



Postgraduate/Distance Learning Assignment coversheet & feedback form

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For completion by the student:		
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Module tutor: Janet Burton		
Assignment due date: 30 August 2019		
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4 This is a medieval document which concerns aspects of the elite lifestyle of a member of the nobility. It was originally written in Latin. Read it carefully and think about how women in particular articulated their spiritual devotion and material possessions, as well as represented notions of their social, cultural and familial world. Think about what this represents, and what the historian can (and cannot) learn from it.

In the name of God Amen. This is the testament and last will of Lady Isabella, countess of Warwick, made in London on 1 December 1439. First I bequeath my soul to Almighty God and my body to be buried in the abbey of Tewkesbury in the place that I have assigned. My great 'templys' [jewels worn on the forehead] with the pale rubies are to be sold for the highest price, and the money delivered to the abbot and house of Tewkesbury so that they do not grumble about my burial or about anything else that I will have done about my body. My image is to be made completely naked, with nothing on my head, and the hair cast back, and is to be of the same size and design that Thomas Porchalyn has made. At my head is to be Mary Magdalene laying my hands across my breast. On the right hand side is to be St John the Evangelist and on the left St Anthony and at my feet a scutcheon of my arms impaled with my lord's and supported by two griffins. And all around my tomb poor men and women are to be depicted in their poor array with their beads in their hands . .

The extract under consideration is from the will of Lady Isabella, Countess of Warwick which she made in the month of her death on the 27 December 1439. Her instructions and directions are quite straightforward and we can learn a great amount about her life and attitude to her death from this extract.

Seven months earlier she had returned to England from Normandy where she was living with her second husband, he was serving as the kings' Regent of France. He died at Rouen Castle on 30 April 1439 and Isabella along with their son Henry travelled back to England bringing his body which was to be buried at Warwick. Isabella became ill and was cared for by the sisters minoresses of the Convent of St Clare in the Minories in London. The inscription on a

moulding was added to the chantry tomb Isabella commissioned for her first husband confirms that she had died in London at the Minories.¹

Isabella was of high status and birth, the great grand-daughter of King Edward III and the second and posthumous daughter of Thomas le Despenser and his second wife Constance Langley.² She inherited her father's estate after the death of her brother Richard le Despenser died in 1414.

Wills written by women were unusual in the fourteenth and fifteenth century. The fate of women was dependant on their status, that of being single, married or if widowed she was in the hands of her male relatives and at will of the king. The land and the estates of Isabella's two husbands and that which she inherited from her father are not mentioned because she had no jurisdiction over the ownership or distribution of the estates. Even a woman of such high status, and as a widow, the only choices she would be able to make, which she did, was in the use of her jewels, the style of tomb and in her case the place of burial.

The format of Isabella's will is typical of the fifteenth century, acknowledging God and committing her soul to His care. The convention is that women are normally buried with their husbands but she requests to be buried in Tewkesbury Abbey. She was a great donor and patron of the abbey and it is where her father and as well as the Despenser family are commemorated and buried. The will mentioned that she already had a place which was assigned to her. In 1422 she had laid her first husband to rest in a chantry chapel in

¹ John Henry Blunt, *Tewkesbury Abbey and its Associations* (London: Simpkin, Marshall and Co., 1875) p. 76.

² Blunt p. 74.

Tewkesbury Abbey, the completion of which she had overseen before she married for the second time. The Abbot of Hereford was her confessor and would have been aware of her wishes but as she notes in her will the Abbot of Tewkesbury would have been a little concerned or ‘grumbled’ about the arrangements she was making.³ To placate the Abbot he was to receive the best price achieved by the sale of her most precious jewels. He is shown in the Founders Book⁴ beside her on her death bed receiving her last will and testament.⁵

Presumably the abbot may have been distressed by the request of Isabella wishing to be depicted ‘completely naked’. This poses the question, is she requesting a cadaver tomb which were popular in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Nigel Saul discusses the way cadaver tombs expressed the concerns and taste of the period in his chapter on ‘The Cult of the Macabre’ from *English Monuments in the Middle Ages*. These types of tombs were chosen mainly by the clergy but also by lay men and women. Designed in what was called a ‘double decker’ tomb depicting the deceased on the top section in their earthy form displaying their wealth and position and underneath a skeleton was carved or sometimes showing a decaying body. Saul points out that this type of burial favoured by northern europeans could be seen in some way a reaction to events such as the plague that ravaged through Europe reaching England in the 1350s but was not so popular in England. Life was fragile and the cadaver tomb did offer time for reflection

³ Blunt p. 80.

⁴ Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS.Top. Glouc. d. 2.

⁵ F. B. Bradley-Birt, *Tewkesbury: The story of the Abbey, Town and Neighbourhood* (Worcester: Phillips & Probert, 1931) p. 115.

for those who prayed for the soul of the deceased on their own mortality. Cadaver tomb designs contained more than naked bodies, they demonstrated the deceased piety in the form of texts warning those that viewed the tomb that they too were eventually heading for the grave. The skeletons or decaying bodies showed the desire to rid themselves of the earthy form and pass through purgatory as quickly as possible.

Henrietta Leyser suggests that Isabella was planning her effigy with the help of John Lydgate the monk-poet.⁶ Lydgate amongst other of his works translated from the french *Les Vers de la Mort* by Helinand de Froidmont to accompany the sequence of Dance of Death paintings in St Paul's cemetery in London.⁷ He was a friend and was also sponsored by her second husband. His moralistic stance could have been seen to bear some influence on Isabella so giving weight to Leyser's idea that the focus of Isabella's design for the tomb was also centred upon her relationship with Mary Magdalene as a repentant prostitute. I find that assumption a misreading of the will. Mary Magdalene may well have been a repentant prostitute but she was respectfully considered as the patron saint of Almshouses and I would suggest it is in that role she was seen by Isabella. When Isabella dedicated her first husband's Chantry chapel the saints included St Mary Magdalen, St Barbara and St Leonard.⁸ St Barbara was the patron saint of artillery and St Leonard of prisoners, fitting for the tomb of Richard de Beauchamp, Earl of Worcester. Isabella chose for her tomb in addition to St Mary Magdalene, St John the

⁶ Henrietta Leyser, *Medieval Women: A social History of Women in England 450-1500* (Great Britain, Phoenix, 2002) p. 234.

⁷ Nigel Saul, *English Monuments in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) p. 320.

⁸ Blunt p. 76.

Evangelist and St Anthony. She died on 27 December which is the day St John is celebrated. He was the patron saint of hospitals and this could have been the reason for her choice, the date of her death was pure coincidence. St Antony is a little more difficult to assess although Isabella may have been dying from what is now call St Antony's fire a disease that was common in the Middle ages in Northern Europe.

Isabella's tomb is no longer to be found at the Abbey having been removed possibly at the Reformation, but there are other indications that the word naked is not enough evidence to presume that her intention was to be depicted as a cadaver.

The nakedness is still a problem but on considering the word in the medieval context it is used to describe being without ones status. Which is how it should be interpreted in this case. A description of the tomb and the magnificent funeral are documented by John Henry Blunt in 1875 at the time of the restoration of the abbey.⁹ Blunt refers to the chronicles for the description which includes 'an effigy of the countess in a plain linen smock, without any state robes, or 'naked' as a person so divested of their upper robes was then said to be'.¹⁰ The description goes on to describe what Isabella has asked for in her will. In 1931 F. B. Bradley-Birt wrote of the discovery of Isabella's stone coffin which contained the remains of a silk lined wooden coffin and her shrouded body still intact.¹¹

⁹ Blunt p. 80.

¹⁰ It is possible the chronicles mentioned could be the sixteenth century 'Founders book' in which her deathbed illustration is found. See note 4.

¹¹ Bradley-Birt p.116.

Further investigation is needed into Thomas Porchalyn whom she mentioned has a list or a model, he could have been a member of her household or a member of the abbey community who advised her on types and styles of tombs. He may well have helped her on the commissioning and design of her first husband's chapel in Tewkesbury Abbey. The comment does need further research into his status and the part he played in her decision about the style of her tomb.

Isabella includes the coat of arms of her second husband, those of the 'de Clare' family describing the ' . . . scutcheon of my arms impaled with my lord's and supported by two griffins'.¹² The griffin is a mythical creature a cross between a lion and an eagle used in heraldry to signify courage and boldness possibly recognising the courage and dedication Sir Richard de Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick showed towards the crown in his service to the king.

The final request mentioned in the extract is that of ' . . . around my tomb poor men and women are to be depicted in their poor array with their beads in their hands . . . '. Bedesmen as they are known are small sculptured figures engaged in praying for the deceased using their rosary or beads ensuring continual prayer for her soul.

¹² Bradley-Birt p. 116.

Manuscripts

Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Top. Glouc. d. 2

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