wine', and in 1212 a 'culcitra serica' or 'silk mattress', suggesting her confinement was very comfortable.⁴⁷ This was an established tactic used by kings before John. During King Henry II's reign, Eleanor of Aquitaine suffered years of imprisonment for inciting her sons against her husband, yet he sent her gifts such as wool to appease her.⁴⁸ Kings seem to have gifted these women with lavish accessories and clothes to keep them subdued while in confinement. John gave varying gifts as opposed to Eleanor mostly receiving cloaks, which suggests John was more thoughtful. However, it is difficult to compare, where Eleanor was imprisoned for

⁴³ Sue Sheridan Walker, 'Introduction', in *Wife And Widow In Medieval England*, ed. by Sue Sheridan Walker and others (Michigan: The University of Michigan, 1993), p. 3.

⁴⁴ *Rotuli Normanniae In Turri Londinensi Asservati, Johanne Et Henrico Quinto, Angliæ Regibus*, ed. by Thomas Duffus Hardy (London: G. Eyre and A. Spottiswoode, 1835), p. 107-108.

⁴⁵ *PR 3 John*, pp. 55, 101; *PR 4 John*, p. 280; *PR 5 John*, pp. 154-155; *PR 6 John*, pp. 125, 213; *PR 7 John*, pp. 7, 12, 113, 121; *PR 8 John*, pp. 8, 47, 149, 150; *PR 9 John*, p. 54; *PR 10 John*, pp. 97, 103; *PR 11 John*, p. 97; *PR 13 John*, p. 221; *PR 14 John*, p. 113.

⁴⁶ *PR 9 John*, p. 139.

⁴⁷ *PR 9 John*, p. 144; *PR 14 John*, p. 43.

⁴⁸ *PR 28 Henry II*, p. 104.

going against her king, while Isabella of Gloucester and Isabel of Angoulême had done nothing wrong. Perhaps the gifts merely served to help soothe John's conscience.

The Lays of Marie de France shed some light on how women were expected to act as compared to men. The poems were written in the later twelfth century, and there are hints such as the line 'hoping to win a royal smile', that the intended audience was royalty, most likely King Henry II, John's father.⁴⁹ This makes it relevant in the context of John's behaviour. It appears women were often controlled by their husbands, with one poem stating a husband 'controlled his wife who was so beautiful that he doubted she was dutiful', going on to say that the husband had walls built to keep her in and around the clock guards.⁵⁰ Another of Marie's poems commented on 'the grim constraints he had put on her'.⁵¹ This sounds like the way in which John confined both his wife and ex-wife, suggesting that it was common at the time for women to be treated with suspicion and locked away with no freedom of their own. These women were not exclusively prisoners or hostages but were treated as the customs of the time permitted, as evidenced in the *Lays*.

The *Lays* only discussed wives being locked up, never broaching the subject of an ex-wife, and so it appears John went against the norms of the time in this regard. It seems that Isabella did not think it appropriate to have been confined for years despite no longer being married. This is apparent in that once she had been married off to Geoffrey, she and her husband joined the baron rebellion against the king, but unfortunately, they lost their lands as a result.⁵² Isabella and her husband could not have had a close relationship with John as at the first opportunity they had gone against him. It may have backfired, but it shows that Isabella wanted to fight against the years of oppression she had faced. It seems John kept her in confinement for his own gains, not out of jealousy as was expected with a wife, but to ensure he had the upper hand in terms of power and control over as much as he could.

Gervase of Canterbury stated that Isabel of Angoulême was kept in close confinement by her husband, even after she had grown up, suggesting she was kept hidden away in a similar way to his ex-wife, to be used as and when John chose.⁵³ Isabel was imprisoned at Corfe Castle in 1208, when translated it specifically stated she was 'under close guard'.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ *LMF*, p. 4.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁵² *RLP*, p. 161.

⁵³ Gervase of Canterbury, *Historical Works*, p. 102.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

This statement is simply one sentence amongst many on the king himself, and as such, it would appear strange to have added in this sentence with no context if it were a fabrication. The fact she was closely guarded sounds more like John was trying to keep her in rather than stop others from getting to her. This is a hint that perhaps Isabel was not as comfortable with her prospects as her silence before this suggests. This also backs up the idea that she was as unhappy in the relationship as John, that she was outspoken.⁵⁵ It is similar to the way in which Eleanor of Aquitaine was outspoken and suffered for it, by often being confined to her chambers and locked away from the world during her marriage to Henry II.⁵⁶ John was simply following what his father had done to his mother before, and keeping his wife locked away to ensure she could not poison others with her words against him.

There are mixed opinions about whether John and Isabel of Angoulême's relationship was close, however there is no doubt they fulfilled their duties to provide heirs. Isabel had two sons and three daughters by John, and John had no further illegitimate children after their marriage as far as evidence suggests. It is difficult to tell much of Isabel's life during the years she had their children, as the chronicles rarely mentioned her, with Roger of Wendover only naming Isabel twice between 1207 and 1208, and even then, it was only about her giving birth to her two sons, Henry and Richard.⁵⁷ This suggests she continued to have no say in charters, her lands or any of her own income. She was merely used to make heirs and played no role as a queen in public matters, being confined once again when the king did not have a use for her.

The relationship between husbands and wives was further explored by Marie de France, when speaking of a wife, explaining that 'she knew that husbands don't have to answer to their wives', and later another beautiful wife was locked away in a tower 'with never a visitor to divert, amuse, or comfort her'.⁵⁸ Beautiful women, it seems, were not trusted to remain faithful, and as such, extreme measures were put in place by their husbands. This does not make John seem such a bad husband, seeing as it was common practice before he became king, and that husbands were not expected to answer to women. Even though it is harsh treatment, John was no worse than his predecessors in the way he treated Isabel of Angoulême.

⁵⁵ *HDN*, p. 115-116.

⁵⁶ *Historiae Anglicanae Scriptores X* (London: Typis Jacobi Flesher, Sumptibus Comelii Bee, 1652), p. 1475.

⁵⁷ *RFOH*, p. 244.

⁵⁸ *LMF*, pp. 47, 77-78.

There is one woman in particular that must be analysed in any study regarding John's treatment of prisoners. Matilda de Braose was the wife of William de Braose, Lord of Bramber. She was imprisoned and faced an untimely death due to King John's cruelty. The author of *History of the Dukes of Normandy* made a detailed account of Matilda de Braose and King John's conflict, calling Matilda a 'beautiful lady, very intelligent, very brave and very energetic', and confirming she gave fine gifts over the years such as '300 cows and a bull' to the queen.⁵⁹ The chroniclers were generous in their descriptions of her, and she appears to have been giving and kind, which led to an uproar when John formed a vendetta against her.

The feud between King John and the Braoses started when William de Braose owed money and fealty, and John sent men to take hostages to assure William's allegiance. King John was rumoured to have murdered his own nephew.⁶⁰ Matilda de Braose, fearing that if her children were taken into John's custody, they may suffer the same fate, spoke out against the king. According to Roger of Wendover, she replied 'I will not deliver up my sons to your lord, King John, because he basely murdered his nephew, Arthur, whom he ought to have taken care of honourably'.⁶¹ William attempted to mediate but unfortunately the messengers returned to the king with Matilda's message. This sparked John's wrath and led to a years' long chase to hunt down Matilda. John sent men to capture the family, however, William found out and retreated to Ireland.⁶² According to Ashley, John was 'determined to punish her and those who were sheltering her in Ireland'.⁶³ It seems an extreme action over one comment, when many were already against the king, and Matilda's concerns were justified with the rumours having spread far and wide regarding John murdering his nephew.

Warren suggested that John treated the offence against him as the start of war, sending over five hundred knights and two sheriffs to capture the Braose family in April 1208.⁶⁴ When the Braoses heard of this, Matilda took her sons to Scotland, however, they were caught by friends of the king. She bargained a ransom, and her husband, William, confirmed the offer. William then fled to France, making the deal void with Matilda's husband on the run again. These were unfortunate circumstances Matilda and her sons found

⁵⁹ HDN, pp. 120-121.

⁶⁰ RFOH, p. 205.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 248.

⁶² Ibid., p. 248.

⁶³ Ashley, *Life And Times*, p. 107.

⁶⁴ RLP, p. 81.

themselves in. She had been abandoned by her husband and was now in John's custody, all because she had been vocal about concerns for her children's safety. She was merely being a good mother trying to protect her children from being taken hostage by a king who would murder his own nephew, but she was punished severely.

What happened next was extremely cruel and shows King John in the most negative light regarding his treatment of women and people in general thus far. According to the *Brut Y Tywysogion*, the king 'put young William and his mother unmercifully to death in the castle of Windsor'.⁶⁵ *History of the Dukes of Normandy* gave further details, suggesting that they were left imprisoned with no food:

On the eleventh day the mother was found dead, seated upright between her son's legs but leaning back on his chest, a dead woman, the son, who was also dead, sat straight up except that he leant against the wall like a dead man, and in her agony his mother had completely eaten his cheeks.⁶⁶

King John had simply abandoned Matilda and her young son to die of starvation. The details are sickening, although it is difficult to tell how much was fabricated to make the act appear even crueller, or whether it was a true account of how they were found. The king had formed a vendetta against the Braose family simply because a woman had spoken out of turn. If a man had stood up to the king instead, would the same outcome have been achieved? It seems even more horrifying that a woman and her innocent child were left to this fate.

However treacherous John's actions appear to be, previously in 1202, he had ordered twenty-two French knights he had captured while saving his mother from a siege in Mirabeau, to be starved to death at Corfe Castle, the very same castle in which years later Matilda and her son would face the same fate.⁶⁷ This suggests John had a compulsion for starving his enemies, and it did not matter if they were male or female. As Matilda had personally attacked John's ego, he would have wanted a severe punishment, and it seems starvation was his favoured method reserved for the worst of his enemies, seeing as he must have been angry at those who would hurt his mother, and taken that as a personal insult also. In a way, this shows John was equally harsh to both men and women and was less biased against women than the general population of the time, despite how harshly he acted.

⁶⁵ *Brut Y Tywysogion; Or, The Chronicle Of The Princes*, ed. by John Williams Ab Ithel (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1860), pp. 263-265.

⁶⁶ *HDN*, p. 122.

⁶⁷ *RLP*, p. 24.

John accounted in 1210 that ‘his actions had been the just and proper response to Braoses’ default on payment of his debts’.⁶⁸ Warren advocated that Matilda was pursued ‘even more relentlessly’ than her husband, and this is proven in the fact that John let William de Braose escape to France and did not pursue him further, showing that Matilda’s words were seen as a personal attack on John, and he only wanted the person who had offended him to suffer.⁶⁹ John’s proclamation as to the innocent reason for his pursuing of the Braose family does not seem to have been believed by the barons who signed it, as years later several of them were leaders of the revolt that led to the Magna Carta. Warren maintained that it was a key factor ‘in urging men to united action against the king’.⁷⁰ Ashley, on the other hand, claimed that as much as it may have been murder, ‘their death might have been accidental’, although it seems unlikely considering his intentional starvation of the knights years before.⁷¹ Even if they starved accidentally, John never proclaimed it an accident and he must have felt guilty as several years later, he granted a charter to Margaret, the daughter of William and Matilda de Braose, to have a religious institute built in honour of her parents and brother.⁷² Perhaps he thought that such a kind gesture would atone his sins upon death: either way it was the act of a guilty man.

Another prisoner of John’s was Eleanor of Brittany, his niece. Her brother, Arthur of Brittany, was John’s rival for the throne upon Richard’s death in 1199, and Arthur continued to fight against John until he was captured. There is nothing more known for certain of Arthur after 1203, and rumours even at the time, which led Roger of Wendover to write about several years later, were that King John had murdered his nephew to prevent any further claim from Arthur’s followers.⁷³ Eleanor of Brittany had been captured at the same time as her brother, at the age of around nineteen. Upon Arthur’s death, she was heir to the throne, as John had no legitimate children at the time.⁷⁴ This made her a real threat to John, and so she would never be allowed to be free in case she made a claim or a deal with one of John’s enemies. Her fate was decided for her, and she was confined to a life of imprisonment by

⁶⁸ Warren, *King John*, p. 187.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 186.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 188.

⁷¹ Ashley, *Life And Times*, p. 155.

⁷² *RLP*, p. 199.

⁷³ *RFOH*, p. 205.

⁷⁴ For more information on Eleanor of Brittany, see Eileen Kim, ‘Eleanor Of Brittany In Confinement: Problematizing Paradigms Of The Household For Noble Prisoners’, in *Royal And Elite Households In Medieval And Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Theresa Earenfight (Leiden: Brill, 2018), pp. 115 – 141.

King John and all other kings up until her death in 1241.⁷⁵ Warren suggested ‘her imprisonment cannot have been very close’.⁷⁶ This is backed up by the fact she had an allowance, and often received gifts from the king, including saddles and reins.⁷⁷ Eleanor’s treatment was no worse than how other kings before John had treated threats, and he had a right to worry, as King Stephen was usurped by Empress Matilda in 1141 and Stephen was even imprisoned for a time. When he regained the throne, he imprisoned Empress Matilda to ensure it could not happen again.⁷⁸ John had warranted concern that the past could be repeated.

In 1208, Eleanor of Brittany was given the title Countess of Richmond, and there is a letter written by her with John’s approval, in which she named herself ‘Duchess of Brittany and Countess of Richmond’, and requested for the receiver to come to England to negotiate with the king for her freedom.⁷⁹ It seems she remained proud and strong throughout her imprisonment, and John treated her with kindness despite using her as a pawn at times.

King John also had hostages throughout his reign, including several female hostages, which shall be explored next. Hostages have been exchanged as assurances in peace deals and negotiations since long before John’s reign. It ensured that both sides would keep to their bargain to safeguard the hostages.⁸⁰ In 1203, Alice de Huntingfield and her brother were given to King John as hostages in negotiations for her father, William de Huntingfield, to become custodian of Dover Castle. This ensured that her father would remain loyal and not go against the king in any manner.⁸¹ Not long after, Alice was wed to Richard de Solers, a marriage that John himself arranged to make political gain, and there is little to no information on her time as a hostage.⁸² There is hardly any evidence of daughters being used as hostages before John’s reign, as it was usually the sons, whose fathers had more to lose if

⁷⁵ Matthew Paris, *Historia Anglorum*, vol. 3, ed. by Frederic Madden (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1869), p. 284.

⁷⁶ Warren, *King John*, p. 83.

⁷⁷ *RLC*, pp. XXXVI – XXXVII.

⁷⁸ For an account of Stephen’s imprisonment, and the events leading up to Empress Matilda’s imprisonment, see *CM*, pp. 172-175.

⁷⁹ *RLP*, p. 91.

⁸⁰ For more information on the history of hostages, see Adam J. Kosto, *Hostages In The Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2012).

⁸¹ *RLP*, p. 34.

⁸² For the circumstances of the marriage with Richard de Solers and their fleeing to Normandy afterwards, see Katherine Wiekert, ‘The (Trunkated) Life Of Alice De Solers Rufus Nee De Huntingfield: Medieval Hostage, Wife And Widow’, in *Writing The Lives Of People And Things, AD 500-1700*, ed. by Robert F.W. Smith and Gemma L. Watson (Farnham: Ashgate, 2016), pp. 13 – 27.

they should do something to enrage their king.⁸³ It appears John did not have a preference of gender with hostages, as he held several females over the years, and also many male hostages.

King William I of Scotland and his wife's two eldest daughters, Margaret and Isabella, became hostages to King John from 1209, due to the ongoing hostilities between England and Scotland. Having these female hostages meant John could control who they married to ensure the king of Scotland could form no alliances with John's enemies. Paris wrote that the king of Scotland 'gave him his two daughters as hostages, that in this way the peace between them might be rendered firmer'.⁸⁴ This follows the hostage traditions of the time, whereby they were used to pressure families to act according to the terms of their agreements.⁸⁵ The arrangement was that Margaret would eventually marry Henry, John's eldest son, and within two years of their union, Isabella would be married. The terms of the Treaty of Norham even went as far to state that should Henry die before marriage, John's younger son Richard would take his place, and should Margaret die before marriage, Henry would marry Isabella instead, meaning that no matter the outcome, Scotland and England would be united through the kings' children.⁸⁶ However, unfortunately for Margaret and Isabella, it would take years for them to be married and free of King John, and by the time of John's death, they were still unwed.⁸⁷ It appears, John had no intention of allowing his sons to marry the daughters of the king of Scotland. He used them as hostages to ensure they would not be able to marry during his lifetime and keep the king of Scotland under his control. John gave his hostages gifts during their imprisonment and allowed them out under close guard to ride. They spent time with other prisoners such as Eleanor of Brittany at Corfe Castle, and even lived in the household of Queen Isabel of Angoulême.⁸⁸ This suggests his treatment did not differ whether they were hostages or in confinement.

⁸³ Kosto, *Hostages In The Middle Ages*, pp. 83-91.

⁸⁴ Matthew Paris, *The Flowers Of History*, vol. 2, trans. by C. D. Yonge (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1853), pp. 109-110.

⁸⁵ Adam J. Kosto, 'Hostages And The Habit Of Representation In Thirteenth-Century Occitania, in *The Experience Of Power In Medieval Europe, 950-1350*, ed. by Robert F. Berkhofer III, Alan Cooper and Adam J. Kosto (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2005), pp. 183-196 (p. 191).

⁸⁶ David Carpenter, *Magna Carta* (London: Penguin Classics, 2015), p. 475.

⁸⁷ Christian Ispir, 'Exigens Obsides Ab Eis: Hostages Under King John Of England, 1199-1216', in *Medieval Hostageship C.700-1500: Hostage, Captive, Prisoner Of War, Guarantee, Peacemaker*, ed. by Matthew Bennett and Katherine Weikert (New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 92-107 (p. 97).

⁸⁸ *RLC*, p. 144; *Calendar Of Documents Relating To Scotland, Preserved In Her Majesty's Public Record Office*, London, vol. 1, ed. by Joseph Bain (Edinburgh: H.M. General Register House, 1881), no. 579.

John did not necessarily treat his hostages like prisoners. He wanted them to remain pliable so as not to complicate matters, and to keep their parents compliant. This makes it sound as though John did what he had to so he could secure his claim to the throne, preventing any threats from becoming a problem. He wanted others to see he treated those in his custody with respect by giving them gifts to keep them happy and comfortable. He treated his male hostages far worse, especially when the Welsh hostages in his custody, sons of princes of Wales, were killed.⁸⁹ John appears to have never killed any female hostages, only the one female prisoner, Matilda de Braose. Any women in his custody throughout the years who did not offend him as Matilda had, were treated well, and maintained limited freedom. John's father, Henry II, took both female and male hostages from Wales in 1164 but it was quite rare to do so, with only a few cases even in John's time.⁹⁰ John used the female hostages as leverage to keep families who could be threats to his reign submissive.

John used the women in his custody or confinement when the need arose. For example, in 1214, his wife Isabel joined him when he went to deal with Angoulême, of which she was the rightful heir.⁹¹ No charters or letters survive regarding any decisions she made while there, and it appears the visits were for show, and she did not exert any authority whilst in Angoulême.⁹² John acted in a similar way to his father Henry II, whereby he used Eleanor of Aquitaine for his own gains when he took her to Poitou to ensure there was no dispute that her family were in charge of the land.⁹³ When King John returned to England, Isabel was escorted by Terric the Teuton, one of John's mercenaries, to Berkhamsted.⁹⁴ This suggests John disposed of Isabel as soon as she was back in England and had served her purpose. Similarly, Eleanor of Brittany was used in 1214, when she accompanied John to France. He went to war with the French so that he could 'set her up as his puppet duchess of Brittany, replacing her younger half-sister Alice'.⁹⁵ John used this move to show Alice, who acted as duchess of Brittany alongside her husband Peter of Dreux, that he was in control, to threaten them with the fact he could restore Eleanor and leave Alice and her husband with nothing. This, however, did not work. Later, Peter ended up yielding to the truce with John anyway as

⁸⁹ Norgate, *John Lackland*, p. 169.

⁹⁰ *Chronica De Mailros: E Codice Unico In Bibliotheca Cottoniana Servato* (Edinburgh: The Edinburgh Printing Company, 1835), p. 79.

⁹¹ *RLP*, p. 117.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁹³ Roger de Hoveden, *Chronica Magistri Rogeri De Hoveden*, vol. 2, ed. by William Stubbs (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1869), p. 304.

⁹⁴ *RLC*, p. 177.

⁹⁵ *CA*, p. 163.

John had managed to capture Peter's brother. John once again discarded of Eleanor of Brittany in a castle, leaving her to her confinement. John only saw his hostages, prisoners and wife when he needed something from them and then discarded them again. It seems particularly harsh for his wife, a woman who should have been able to make her own decisions, and queens before her had ruled when their husbands had been away or busy, such as Matilda, William the Conqueror's queen, who took care of matters in England while William was away in Normandy.⁹⁶

John was contradictory in his treatment of female hostages and prisoners. In some ways, he was grotesquely cruel, to Matilda de Braose in particular, and confined even his ex-wife to years without purpose or any authority of her own. On the other hand, his treatment of Matilda de Braose was in line with the crimes he had previously committed against prisoners he had captured from a siege, making her of equal consequence to a male traitor. In this light, he appears less misogynistic than the norms of the time permitted, however this does not excuse the treatment of his wife, never being able to have any real authority of her own, being confined and only used when needed. There is evidence that his actions backfired, with Isabella of Gloucester and her husband rebelling against him once they were wed, suggesting these women were not as content as he had hoped. John acted no worse than any other ruler of the time, and thus his reputation as one of the worst kings is unwarranted. The fact John did not allow even his ex-wife to be free once he divorced her suggests he behaved selfishly, using the standards of the time to his advantage, keeping those who could cause harm to his reign close enough that they could not be a real threat. His concerns were warranted from past experiences of kings being overthrown, which suggests his behaviour befitted a king.

⁹⁶ Janet L. Nelson, 'Chapter 11: Medieval Queenship', in *Women In Medieval Western European Culture*, ed. by Linda E. Mitchell (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), pp. 179-208 (p. 200).

Chapter 3: King John's Treatment of Widows and Unmarried Women

John had numerous interactions with widows and unmarried women, documented mostly in the *Pipe Rolls*. Kings were able to fine women who did not wish to marry, and John used this to support his income, as well as having his illegitimate daughter married off for his own political gain. He was selfish and greedy for any political and economic benefits he could obtain, and used his right as king to exert power and influence over those he wanted something from, whether through marriages or fines.

John famously had an illegitimate daughter, Joan, whom he married off to Llywelyn ap Iorwerth, prince of North Wales. Not much is known of Joan's youth, which makes it difficult to understand what Joan's relationship with her father was like. Bennett Connolly suggested John ensured his daughter had a good education, as he would have wanted to arrange a good marriage for her, as daughter to a prince, and later to a king.⁹⁷ Daughters of kings were often married off for political gain in the Middle Ages, although it was rare for an illegitimate daughter to marry as high a rank as a prince of Wales. King Henry I had arranged for one of his illegitimate daughters, Sybilla, to marry the king of Scotland, Alexander I in the early twelfth century, so it was not unheard of, but there are few examples.⁹⁸ King John by no means had to follow a custom such as this, and so the fact he arranged such a powerful match for his daughter, he must have known she was well-trained for the role of a princess.

In 1202, Llywelyn ap Iorwerth paid homage to King John.⁹⁹ This worked out in Llywelyn's favour as the king later betrothed his daughter Joan to him. According to the *RLC*, they were betrothed before 15 October 1204, and married no later than 1206.¹⁰⁰ The exact year of marriage has been disputed in different sources, with the *RLC* stating they were married by 1205, while the *Annales Cestrienses* specified the year of marriage as 1204.¹⁰¹ There was a price for Llywelyn's allegiance to King John, an 'unspoken caveat that the Welsh prince was of a lower rank than the English king'.¹⁰² It seems that King John used his

⁹⁷ Bennett Connolly, *Ladies Of Magna Carta*, p. 174.

⁹⁸ Susan Marshall, *Illegitimacy In Medieval Scotland: 1100-1500* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2021), p. 119.

⁹⁹ *RLP*, p. 8-9.

¹⁰⁰ *RLC*, pp. 12, 23.

¹⁰¹ *RLC*, p. 23; *Annales Cestrienses: Or, Chronicle Of The Abbey Of S. Werburg At Chester*, ed. and trans. by Richard Copley Christie (London: The Record Society, 1887), pp. 48-49.

¹⁰² Bennett Connolly, *Ladies Of Magna Carta*, p. 174.

daughter purely for political reasons, to keep North Wales under his rule, in a time when Wales was increasingly difficult for English kings to gain control of.

The marriage could not have been an easy match to begin with, seeing as Llywelyn was fifteen to twenty years Joan's senior. Llywelyn had children already by a lady named Tangwystl and it is unknown whether he had children by any other mistresses.¹⁰³ Despite Joan being very young at the time of marriage, they had their first child together, Dafydd, in 1206. Recent research suggests they had at least five children together over the years.¹⁰⁴ It must have been a coincidence that they were so well matched, as John arranged the marriage because it:

Served the dual purpose of maintaining an ascendant and potentially troublesome neighbour within the king's sphere of influence, while helping John keep to his territorial ambitions.¹⁰⁵

Considering John's treatment of his own wives, it appears most of his decisions were made because they suited his own political and territorial ambitions. Unfortunately, Joan was yet another pawn in the king's game, just as many daughters of kings had been before. Daughters in royal families formed important political alliances through marriage and there is no doubt John would have prepared her for this kind of alliance.¹⁰⁶ The marriage allowed John to keep the Welsh in check, although only for a time, as Joan would be needed to help negotiate with her own father later.

On another occasion, King John, after keeping his ex-wife Isabella of Gloucester under his control for so many years, decided to have her married off. He planned for her to wed Geoffrey de Mandeville, Earl of Essex. Geoffrey agreed to pay John twenty thousand marks for the right to marry her and have the earldom of Gloucester, which was confirmed in the *Rotuli de Oblatis* and *Pipe Rolls*.¹⁰⁷ Unfortunately once again Isabella's future had been decided for her by her ex-husband. According to Bennett Connolly, the marriage was 'politically motivated and driven by John as a means of raising cash'.¹⁰⁸ This is reminiscent of John's daughter Joan's marriage to Llywelyn ap Iorwerth. For Isabella, this meant she was

¹⁰³ Lewis Morris, *Celtic Remains* (London: J. Parker, 1878), p. 401.

¹⁰⁴ Danna R. Messer, *Joan, Lady Of Wales: Power And Politics Of King John's Daughter* (Yorkshire: Pen & Sword History, 2020), p. ix.

¹⁰⁵ Louise J. Wilkinson, 'Joan, Wife Of Llywelyn The Great', in *Thirteenth Century England X*, ed. by Michael Prestwich, Richard Britnell and Robin Frame (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2005), pp. 81-94 (p. 83).

¹⁰⁶ Jennifer Ward, *Women In Medieval Europe 1200-1500* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), p. 114.

¹⁰⁷ *Rotuli De Oblatis Et Finibus In Turri Londinensi Asservati, Tempore Regis Johannis*, ed. by Thomas Duffus Hardy (London: G. Eyre and A. Spottiswoode, 1835), pp. 520-521; *PR 16 John*, p. 10.

¹⁰⁸ Bennett Connolly, *Ladies Of Magna Carta*, pp. 143-144.

mostly free from John, except for the fact that her new husband missed the first instalment owed to him. John confiscated their estates, but her husband renegotiated the agreement, and their lands were returned to them.¹⁰⁹ Isabella still did not have her lands in her own right but held them through her husband. However, the *Earldom of Gloucester Charters* documented several agreements issued jointly with her husband, signing that they were confirmed in ‘consensus et assensu domini’ which translates as ‘agreement and assent of her lord’.¹¹⁰ This suggests that despite not having her own lands, Isabella exhibited some power for the first time in her life during her marriage to Geoffrey. Therefore, by John marrying Isabella off to someone else, he gave her that bit of freedom to have power that she had always wanted. Once her husband died, she had even more freedom as is evidenced in the charters where she opened with ‘Ysabella comitissa Gloucestrie et Essexie in libera viduitate et in ligia potestate’ which translates to ‘Isabella, countess of Gloucester and Essex in free widowhood and in her own power’.¹¹¹ The fact she commented on her power suggests Isabella wanted to show the world that she finally had her own authority in her widowhood.

John did not merely use women for marriage to make political gains, he saw women as a means to increase his revenue. He agreed to significant fines from widows and unmarried women to remain unattached, have a choice in their husbands or to take a vow of chastity. Throughout the medieval period, widows and wealthy unmarried women were able to offer the king a fee to maintain their independence, and not have to remarry or lose their inheritance to another. Often wealthy widows would be forced into new marriages by their families and superiors for political gain, or even abducted. However, kings found it fruitful to agree to fines to protect these women from marriage.¹¹² This became increasingly common throughout John’s reign, with the costs for wealthy widows in particular growing massively.

During the reign of John’s brother, Richard I, some women paid fines of twenty marks to take a ‘vow of chastity’ and remain unmarried for life.¹¹³ Others paid to remain unmarried, with most fines during Richard I’s reign being between five and forty marks, sometimes a little more.¹¹⁴ Meanwhile, King John fined between forty and sixty marks and

¹⁰⁹ *PR 16 John*, p. 138.

¹¹⁰ *Earldom Of Gloucester Charters: The Charters And Scribes Of The Earls And Countesses Of Gloucester to A.D. 1217*, ed. by Robert B. Patterson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), p. 32.

¹¹¹ *Earldom Of Gloucester Charters*, p. 81.

¹¹² Caroline Dunn, *Stolen Women In Medieval England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 87-97.

¹¹³ *PR 10 Richard I*, pp. 93, 210.

¹¹⁴ *PR 10 Richard I*, pp. 93, 94, 138, 222.

horses were also included, usually one or two as part of the fee.¹¹⁵ Fines that stood out as much higher than normal included Margaret, widow of Robert FitzRoger, who was said to have promised King John £1000 in 1214 to remain single for the rest of her life and keep her inheritance for herself.¹¹⁶ In another case, Hawise, the countess of Aumale, offered five thousand marks in 1212 to avoid being married again, and have her 'inheritance, property and dowry'.¹¹⁷ It appears if women had their own property and inheritance, and were widows, they had to pay much higher fines to remain independent, as they were worth far more to John if he decided to marry them off. They had to make it worth his while to prevent him from arranging a new marriage for his own gain.

In comparison to his brother, John was greedy for as much money as he could get from women who just wanted their independence and freedom. He could have refused to allow such payments if he was so eager to marry them off to other parties to make political and economic gains, but he gave women the choice, just as his brother had before him, to pay for the privilege to retain their independence. When looking at it from an outside perspective it appears John was fair in this way, but as the fees increased during his reign, it exhibits John's greed, knowing he could profit further by demanding higher fees, and even adding horses into the deals to get as much from these women as possible.¹¹⁸ In reality this meant widows and unmarried women with larger estates had to pay a fortune to maintain what they had, being indebted to their king, while men were allowed to remain free without owing their king anything. John was not simply following what his predecessors had done, but increasing the fines so much that it became a very profitable business for him, and not a personal act of kindness. In terms of John marrying women off, it appears this was solely to subdue his enemies in Joan's case, and have some control over them, while for others it was purely for financial gains, as in the case of Isabella of Gloucester. Although these marriages appear to have been successful, John seems to have had little care for making good matches, and was merely following the customs of the time, providing himself with extra protection in his role as king.

¹¹⁵ *PR 16 John*, pp. 36, 102, 132.

¹¹⁶ *PR 16 John*, p. 175.

¹¹⁷ *PR 14 John*, p. 37.

¹¹⁸ *PR 16 John*, pp. 36, 102, 132.

Chapter 4: King John's Treatment of Women with High Status and Authority

John had contact with several powerful women throughout his life, from growing up with his mother, arguably the most powerful female of the time, to women he interacted with during his reign, including loyal constables, queens and princesses who negotiated with the king. His behaviour towards these women differed, dependent on their loyalties and John's interests, as shall be explored in this chapter.

John grew up with a powerful monarch for a mother. When he was born, Eleanor of Aquitaine was queen of England, wife of King Henry II. John was the youngest of five sons, and as such was brought up with the prospect that he would never be king. There is not much known as to how he spent his youth, but it is unlikely he spent much time with his mother. He had a wetnurse in his youngest years, and his mother was mostly imprisoned by his father for years due to Eleanor's power, and the fact she incited their sons to revolt against her husband.¹¹⁹ There has been a presumption that John was Eleanor's 'least-loved child' because, at the time, Henry was having an affair, and this meant John was abandoned for much of his youth.¹²⁰ Weir argued that there is 'no evidence that Eleanor did not love her son'.¹²¹ However, it is most likely that John was distanced from his parents as a child due to him being the youngest son, as it was common for the youngest children of royal families, unlikely to be king, to be brought up in the church.¹²² This suggests John may not have had such a negative relationship with his mother as previously suggested, although it is difficult to find much information about John's relationship with anyone before he became king. The chroniclers mostly focused on the kings and not their children. In adulthood John showed great respect and fondness towards Eleanor, which will be investigated next.

The fact John allowed his mother to continue to receive Queen's Gold even during his reign, has already been discussed, however, he also gave her status. In a charter, John confirmed that his mother had the whole of Poitou and could do with it as she pleased for the

¹¹⁹ Alison Weir, *Eleanor Of Aquitaine: By The Wrath Of God, Queen Of England* (London: Pimlico, 2000), p. 240.

¹²⁰ Polly Schoyer Brooks, *Queen Eleanor: Independent Spirit Of The Medieval World: A Biography Of Eleanor Of Aquitaine* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin company, 1983), p. 98.

¹²¹ Weir, *Eleanor Of Aquitaine*, p. 240.

¹²² Elizabeth Gemmill, 'The Ecclesiastical Patronage Of The Earls During The Reign Of Edward I', in *Thirteenth Century England III*, ed. by P. R. Coss and S. D. Lloyd (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1991) pp. 65-74 (p. 67).

rest of her life. This is interesting as Eleanor gave Poitou over to John at first, and he could have given it to his queen, but the fact he returned it to his mother without any clause that he could take it back, suggests his full trust in her to take responsibility over the land in her own right, not even on his behalf, relinquishing his own rights to it.¹²³ It is unsurprising that John looked up to his mother of all women, seeing as she was frequently described as one of the most powerful women in medieval England, with Weir calling her ‘a tough, capable and resourceful woman’.¹²⁴ Eleanor was as much a ruler as any man could be, and John treated her as befitted a woman of such authority.

When Eleanor of Aquitaine died in 1204, a letter in the *RLP* confirmed that John wanted to do a great kindness to honour his ‘karrissimus matris’ or ‘dearest mother’. As a result, John released the majority of prisoners across England, including those who had committed murder, felony and robbery. In the letter, John only prevented ‘captis de werra’ or ‘prisoners of war’ from being released.¹²⁵ According to Webster, the only similar occurrence before John’s act of generosity was William Rufus, who had released prisoners for the soul of his predecessor, William the Conqueror, in 1087.¹²⁶ However, according to the chronicler William of Malmesbury, William the Conqueror gave the order on his deathbed, suggesting it was not an act for the king, but by the king himself.¹²⁷ There is a recorded instance where Eleanor herself paid homage to her late husband by releasing prisoners before her son Richard inherited the throne.¹²⁸ This is more a wife honouring her husband than a king commemorating his mother.

Whether it was in the king’s honour or an order by the king, the acts differ in that John’s actions were in memory of a woman, suggesting he treated his mother with as much respect as was due a king. He respected Eleanor of Aquitaine more than anyone else in his life, and despite often being described by historians as the worst king, this proves he was moral when he chose to be, and that his mother made him a better man, following in her

¹²³ *FCL*, p. 36. For more information on the agreement between King John and Eleanor, see Norgate, *John Lackland*, p. 69.

¹²⁴ Weir, *Eleanor Of Aquitaine*, p. 355.

¹²⁵ *RLP*, p. 54.

Eleanor’s death is reported in *CA*, p. 144.

For more information on this good deed by King John, see T. J. McSweeney, ‘The King’s Courts And The King’s Soul: Pardoning As Almsgiving In Medieval England’, *Reading Medieval Studies*, XL (2014), 159-175 (pp. 171-171) <<https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/84586/>> [Accessed 28 June 2023].

¹²⁶ Paul Webster, *King John And Religion* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2015), p. 93.

¹²⁷ William of Malmesbury, *William Of Malmesbury’s Chronicle Of The Kings Of England*, trans. and ed. by J. A. Giles (London: George Bell and Sons, 1895), p. 310.

¹²⁸ Benedict of Peterborough, *The Chronicle Of The Reigns Of Henry II and Richard I. A.D. 1169-1192*, vol. 2., ed. by William Stubbs (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1867), p. 74.

footsteps. He could have done nothing but mourn his mother's loss or donate money to the church as many kings before him had, including his own father having made great donations to Godstow where his mistress was buried.¹²⁹ Instead, he chose to do a kindness by releasing prisoners. This shows that the wholly negative attitude towards John by historians over the years could be viewed as unjust and inaccurate. He did have redeeming features, and perhaps he was not a good king, but he was a loving and caring son.

It was not just his mother that John gave status to. He saw it beneficial to reach out to other powerful women whom he trusted, and had proven themselves as equal to men, giving them positions of higher authority to keep them on his side and reward their loyalty. One such woman was Nichola de la Haye. Nichola's father and grandfather had been constables of Lincoln Castle and sheriffs of Lincolnshire, holding the titles by hereditary right. Nichola was one of three daughters by her parents, and as such she was an heir to their titles. Her father died in 1169, and, as the laws of the time permitted, her first and second husbands took the titles, meaning she was not heir in her own right.¹³⁰ However, in 1191, William de Longchamp, in his fight against Prince John, tried to remove her second husband, Gerard de Camville, from Lincoln Castle. Camville went to Nottingham to seek assistance from Prince John, showing an early allegiance to the prince who would be king years later. Meanwhile, Nichola proved herself by staying at Lincoln Castle, protecting it from siege for a month. Longchamp came to an arrangement when he could not take the castle, but when King Richard returned to England, he stripped Camville of the titles for siding with John.¹³¹ Unfortunately, this meant that consequently, Nichola was also removed from her inheritance. This ensured they were not loyal to King Richard, due to his harsh treatment of them upon his return.

When King John inherited the throne, Nichola and her husband were restored to Lincoln. For several years, there was not much known of Nichola, however she must have proven strong, as when her husband died in 1215, she held the title of constable in her own right. She proved her loyalty further to King John, when, according to William of Coventry, another siege occurred at Lincoln, by those who were against John. She was able to hold

¹²⁹ Roger of Howden, *The Annals Of Roger De Hovedon: Comprising The History Of England And Of Other Countries Of Europe From A.D. 732 To A.D. 1201*, Vol. 2, ed. and trans. by Henry T. Riley (London: H.G. Bohn, 1853), p. 257.

¹³⁰ Richard Huscroft, *Tales From The Long Twelfth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), p. 250.

¹³¹ For a full contemporary record of the siege of Lincoln in 1191, see Richard of Devizes, *The Chronicle*, ed. by John T. Appleby, pp. 30-32.

them off, as strongly and independently as any senior noble.¹³² According to Norgate, Nichola was intelligent in her tactics, paying off the enemies to stop the siege.¹³³ Richard of Devizes wrote that she ‘defended the castle like a man’, suggesting she was equal to any man, which was unusual in a time when women were subordinate to men.¹³⁴ This shows that there were some women treated equally to men and the chroniclers admitted this at times, although infrequently.

In 1216, John visited Nichola, where, according to the *Rotuli Hundredorum*, she gave him the keys to Lincoln Castle because she had reached a ‘magne etatis’ or ‘great age’ and had lived through many ‘labours and anxieties’. John had other ideas and instead kept her on as she was trusted and had proven herself to him countless times.¹³⁵ Not only did he keep her in the position of constable, but he also made her co-sheriff of Lincolnshire with Philip Mark, the sheriff of Nottingham. As Mark already had Nottingham to look after, it seems that he was named co-sheriff in title alone, as he disappeared from the records after this. This made her the ‘first ever female sheriff in England’.¹³⁶ According to Round, there was another female sheriff in Norfolk at around the same time, named Margaret de Caisneio, however no record survives naming Margaret as sheriff, only as heir to her father’s titles, and it has been presumed that her husband oversaw the administration.¹³⁷ The fact the only records that survive suggest Nichola was the first female sheriff, furthers the notion that she was indeed in an unusual position, all thanks to King John, who, for a medieval man, was forward-thinking in his attitudes towards women. By John naming a woman as sheriff, this shows he did not differentiate between men and women if they were on his side and had proven themselves in a manner not dissimilar to men, such as Nichola defending a castle in wartime. The reality that he gave no such respect to his two wives suggests they never had the opportunity in the first place to show him what they could do if they had power.

Another key theme in John’s treatment of women in authority was his permitting of women to act as mediators and negotiators on behalf of their husbands. According to the *Gesta Ricardi*, when John’s brother Richard became king, he did not trust Prince John to

¹³² William of Coventry, *Memoriale Fratris Walteri De Coventria*, vol. 2, ed. by William Stubbs (London: Longman & Co., 1872), p. 230.

¹³³ Norgate, *John Lackland*, p. 276.

¹³⁴ Richard of Devizes, *The Chronicle Of Richard Of Devizes*, trans. by J. A. Giles (London: James Bohn, 1841), p. 29.

¹³⁵ *Rotuli Hundredorum*, Vol. 1 (London: Eyre & Strahan, 1812), p. 309.

¹³⁶ Bennett Connolly, *Ladies Of Magna Carta*, p. 53.

¹³⁷ J. H. Round, ‘The Early Sheriffs Of Norfolk’, *The English Historical Review*, 35.140 (1920) 481–496 (p. 492) <DOI: 10.1093/ehr/XXXV.CXL.481>.

keep the peace while Richard went on crusade, thus barring him from returning to England for a period of three years. However, their mother Eleanor of Aquitaine tried to keep her children from fighting, and trusted John enough to ask Richard to reconsider, persuading him to allow John to remain in England.¹³⁸ This implies Eleanor was a mediator between her sons, with Benedict of Peterborough using the term ‘consilium’ which can mean counsel or advice, supporting the idea that both her sons listened to her and heeded her guidance.¹³⁹ John may have inherited this positive trait to take counsel from powerful women, thanks to his own mother, as he later allowed his illegitimate daughter, Joan, to mediate between him and her husband Llywelyn ap Iorwerth, Prince of North Wales, as shall be explored next.

Joan’s relationship with her father remained strong through the years of her marriage, with John calling her ‘our beloved daughter’ in a letter dated early January 1215.¹⁴⁰ According to Jenkins, Llywelyn bided his time, remaining loyal to John until the king was ‘distracted by baronial plots before arranging a series of prudent marriages between his daughters and powerful marcher lords’.¹⁴¹ Llywelyn started a war against John which ended in Wales’s defeat. This led to the greatest test of Joan’s relationship with her father when she was sent by her husband as a mediator with John. Llywelyn had nothing left to lose and had to make amends by any means to prevent Wales crumbling. The *Brut Y Tywysogion* recounts that Llywelyn sent Joan ‘to make peace between him and the king, in any manner she might be able’.¹⁴² She negotiated for her husband’s safe passage to meet King John in person, even going as far to send hostages to the king as an act of trust, and finally handing over a portion of Wales.¹⁴³ It seems Joan managed to persuade her own father to listen to her husband, an act that was rare indeed.

On another occasion, John was in outright war with the Welsh barons in 1211, and he arranged for many Welsh hostages to be hung. Twenty-eight Welsh hostages were killed, although Llywelyn’s son Gruffudd was spared, perhaps with John not wanting to alienate his daughter. Joan deescalated the matter when she found out that some of John’s barons in England were plotting against him. In 1212, Joan sent a letter to her father, warning John about the revolt, and ‘if he persisted in leading them to war, either to turn and slay him

¹³⁸ Benedict of Peterborough, *Chronicle*, p. 106.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

¹⁴⁰ Huw Pryce, *Acts Of The Welsh Rulers 1120-1283* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2005), p. 446.

¹⁴¹ Geraint H. Jenkins, *A Concise History Of Wales* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 89.

¹⁴² *Brut Y Tywysogion*, p. 269.

¹⁴³ *Brut Y Tywysogion*, p. 269.

themselves, or deliver him to death at the hands of his Welsh enemies'.¹⁴⁴ John turned back to England, and Wales was safe again for a time while his focus remained closer to home. Thankfully, a similar warning had also come from the king of Scotland, and so it may have been the two accounts together that made John realise it was true, and not something his daughter had conjured up to distract him from Wales.¹⁴⁵ The question remains whether John would have believed his daughter if he had not received the same information from other sources. Later, he did listen to his daughter and allowed her to negotiate, in 1214, for the release of the remaining Welsh hostages, including her husband's son.¹⁴⁶ This suggests John trusted his daughter's information, despite her being married to an enemy.

Joan's negotiation skills served her well even after her father's death, often acting as peacekeeper with her half-brother, King Henry III. She was a strong, independent woman who was able to get through to her father to get what she needed, unlike John's two wives, who had no voice in politics despite being married to a prince and then a king. Perhaps, like the way Eleanor of Aquitaine was treated by John, Joan was treated well by her father as she was a blood relation, and his wives were merely pawns in his game to gain their inheritances. He had no close relationship with either of his wives before marriage and so he could cut those ties, whereas it seems he was emotionally connected to his family and could not help but listen to their guidance and trust them to negotiate, after all, they were royal blood.

Queen Ermengarde of Scotland, like John's daughter, Joan, became a mediator between her husband and the king.¹⁴⁷ There is not much known of Ermengarde in terms of politics until 1212, when she helped bring about the agreement between King John and William I of Scotland, but even the circumstances of the mediation have been disputed. According to Bennett Connolly, Ermengarde acted in place of her husband while he was unavailable, suggesting she was a leader in the negotiations for the agreement.¹⁴⁸ Church, on the other hand, suggested King William of Scotland was present at negotiations, and that Ermengarde may have merely been there as an interpreter between her husband and the king

¹⁴⁴ Norgate, *John Lackland*, p. 169.

For a full account of Joan giving King John the letter, see *CM*, p. 534.

¹⁴⁵ *RFOH*, p. 257.

¹⁴⁶ *RLP*, p. 125.

¹⁴⁷ For more information on Ermengarde, see Kimm Perkins, 'Ermengarde De Beaumont, Queen Of Scotland', in *The Biographical Dictionary Of Scottish Women*, ed. by Elizabeth Ewan, Sue Innes and Sian Reynolds (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), pp. 113-114 (p. 113).

¹⁴⁸ Bennett Connolly, *Ladies Of Magna Carta*, p. 118.

of England.¹⁴⁹ The term mediation, however, makes it seem as though she did have a say in the negotiations which led to peace between Scotland and England. John remained true to his word, when Ermengarde's son and heir Alexander II of Scotland, was knighted in 1213, and Henry III also kept to the agreement, when in 1221 Alexander married Joan, John's legitimate daughter.¹⁵⁰ This means that despite John's reputation, he kept to some of his promises with the Scottish and as such, Ermengarde must have left a positive impression on the king of England. There is no mention of any foul treatment from John to Ermengarde, despite her own daughters being hostages of King John for many years.¹⁵¹

Other queens before Ermengarde had negotiated on behalf of their husbands, including Queen Matilda in 1141, who negotiated with Empress Matilda who had captured King Stephen in an attempt to become queen of England. Queen Matilda used her negotiation skills to have Empress Matilda release the king in exchange for the empress's brother.¹⁵² Queens were expected to act on behalf of their kings, and as such it is altogether possible that Ermengarde did indeed act as negotiator with King John. Bower, in his history of Scotland, described her as 'an extraordinary woman, gifted with a charming and witty eloquence'.¹⁵³ This suggests she was a powerful woman and furthers the notion that John respected women of influence, and listened to their guidance.

To further evidence John's dealings with women of power, influence and authority, the next point of focus will be John's relationship with his wife and queen, based on the perception of the chroniclers. Isabel of Angoulême had previously been betrothed, some suggest even married, to Hugh le Brun, before John persuaded her father to let him marry her instead. Isabel was below marriageable age at the time of their wedding, as confirmed by Roger of Howden.¹⁵⁴ Shortly after, she was crowned queen of England.¹⁵⁵ According to most chroniclers of the time, the union of King John and Isabel of Angoulême was fatal to John's

¹⁴⁹ A. A. M. Duncan, 'John King Of England And The Kings Of Scots', in *King John: New Interpretations*, ed. by S. D. Church (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1999), pp. 247-271 (p. 263).

¹⁵⁰ P. Hume Brown, *History Of Scotland To The Present Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911), p. 90.

¹⁵¹ Paris, *The Flowers Of History*, p. 110.

¹⁵² Michele Morrical, *Usurpers: A New Look At Medieval Kings* (Yorkshire: Pen & Sword History, 2021), p. 53.

¹⁵³ Walter Bower, *Scotichronicon*, vol. 4, ed. by D. E. R. Watt and others (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1994), p. 469.

¹⁵⁴ Roger of Howden, *Chronica*, pp. 119-120.

¹⁵⁵ CM, p. 462.

reign, leading the Poitevins to start a war against England, due to John taking Hugh le Brun's betrothed.¹⁵⁶ For the most part it seems the queen was blamed.

The anonymous author of *History of the Dukes of Normandy* stated that John 'paid attention to nothing but dogs and birds and to enjoying himself with the queen his wife, whom he dearly loved'.¹⁵⁷ It seems the king was infatuated with his queen, and spent every moment with her, neglecting his other duties. Paris argued that the marriage led to the king's downfall, while Wendover stated that 'this marriage was afterwards very injurious to the king as well as the kingdom of England'.¹⁵⁸ Later in his chronicle, Wendover spoke of John's lust towards Isabel several times, stating the king, even at the worst of times, 'was infatuated by sorcery or witchcraft; for, in the midst of all his losses and disgrace, he showed a cheerful countenance to all'.¹⁵⁹ It appears that the love John had for Isabel blinded him to the duties of a king, and this in turn impacted the country as a whole. It reflects positively on John as a husband, but as he had such a high position of responsibility, it seemed he cared little for his duties and only acted on lust and impulse.

The *Chronicon Anglicanum* stated that Isabel was just twelve years old when she married King John.¹⁶⁰ Other chroniclers could not pinpoint a specific age, but it is assumed that she was aged between nine and fifteen, more likely towards the younger end.¹⁶¹ This appears to show that the king was the one besotted with her, and she would have been too young to understand her role as wife and queen. On the other hand, Turner suggested the marriage was a purely 'diplomatic move, for the Angoumois was a rich territory strategically located astride roads connecting Poitou and Gascony'.¹⁶² This meant John had a clear and safe route through the lands, and his kingdom was greatly expanded. If there was an infatuation as the chroniclers suggested, it was clearly one sided, seeing as Isabel was merely a child at the time of marriage, and she cannot be blamed for the king neglecting his responsibilities. John could have waited until she was older before marrying her, but he most likely felt that as he was taking her from another man, he should marry her quickly to avoid the risk of her being taken back, or a fight ensuing between the families. However, a fight

¹⁵⁶ *HDN*, p. 105.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 115-116.

¹⁵⁸ *CM*, p. 462; *RFOH*, pp. 187-188.

¹⁵⁹ *RFOH*, p. 207.

¹⁶⁰ *CA*, p. 103.

¹⁶¹ Vincent, p. 174.

¹⁶² Turner, *King John*, p. 117.

was not avoided, in fact the speedy marriage only worsened the opponents' anger and started a war against King John.

It is difficult to tell whether this infatuation was real or fabricated by the authors of the chronicles as a romantic story. Many chroniclers were men of the church, and as such were biased towards those affiliated with the church, having their own ideas of the characteristics that made a king good or bad.¹⁶³ This means it was likely that some stories were fabricated to sound more interesting or to turn people against someone, particularly one as powerful as a king. Ashley furthered this notion, stating that as John had many mistresses, it was unlikely that he was infatuated with a twelve year old girl.¹⁶⁴ In *The Flowers of History*, when explaining King John's attitude, the author noted merely that the king 'devoted the hours of the night to drinking', suggesting it was not his lust for Isabel but drinking that caused him to rise late in the day, and not see the true losses that were occurring.¹⁶⁵ This furthers the idea that the stories of lust may have been fabricated for entertainment and to turn the public against King John. Later, the chronicler did follow the same path as their contemporaries, stating John ignored the woes of his people once again, 'indulging his gluttony and luxury with his wanton queen'.¹⁶⁶ This is a little less blameful towards Isabel, as the chronicler was suggesting King John enjoyed all the luxuries money could buy alongside his wife, rather than his wife distracting him herself.

The chroniclers not only blamed Isabel for John's faults, but they also described her characteristics negatively, claiming she 'often used to say reproachful and bitter things' to the king, but they did redeem her character by stating she 'later suffered for it'.¹⁶⁷ These are contradicting statements, but they indicate she spoke out of turn often and was by no means perfect, however she was a lesser evil to her husband, and that she 'suffered' as a consequence of speaking out of turn. This implies that Isabel was mistreated by her husband, and it was common knowledge. Despite the misogyny of the time, people felt bad for the queen who had not chosen this life for herself. It was not entirely her fault that the king made bad judgements or neglected his duties. He was never destined to be king originally, despite trying to take control of England while his brother King Richard was on crusade, as such he

¹⁶³ Turner, *King John*, p. 2.

¹⁶⁴ Ashley, *Life And Times*, p. 43.

¹⁶⁵ Paris, *The Flowers Of History*, p. 99.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 101.

¹⁶⁷ HDN, p. 115-116.

was never brought up to be a king, and perhaps never fully developed the traits or understanding of what it meant to be king.

John was in some ways caring towards his wife. He rescued both his mother and his wife at different times when they were under siege by John's enemies. John's mother, Eleanor of Aquitaine, was at Mirabeau when she came under siege from her own grandson, Arthur.¹⁶⁸ According to Wendover, Eleanor despatched messengers to John:

Earnestly beseeching him by his filial affection to come to her assistance; on receipt of this intelligence, the king hastily set out with a strong force, and travelling night and day, he accomplished the long distance quicker than is to be believed.¹⁶⁹

This establishes that John would drop everything to ensure the safety of his mother, furthering the belief that he had a close relationship with Eleanor. It can be argued that John's quick response to save his mother was only because she was a woman, a damsel in distress figure, and that it was a threat to allow such a powerful person to be captured. This was also exemplified in the *Chronicon Anglicanum*, which included a letter from King John to his barons in England stating that 'we heard that our lady mother was besieged at Mirabeau, and so we hurried there as fast as we could'.¹⁷⁰ The use of the term 'our lady mother' seems as though he is suggesting she is the king's mother rather than the queen that is alluded to in letters during John's reign.¹⁷¹ The fact that his rival for the throne, Arthur, was the one behind the siege and capturing him would benefit John, also plays a part in the reasons for his quick response. However, Paris noted that 'he flew with all possible speed' riding through the day and night without stopping, and John's actions seem extreme if he merely wanted to be chivalrous.¹⁷² It is far more likely he wanted to save his mother because she was important to him both strategically and due to her being family.

In comparison, in 1203, when John's wife and queen, Isabel of Angoulême, was besieged by the Lusignans, John did not act with as much urgency. The Lusignans were at war with John since Isabel had been betrothed to the family before John took her as his wife. It did not help that John had started seizing their castles, and so they turned to King Philip of France for assistance.¹⁷³ As Eleanor of Aquitaine had done the year before, Isabel sent

¹⁶⁸ Gervase of Canterbury, *Historical Works*, p. 94.

¹⁶⁹ *RFOH*, p. 204.

¹⁷⁰ *CA*, pp. 137-138.

¹⁷¹ *FCL*, p. 36.

¹⁷² Paris, *The Flowers Of History*, p. 98.

¹⁷³ For more information on the war that ensued, see Malcolm Barber, *The Two Cities: Medieval Europe 1050-1320*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 262; Warren, *King John*, pp. 84-86.

messengers to John for help. He set out for Isabel but as he got closer, and stopped on his way, he realised he was at risk of being captured himself, and as a result sent mercenaries in his place to rescue Isabel.¹⁷⁴ Seeing as the king stopped enroute to save Isabel, it appears he cared less for his own queen than his mother when he had ridden without stopping for more than forty-eight hours to rescue her. Perhaps then he had only done as such due to Eleanor being such a powerful figure and being the head of the family after his father died. The evidence suggests his relationship with his wife was more politically motivated than the chroniclers let on, seeing as his close bond with his mother led him to respond far quicker. Despite this, John still got his mercenaries to rescue Isabel, knowing that if she were captured, there would be a ransom, and it would complicate his rule further.

The ideal of chivalry may be one of the factors that made John leap into action when his mother and then wife were besieged. Chivalry had become a code for knights by the twelfth century, and one of the most famous chivalric knights from this time was William Marshal. Marshal lived through the reigns of King Henry II, King Richard I, and King John, and served royalty throughout his life. He was the epitome of a chivalrous knight, and according to *The History of William Marshal*, written of his life in the 1220s after his death, he performed chivalrous acts for women including rescuing an old woman from a burning building.¹⁷⁵ The knight was turned from merely a warrior into an ideal for all men to aspire to.¹⁷⁶ As such, John may have wanted to improve his reputation by appearing to move quickly to save damsels in distress. In the case of Isabel, whom he did not personally rescue, he sent instead another knight, when he did not think it safe for him to rescue her himself, thus allowing the knight to be chivalrous, and improve their own reputation. This suggests John did not care about looking chivalrous and acted based on his own morals, ensuring his wife was saved, even if he could not do it himself.

John had differing relations with powerful women. He did not treat his wife respectfully, however spent a lot of time in her company, according to the chroniclers. He made a habit of rescuing both his wife and mother, making John chivalric, and even honourable in the way he allowed another to take credit for saving Isabel. Women who had proven their loyalty and had status, such as Nichola de la Haye and his daughter, Joan, were

¹⁷⁴ *L'Histoire De Guillaume Le Maréchal*, ed. by Paul Meyer (Société de l'Histoire de France, 1891), pp. 88-91 (line 12585-12652).

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 316 (line 8753-72).

¹⁷⁶ Nigel Saul, *For Honour And Fame: Chivalry In England 1066-1500* (London: Penguin, 2011), p. 38.

able to maintain and even grow their authority during his reign, with John backing them in their endeavours and listening to their guidance. In order to have a positive relationship with John, these women had to already have power and authority in their own right. John's wife was unlucky in that the chroniclers blamed her for John's shortcomings throughout their marriage, and as a result she did not have a chance to develop her own authority, with John never giving her the opportunity, as her reputation was already negative.

Chapter 5: How Adultery and Mistresses Influenced King John's Treatment of Women

This chapter will explore the ways in which adultery played a part in King John and Isabel of Angoulême's lives, and particularly how John treated her when accusations were raised. It will also examine his treatment of mistresses, whether they suffered similar territorial treatment to his ex-wife and wife, or if he had a different kind of connection when he could have whomever he wanted with little to no consequences.

Both John and Isabel were accused of adultery by chroniclers through the years. John's adultery has been proven by his numerous illegitimate children, mostly born during his ten-year marriage to Isabella of Gloucester, which led historians to conclude that with Isabella not having any children from the marriage, they were not a happy couple.¹⁷⁷ It is impossible to say whether the marriage did not work because of John or Isabella, or perhaps they were jointly responsible. According to Ashley, 'John was certainly, and perhaps understandably, unfaithful to his first wife'.¹⁷⁸ It is uncertain what Ashley meant by being 'understandably unfaithful', it could be because it was a marriage of convenience, ensuring John had lands and a title, and so they were not expected to love one another. John's own father, Henry II, was known to have mistresses and illegitimate children. One of his most famous mistresses was Rosamund Clifford, whom Henry publicly flaunted once he locked his wife away, and so it may have simply been the expected reality of a royal.¹⁷⁹ There is mention in the *Chronica Majora* that John was 'zelotipavit' or 'jealous' of those around him and 'filias corruptit nobiles ac sorores', which translates to him having affairs with marriageable daughters and sisters.¹⁸⁰ *The Flowers of History* made a similar statement that John called his nobles 'jealous, miserable wittols, whose wives, as he used to boast, he had violated, and whose daughters he had deflowered'.¹⁸¹ On the other hand, Ashley commented that the story sounded 'improbable and was no doubt a piece of gossip cooked up by the monks'.¹⁸² The fact that John's adultery is mentioned in multiple original sources of the time strengthens the likelihood that his excessive threats to corrupt sisters, daughters and wives of

¹⁷⁷ Bennett Connolly, *Ladies Of Magna Carta*, p. 141.

¹⁷⁸ Ashley, *Life And Times*, p. 151.

¹⁷⁹ For more information on King Henry II's mistress Rosamund Clifford, see Gerald of Wales, *Giraldi Cambrensis Opera*, Vol. 8, ed. by J. S. Brewer, James F. Dimock and George F. Warner (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 165-6.

¹⁸⁰ Matthew Paris, *Monachi Sancti Albani, Chronica Majora* (London: Longman, 1872), p. 563.

¹⁸¹ Paris, *The Flowers Of History*, p. 115.

¹⁸² Ashley, *Life And Times*, p. 151.

his nobles contained some truth, and he acted on these impulses without regret or thought for his professional relationship with his nobles.

Several of John's mistresses were named and can be traced. These included Robert Fitzwalter's daughter Maud, who is said to have been a 'victim of sexual advances' by John.¹⁸³ Even the *Pipe Rolls*, more trusted and less biased than the chronicles, mentioned instances such as a man named Robert who 'gave five of his best horses' to keep the king quiet about Henry Pinel's wife, insinuating the king was having an affair with her, and Robert did not want her reputation ruined as a result.¹⁸⁴ Meanwhile, Joan de Cornhill offered to pay the king two hundred chickens in 1204 so she could spend a night with her own husband, suggesting she was forced to be with the king when she should have been with her husband.¹⁸⁵ It appears Joan de Cornhill had little say in being a mistress, considering she was so desperate to be with her husband for just one night, that she would pay whatever she could. Further to this, Joan's husband Hugh de Neville was chief justice for the royal forests under King John, but then joined the revolt against him in 1216. According to Hickey, 'if John had taken his wife as his mistress, Hugh had reason to be aggrieved'.¹⁸⁶ It seems likely that this is what happened, or else something just as bad that forced de Neville to act and lose his high-ranking position. This also proves that many people were aggrieved by John's behaviour towards his nobles in having inappropriate relations with their wives, sisters, and daughters.

Gerald of Wales excused John's behaviour, stating that 'because of his age, he was devoted more to wantonness than to warfare, pleasure than hardships, to love than virtue'.¹⁸⁷ It was permitted and expected for a man of John's tender age, and as the youngest son, to have affairs with multiple women. Marie de France's *Lays* provide further evidence that it was common for men to have mistresses in the late twelfth century. One lay stated that 'the powerful man takes as his right the love he desires, if but for a night'.¹⁸⁸ Another lay commented that:

¹⁸³ John Stow and Edmund Howes, *Annals Or, A General Chronicle Of England* (London: Richardi Meighen, 1631), p. 170.

¹⁸⁴ *PR 12 John*, p. 139.

¹⁸⁵ George E. Cokayne, *The Complete Peerage Of England, Scotland, Ireland, Great Britain, And The United Kingdom, Extant, Extinct, Or Dormant*, Vol. 9 (London: The St Catherine Press, 1936), p. 480.

¹⁸⁶ Julia A. Hickey, *Medieval Royal Mistresses* (Yorkshire: Pen & Sword History, 2022), pp. 99-100.

¹⁸⁷ Gerald Of Wales, *Instruction For A Ruler*, p. 483.

¹⁸⁸ *LMF*, p. 31.

A man could fall safely in love with any and all women in the land. But refuse a single suitor, and ladies can lose their reputations and risk even more.¹⁸⁹

High ranking men were able to have relations with innumerable women with no repercussions, and women were expected to be agreeable and not deny any man. In essence, John was able to take any women he wanted and did not think he would face repercussions. Yet as a result, many nobles went against him in the revolts of 1216, suggesting John had taken his relations too far.

It is not known whether John had any children from mistresses during his marriage to his queen, Isabel of Angoulême. Paris stated that John ‘exosam’ or ‘hated’, his wife, and she hated him. He called her ‘incestam, maleficant, et adulteram’, meaning she was sinful, wicked and an adulteress. This terminology is extreme, and Paris gave no kind words towards her. There has never been any evidence that this statement is true, however this did not stop Paris from going as far to suggest that John knew of Isabel’s lovers and had them ‘strangled’ in her own bed.¹⁹⁰ According to Weir, however, this was merely ‘monastic gossip’, and is unlikely to be the truth, as surely King John would have publicly named her an adulterer if he truly believed her capable.¹⁹¹ There is only the second-hand account of Paris stating John called her an adulterer. Paris also stated that John was an adulterer, which placed the blame less on Isabel alone, however the fact remains that harsh words were said of Isabel, and she was not innocent, according to the chroniclers. There is no first-hand record of John ever speaking of his wife in such a manner, in fact he rarely even mentioned her at all. Other historians including Ashley and Bennett Connolly backed up the opinion that the accusations were unfounded and may have been fabricated to lay the blame more on Isabel as to the failures of the king.¹⁹²

These kinds of accusations of queens being adulterous were around before and after Isabel. Eleanor of Aquitaine had been accused of adultery with her own uncle by chroniclers such as William of Tyre, despite there not being any evidence that an affair between them existed.¹⁹³ The fact John never spoke out about the rumours suggests he believed Isabel to be faithful to him, although he may have only remained impartial as he did not want the legitimacy of their children to be called into question. Either way, John remaining silent on

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 105.

¹⁹⁰ Paris, *Monachi Sancti Albani*, pp. 562-563.

¹⁹¹ Alison Weir, *Isabella: She-Wolf Of France, Queen Of England* (London: Vintage Books, 2012), p. 3.

¹⁹² Ashley, *Life And Times*, p. 151; Bennett Connolly, *Ladies Of Magna Carta*, p. 156.

¹⁹³ William of Tyre, *Recueil Des Historiens Des Croisades. Historiens Occidentaux* (Paris: Imprimerie Royale, 1844), pp. 752-753.

the matter could be construed as positive in that he did not confirm any rumours, but negative that he did not back up his wife to nullify the rumours, allowing them to fester.

At the time, women were expected, but not trusted, to remain loyal to their husbands, whereas men could do as they pleased. This is evident in *Le Fresne*, one of the lays by Marie de France. The tale told of a wife giving birth to twin sons, and a jealous woman who started a rumour that she must have committed adultery to give birth to twins. Even though it is clear the wife was ‘utterly blameless’, her husband ‘confined her now under lock and key and appointed faithful servants to keep watch over her both awake and asleep’.¹⁹⁴ This suggests wives were often blamed when a rumour circulated about adultery, even if it was untrue, and this could have led to John confining Isabel to remove any doubt as to her loyalty. In this regard, John was merely following the prejudices of the time. As there is no surviving first-hand account from John regarding his wife committing adultery, it appears unlikely she did commit such a sin, especially as she did not have much chance, being confined, and guarded throughout her husband’s reign, as discussed previously.

John appears to have treated his mistresses in a similar way to those in confinement and his hostages, as there are several references to him giving romantic gifts to women including a ‘croceo cendalum’ or ‘gold cloth’, for a woman named Susanne, an ‘amice’ or ‘friend’ of the king.¹⁹⁵ The fact these women were sent gifts implies they were treated well as a result, although there was still the misogyny of the time, that a man, especially one as powerful as a king, could get away with affairs while wives were expected to remain completely loyal, and not trusted to do so, where in the case of John’s wife, she was in confinement to ensure she could not be led astray.

John’s predecessors had gifted land and marriage to families whose wives and daughters they had bedded, such as in the case of Henry II, who arranged for one of his mistresses, Isa de Tosny, to be married off to a wealthy, powerful man, also giving a large dowry including land as part of the deal.¹⁹⁶ However, there is no equivalent evidence in John’s accounts, suggesting he does not appear to have given large gifts or high status marriages to his mistresses and their families, instead opting for pretty gifts for the mistresses alone. This implies John did not care whether his barons were unhappy with the way he

¹⁹⁴ *LMF*, p. 36.

¹⁹⁵ *Documents Illustrative Of English History In The Thirteenth And Fourteenth Centuries: Selected From The Records Of The Department Of The Queen's Remembrancer Of The Exchequer*, ed. by Henry Cole (London: George E. Eyre and Andrew Spottiswoode, 1844), pp. 234, 267.

¹⁹⁶ *Rotuli Hundredorum*, p. 504.

treated their women, and the lack of thoughtfulness led to his reputation worsening, and the barons rebelling. The one positive is that the chroniclers never mentioned any violence from the king towards his mistresses, but they rarely mentioned women in the first place, so this cannot be taken as evidence considering it appears that they did not have a choice in the relationship. John did not spare a thought for the families of the mistresses he had, nor did he give women a choice. He pardoned himself by sending gifts to his mistresses, as he had done with his wife, to keep them amicable, rather than thinking of the consequences. The fact he did not back up his wife when rumours went around of her own adultery furthers the notion that John did not care about others, and merely followed his own path, even if that meant being cruel.

Conclusion

King John's reputation has mostly been interpreted negatively throughout history, from medieval chroniclers through to modern historians who analysed what attributes led to this opinion. There are several cases where John treated women less than honourably, such as the imprisonment and starvation of Matilda de Braose. Her death was uncalled for, but she had disrespected a king with a bad temper, and he had a reputation for starving those who offended him, such as the knights who attempted to capture John's mother in 1202. Despite his cruelty, Matilda was treated no differently as a woman than she would have if she were a man. John greatly respected some women of authority such as Nichola de la Haye, whom he made the first female sheriff.

Throughout this essay, John's relationship with his mother, the formidable Eleanor of Aquitaine, shows John as a humble son, with an unbreakable bond to his family. He allowed her to continue using the title 'queen' when he took the throne and gave her Queen's Gold where it should have gone instead to his wife. John also expressed kindness when honouring his mother's death by releasing prisoners, an act unheard of in respect for a woman.

In contrast, John was not kind to his wife, Isabel of Angoulême and ex-wife, Isabella of Gloucester, confining them to castles around England throughout his reign, and not giving them any of the authority or dowries they were owed. They never received the Queen's Gold that was customary, and this shows John was still misogynistic when it worked for him. He needed control and power and did not want his wife to take any of that away from him. His ex-wife faced a worse fate, being confined all the same despite their divorce, so that John could retain her lands, and sell her to the highest bidder when the time came. It was not uncommon for wives to be treated this way, as women were often confined to remove any doubt as to the legitimacy of their children and ensure there could be no affairs, while men could do as they pleased, having as many mistresses as they wanted. John was merely protecting his interests in controlling Isabel of Angoulême, however Isabella of Gloucester's treatment was harsh considering she was no longer married to John, proving that John put his own interests above others.

The evidence presented in this essay is contradictory at times, but it appears that overall, John was fair to most women and rewarded those who showed loyalty. He treated women no differently to men, and when he did treat a woman as less than equal, it was for his own political and economic gain, following the norms and laws of the time when it suited

him. He made false promises to women such as Berengaria, his brother's queen, and some of his hostages, that he knew he would never act upon, to keep them where he wanted them. John's treatment of his wife and ex-wife most likely originated from his father, Henry II, who kept Eleanor of Aquitaine confined for many years after she incited their sons to attempt to overthrow their own father. It seems that John had his own concerns due to what had happened with his parents, and as a result, he ensured his own wives were kept suitably secure, in comfort as his mother had years before. He did not wholly trust the women who had not proven their undying loyalty to him, however he trusted his mother who had fought for him when his brother Richard had him exiled, and assisted in ensuring he would gain the throne once Richard died.

There is no doubt that John was greedy for money and power, evidenced in marrying off his illegitimate daughter, Joan, to the prince of North Wales, and increasing the fines payable by widows and unmarried women to maintain their independence. He treated his mistresses to gifts, and other predecessors had behaved in similar ways, with John making these decisions to secure his income and ensure he kept his enemies close to prevent conflict. He went against the customs in a way that angered many, by doing what he wanted and having affairs with women without repaying them with marriages to nobles. In this regard, John was selfish, but he cannot be completely blamed for his ignorance of the barons. He was never destined to be king and had not been brought up to lead a nation himself. As such, he may not have fully understood his obligations or the consequences of his actions.

In many ways, John was fairer to women than his father had been, and it seems John did not wish to cross women who had their own authority, such as Nichola de la Haye, and risk them turning against him. He would much rather keep them on his side, and in that regard, he was reasonable when it was in his best interest. Where those who served John loyally were rewarded, meanwhile those within close reach of him, who could become a threat, were kept under close watch to ensure the threats could not come to fruition, such as in the case of Eleanor of Brittany. John's decisions were sensible in a time when there had been real threats and fights for the throne, such as between King Stephen and Empress Matilda in the mid-twelfth century, and between his own mother and father. He treated even those women who were hostages or in confinement to luxuries and allowed them limited freedom. He kept them pliable by distributing expensive gifts despite giving them no authority or anything that was owed to them.

John was no worse than any king before him regarding his treatment of women and naming a woman as sheriff had been unheard of before his time, suggesting John was a king who saw little difference between men and women and gave the same punishments equally, when they were due. He may not have been a good king, and riled up his nobles, but he was a king of equality and fairness between men and women, apart from where politics was involved, and only following the misogynistic customs of the time when it served his ambition.

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