



'Public' aspects of lordly women's domestic activities in France, c.1050–1200*

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Author(s)	Lo Prete, Kimberly A.
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Kimberly A. LoPrete

A heuristic distinction between public and domestic spheres has become problematic in women's history largely because it is construed in so many different ways. One source of confusion, broadly speaking, is that Philippe Ariès, in his studies of 'private life', introduced a view of public activities at odds with the technical sense of the public domain as used by professional historians, in part to encapsulate salient differences between modern states and a patrimonial medieval world. Ariès's admittedly 'common sense' notion of public spaces paradoxically endowed his contrasting 'new culture' of private life – new, he claimed, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – with features analogous to those Jürgen Habermas placed at the centre of his roughly contemporaneous concept of a bourgeois public sphere, though Habermas, unlike Ariès, built on the entrenched academic distinction between public and domestic realms.¹ Because of Ariès's and Habermas's influence in discussions of post-medieval women, scholars can misconstrue the import of earlier historians' views of medieval noblewomen's participation in seigneurial rule. They held that such women could intervene authoritatively and 'publicly' in politics even as their powers, like those of male lords, were generally construed as 'private' when contrasted with those of rulers in modern states.²

* After expressing my gratitude to the symposium's organizers for inviting a speaker indebted to Pauline Stafford's path-breaking studies of medieval women but working neither on England nor on queens, I thank both NUI Galway's Millennium Fund, which subsidized my attendance, and the *Medieval Feminist Forum*, xlv (2008), 3–35, where in 'The domain of lordly women in France, c.1050–1250' I discussed several issues treated here.

¹ E.g., P. Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: a Social History of Family Life* (New York, 1962); J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. T. Burger and F. Lawrence (Cambridge, 1989); D. Goodman, 'Public sphere and private life: toward a synthesis of current historiographical approaches to the Old Regime', *History and Theory*, xxxi (1992), 1–20, at pp. 9–12.

² A. Luchaire, *Histoire des institutions monarchiques de la France sous les premiers capétiens, 987–1180* (2 vols., 2nd edn., Paris, 1891), i. 133–50; M. Bloch, *Feudal Society*, trans. L. A. Manyon (1961), pp. 200–1, 252–3, 327, 408–37; J. Dhondt, 'Sept femmes et un trio de rois',

This chapter seeks to clarify both ‘traditional academic’ and ‘Habermasian’ views of the relation between public and domestic domains because they remain useful in conceptualizing how the seigneurial (lordly) powers of prominent noblewomen were perceived in relation to those of male lords in eleventh- to thirteenth-century France. In both usages the two spheres are held to have been largely undifferentiated at that time. That fact helps to explain key differences in politically active women’s access to positions of legitimate authority over lands and people in the medieval and modern worlds. When medieval noblewomen – at non-royal levels of lordship in particular – wielded the same powers as elite men and performed the same lordly deeds, no qualitative difference was drawn between the authority with which they acted, or the legitimacy of their lordly powers. In other words, in those routinely occurring situations when women exercised jurisdictional powers over lands and people, nothing struck contemporaries as extraordinary. Like men’s actions, those of women could please or displease articulate commentators; however, because the generic human being was typically seen as a man, lordly women’s deeds tended to attract exaggerated praise or blame. Yet even when such commendations or condemnations might be linked to other traits deemed particularly feminine, noblewomen’s capacity to act with lordly authority was not denied.³

Long entrenched in the conceptual repertoire of historians and social theorists, traditional academic understanding of public and private spheres builds on both the Aristotelian separation of the *oikos* from the *polis* and distinctions in Roman law drawn between what pertains to particular individuals and what to the community as a whole. It contrasts a formal domain of impersonal institutions of ‘state’, political office and the market with an informal domestic sphere of families, households and social reproduction. It thus neatly encapsulates some key differences between, on the one hand, the bureaucratic government of modern states, with their legally defined institutions, officially authorized agents and monopolies on legitimate violence, and, on the other, patrimonial societies that are organized largely by means of kinship ties, lord-client bonds, seigneurial

Contributions à l'histoire économique et sociale, iii (1964–5), 35–70; M. Facinger, ‘A study of medieval queenship: Capetian France, 987–1237’, *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History*, v (1968), 3–48; K. LoPrete, ‘Women, gender and lordship in France, c.1050–1250’, *History Compass*, v (2007), 1921–41.

³ See above, n. 1, and *Aristocratic Women in Medieval France*, ed. T. Evergates (Philadelphia, Pa., 1999); F. Cheyette, *Ermengard of Narbonne and the World of the Troubadours* (Ithaca, NY, 2001); K. LoPrete, ‘The gender of lordly women: the case of Adela of Blois’, in *Studies on Medieval and Early Modern Women: Pawns or Players?*, ed. C. Meek and C. Lawless (Dublin, 2003), pp. 90–110; *Capetian Women*, ed. K. Nolan (New York, 2003); K. LoPrete, *Adela of Blois, Countess and Lord, c.1067–1137* (Dublin, 2007).

jurisdiction, and household-based economies – that is, where 'governance' and 'economics' are immanent in highly personalized social structures, not exercised through impersonal institutions.⁴

In this view the 'feudal' world (so-called) is 'private' by definition, with the rights and powers of medieval lords (*domini*) derived in part from the household roles and moral authority traditionally accorded to people of noble status.⁵ Added to them were many powers of command that 'feudal' lords appropriated, as 'private' individuals, from the portfolio of 'public' powers previously exercised for the common good by governments headed by emperors and kings.⁶ Generations of social historians construed as 'private' matters the politically important privileges that lords granted to individuals and corporate groups. They stressed the unofficial or uncertain legal standing of the informal written compilations of orally transmitted customs that embodied a community's traditions, and then contrasted such customs to statutory laws formally promulgated in writing and enforced by official crown authorities. The vast majority of documents known generically as 'charters' continue to be categorized as 'private acts', distinct from the 'public acts' of the royal governments of kings, even when such 'private' instruments recorded transactions to alienate land, regulate trade or manage relations between fief-giving lords and their 'men'.⁷

Familial feuds (*guerrae*) over inheritances are lumped together with judicial duels and other forms of self-help and dismissed as mere 'private war'. Honours – those bundles of lands, rights and titles that constituted the material base of the social prestige and political reach of the ruling chivalric elite – were mostly acquired in one of two ways: either as personal gifts, whether for services rendered or at one's marriage; or through inheritance, like any other family goods, even as distinctive rules developed to govern the transmission of those peculiar goods called fiefs. Indeed, the integral

⁴ See above, n. 3. This distinction underlies, e.g., J. L. Nelson, 'Queens as Jezebels: the careers of Brunhild and Balthild in Merovingian history', and P. Stafford, 'Sons and mothers: family politics in the early middle ages', in *Medieval Women: Essays Presented to R. M. T. Hill*, ed. D. Baker (Oxford, 1978), pp. 31–77, 79–100.

⁵ The 'received' view critiqued, e.g., by S. Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals: the Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted* (Oxford, 1994).

⁶ E.g., G. Duby, 'Recherches sur l'évolution des institutions judiciaires pendant le x^e et le xi^e siècles dans le sud de la Bourgogne', *Moyen Âge*, lii (1946), 149–94, liii (1947), 15–38 (trans. C. Postan in his *The Chivalrous Society* (Berkeley, Calif., 1980), pp. 15–58), and 'The nobility of 11th- and 12th-century Mâconnais', in *Lordship and Community in Medieval Europe: Selected Readings*, ed. F. Cheyette (New York, 1968), pp. 137–55 (= translated extracts from *La société aux xi^e et xii^e siècles dans la région mâconnaise* (2nd edn., Paris, 1971), pp. 155–245).

⁷ See further at LoPrete, 'Domain of lordly women', pp. 16, 30, nn. 10–12.

link between one's honour and one's honours discloses the extent to which the public domain of the state had come to be subsumed into the domestic realm of dynastic families and lords' households.⁸ With the exception of kings and a few major princes, the military, fiscal and judicial activities of the lordly elite are deemed, in this view, to be unofficial and sub-political. They are simply the self-interested affairs of 'private persons', which merit consideration as historically significant events only to the extent that they contributed to the formation of 'modern' states.⁹

Historians who view the 'feudal' world essentially as a 'private' one provide insight into how noblewomen's powers were construed by reminding scholars of what titles meant at this time. *Dominus* emerged as a new term of respectful address freely bestowed upon, and reflecting the deference accorded to, the powerful *seniores* – elders, *seigneurs*, lords – of noble or common birth, who had come to constitute a ruling elite.¹⁰ Essentially an honorific, it also encapsulated the powers over lands and people those men wielded. Moreover, older and grander titles, such as viscount, count and duke, were now inherited more often than bestowed by a higher authority, and had themselves become as much honorifics as badges of office. No legally defined hierarchy of titles existed and their use could be quite 'unofficial', as, for instance, when brothers used *comes* (count) as a status indicator or when the pre-eminent lords of Normandy were called *dux*, *comes* or *consul* indifferently.¹¹

Counts' wives were overwhelmingly accorded the title *comitissa*, though, like their husbands, they could also be addressed as *domina*, or 'lord (female)' – as indeed were the wives of other titled lords and lower-ranking castellans alike.¹² *Domina* is most often rendered as 'lady', though such female lords, like their male peers, could and did wield powers of command over lands and people. That point is all too often lost in translation or obfuscated by those who would treat *domina* merely as a form of deferential address. Yet when a knight or castle lord sought the consent of his *domina* to alienate fiefs he held from her, or sought judicial redress at his *domina*'s court for estates unjustly taken from him, the *domina* he petitioned was his personal

⁸ Bloch, *Feudal Society*, pp. 176, 192, 368, 395–6; D. Barthélemy, 'L'état contre le "lignage": un thème à développer dans l'histoire des pouvoirs en France aux XI^e, XII^e et XIII^e siècles', *Médiévales*, x (1986) 37–50, at pp. 37–8.

⁹ E.g., T. Bisson, *The Crisis of the 12th Century: Power, Lordship, and the Origins of European Government* (Princeton, NJ, 2009).

¹⁰ LoPrete, 'Domain of lordly women', pp. 14, 17, 29, n. 3.

¹¹ LoPrete, 'Domain of lordly women', pp. 20, 32, nn. 26–8, and *Adela of Blois*, pp. 65–6, 183–7.

¹² W. Kienast, *Der Herzogstitel in Frankreich und Deutschland, 9. bis 12. Jahrhundert: mit Listen der ältesten deutschen Herzogsurkunden* (Munich, 1968), pp. 434–51, remains a good starting point for women's titles.

or feudal lord in precisely the same sense that a *dominus* was.¹³ And when his *domina* consented to his grant, presided over the juridical proceedings whereby his goods were restored, ordered him to join the offensive campaigns of *her* lord, or commanded him to defend *her* castle, she was authoritatively exercising commonplace lordly prerogatives that could have significant effects in wider political communities. The same applies to the *domina* who renounced privileges like the right to control episcopal goods during vacancies, served as monks' advocate, collected hospitality dues, established markets, swore to enforce the Lord's peace, received homages from her sworn followers, or declared their fiefs forfeit.

The women who wielded such powers were most often married to men of the ruling chivalric elite. They came to play the lord in their prescribed wifely roles as heads of households, consorts of lords and mothers of heirs, when they could have household knights at their command, as well as household clerics and household cooks – not to mention a raft of 'sergeants', provosts and other male 'officials' to assist them, both locally and in the longer-distance management of their conjugal families' domains. Their lordly powers and political impact would often expand when they controlled lands, honours and revenues in their own right (whether as inheritances or marital assignments – dower/dowry – or both), or when they acted as regent-guardians for absent husbands or minor sons. But in all cases, such lordly activities, performed by wives and widows alike, were grounded in an extensive 'private' sphere composed not only of aristocratic families and their inherited properties, but also their household retainers (*familiae*), clientele of sworn men (*fideles*) and other dependants. Noblewomen's broader political interventions were thus viewed as natural extensions, not transgressions, of their traditionally feminine and domestic social roles.¹⁴

Ample evidence for such attitudes is found, for example, in letters that show reforming clerics like Ivo of Chartres treating matter-of-factly with the female lords in their midst; or a town like Saint-Omer having written into its charter of liberties the rights of the castellan's wife to initiate certain judicial proceedings in her husband's stead.¹⁵ And, although the complex contours

¹³ Examples of these and the following activities abound in the works and literature cited in n. 3.

¹⁴ LoPrete, 'Women, gender and lordship', pp. 1925–7, 'Domain of lordly women', pp. 18–19, 31–2, nn. 17–23, and works cited in n. 3.

¹⁵ LoPrete, 'Gender of lordly women', pp. 99–103, and 'Gendering viragos: medieval perceptions of powerful women', in *Studies of Medieval and Early Modern Women*, iv: *Victims or Viragos?*, ed. C. Meek and C. Lawless (Dublin, 2005), pp. 17–38, at pp. 30–1. G. Espinas, 'Le privilège de Saint-Omer de 1127', *Revue du Nord*, xxix (1947), 43–9, at p. 47, quoted in LoPrete, 'Women, gender and lordship', p. 1935, n. 22.

of medieval French women's real property rights cannot be discussed here, a woman disposing of property legally hers or exercising customary jurisdiction over her tenants can hardly be cast as a usurper of someone else's rights.¹⁶ As Marc Bloch eloquently declared, women in the middle ages were never deemed 'incapable of exercising authority (*pouvoirs de commandement*)'. No one was disturbed by the spectacle of the great lady (*'la haute dame'*) presiding over the baronial court when her husband was away'.¹⁷

Of course, in 'common sense' terms as evoked by Ariès and others, most such lordly (seigneurial, 'feudal') powers appear to be quite 'public'. They concern the disposition of landed estates, the development of market-based revenues, jurisdiction over tenants, and feudal relations (in the narrow sense that includes military services and the exchange of fiefs). Authoritative measures taken by lordly women were often enacted openly before, or in conjunction with, leading laymen and clerics drawn from circles extending well beyond kin or residential groups. Without doubt, the lordly deeds of women could affect powerful men and have significant political effects in wider regional – or even regnal – communities. Indeed, a flowing stream of studies analyses French noblewomen's surprisingly well-documented contributions to this extra-familial world of lords' courts, where disputes were settled, property transactions authorized, political favours dispensed, and oaths binding lords and followers exchanged.¹⁸

Drawing attention to the domestic grounding of the powers of female lords is not meant to deny in any way the important 'public' aspects of lordly women's deeds, when public is understood as actions implicating non-intimates taken in full view of others. Rather, it is to suggest that any historian who posits a fundamental distinction between how power and authority were wielded in a profoundly patrimonial world from how they are construed in bureaucratic states will have to define very carefully what he or she means by the 'public powers' of any medieval lord – male or female.¹⁹ This is especially the case if one then wants to argue that the socially sanctioned powers of such lords and ladies were qualitatively different in kind – as did Georges Duby, to name but one influential scholar.

¹⁶ LoPrete, 'Domain of lordly women', pp. 18–19, 31–2, nn. 17–23; T. Evergates, *The Aristocracy in the County of Champagne, 1100–1300* (Philadelphia, Pa., 2007), pp. 63–138.

¹⁷ Bloch, *Feudal Society*, p. 200.

¹⁸ Works cited above, nn. 3, 15–16.

¹⁹ Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, pp. 3–7; J. L. Nelson, 'The problematic in the private', *Social History*, xv (1990), 355–66; Goodman, 'Public sphere', pp. 18–19; T. Reuter, 'Assembly politics in western Europe from the 8th century to the 12th', in *The Medieval World*, ed. P. Linehan and J. L. Nelson (2001), pp. 432–50, at p. 442; LoPrete, 'Women, gender and lordship', pp. 1924–6.

In Duby's eloquent depictions of the seigneurial domination that characterized eleventh- and twelfth-century France there is nothing 'public' in the sense of official, legal or state-like. This was, rather, a time when 'feudal' lords exercised *de facto* powers (*potestates*) after unjustly usurping them from kings, who served as the sole guarantors of legitimate public authority even when at their weakest.²⁰ Yet paradoxically, the qualitative distinction Duby draws between the powers of aristocratic men and women hinges on a contrast between their respective 'public' powers. Perhaps unsurprisingly, his definition of the 'public power' of chivalric lords is frustratingly vague. It is a quality that inheres in the swords that lords personally wielded to enforce their individual – 'private' – wills and punish others, both off and on the battlefield.²¹

The problem appears in Duby's discussion of a comital couple represented as seated on their conjugal bed when they jointly consent to the alienation of a fief. By suggesting that the bed represents the private, maternal power of the womb, he contrasts the countess's fleeting, unofficial influence with her husband's enduring official capacity to rule.²² But, while the 'sword' the count wields in bed is undoubtedly male, it is difficult to see how it can represent an exclusively masculine, authoritative and 'public' power over clients who are personally answerable for their 'private' fiefs to count and countess alike. In other words, when lords of both sexes regulated affairs concerning fiefs from their bedchambers, female lords crossed neither tangible nor conceptual thresholds in exercising seigneurial powers. Any socially sanctioned authority in the exercise of those powers was that conferred by tradition and custom. It depended more on the personal status, social rank and familial situation of the rulers – men or women – than on their gender.

My earlier invocation of noblewomen's activities at lords' courts evokes the 'Habermasian' twist on the 'traditional' distinction between 'public' and 'private' spheres. It gained circulation in the wake of Habermas's arguments about how, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, an urban bourgeoisie extended their domestic domain to create a realm of informed 'public' opinion in which to contest what had become the secretive, court-based government of absolutist kings.²³ Habermas's bourgeois public sphere has been amplified in recent literature to embrace just about any social

²⁰ See above, n. 6.

²¹ E.g., G. Duby, 'Women and power', in *Cultures of Power: Lordship, Status, and Process in 12th-Century Europe*, ed. T. Bisson (Philadelphia, Pa., 1995), pp. 69–85, at pp. 72–5.

²² Duby, 'Women and power', pp. 72–3; details at LoPrete, 'Women, gender and lordship', p. 1935, n. 19.

²³ Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, pp. 14–26.

institution for the open exchange of ideas among freely gathered groups of educated, 'private' individuals: 'civil society', in short. This is not the place to discuss the effectiveness of such Habermasian formulations in elucidating an array of issues that includes the import of lay literacy and consultative assemblies in the middle ages.²⁴ Nonetheless, aspects of his views are revealing for attempts to conceptualize in medieval terms the powers of French noblewomen, even if a preliminary warning is needed.

First the warning. Dena Goodman has cogently analysed the affinities between Habermas's literate public sphere and the new forms of sociability undergirding Ariès's culture of private life.²⁵ As a result of those similarities, 'public activity' has come close to meaning anything done 'in public' – that is, for or before others – in contrast to actions of individuals and their intimates that are largely hidden from others' scrutiny. However, as Goodman reminds historians, Habermas's sphere of 'public opinion' emerged as part of the 'private', domestic realm inhabited by free citizens. It thus remained notionally opposed to increasingly depersonalized and bureaucratically complex monarchical regimes, even as private parties came openly to contest what had become quite secretive government.²⁶ And when Habermas pointed to a subsequent 'refeudalization' of liberal democratic societies, he revealed the continued conceptual strength of a contrast between 'public' governmental organs designed to ensure the common good and 'private' parties, who wield powers over others for their own advantage.²⁷ In other words, Habermas's literate public sphere is conceptually poised between domestic affairs and state authority: he works within 'traditional academic' usage even as he develops it in order explain in class-based terms the emergence of modern democratic regimes.

Perhaps more interesting is Habermas's view of the pre-modern world of lords' courts because it reveals another way in which men and women of the ruling elite can be understood to have shared the same 'public' qualities in their effectively 'domestic' domains. In the middle ages, according to

²⁴ LoPrete, 'Domain of lordly women', pp. 22–3; and, e.g., G. Althoff, *Spielregeln der Kommunikation in mittelalterlichen Öffentlichkeit* (Darmstadt, 1997), pp. 29–57; Reuter, 'Assembly politics', pp. 439–42.

²⁵ Goodman, 'Public sphere', pp. 6–14.

²⁶ Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, pp. 18–19; Goodman, 'Public sphere', pp. 10–14, 18–19. Goodman would then conceptualize the activities of *ancien régime* women in this extended domestic domain as 'public', even though all women in post-revolutionary France were formally excluded from direct, official participation in the institutions of the newly erected French state: a position that risks masking core continuities and changes from the medieval to modern worlds.

²⁷ J. Habermas, 'The public sphere: an encyclopedia article (1964)', *New German Critique*, iii (1974), 49–55, at p. 54.

Habermas, legitimate authority to rule others was displayed at court by those individuals – kings at first, followed by princes and leading lords – who were perceived, literally, to embody and re-present on earth the external and legitimating authority of the sacred realm.²⁸ In this view, such 'representative publicness' inhered in the personal status, attributes and landed possessions of the lordly elite even as it also referred to the increasingly elaborate court ceremonial through which a certain ideology of rulership was publicized – broadcast – to those subjected to lordly authority.

In medieval France, as kings' powers faltered and local princes appropriated governing functions, churchmen generalized scripturally based notions of authoritative royal powers in order to legitimate the ruling powers of leading lords and princes. As prelates enjoined local princes to enforce God's justice and keep peace in their domains, all lords came to be viewed as playing essential governing roles at their respective levels in the divinely ordained hierarchy of earthly authority. And, since their jurisdictional authority was held to flow from the same divine source as made kings, medieval lords imitated and adapted ceremonial practices used at royal courts to display their majestic, ruling dignity.²⁹

Few historians would deny that noblewomen played important roles in the display of lordly authority at princely courts.³⁰ But women could also embody and re-present that very divinely ordained authority itself – that is, display 'representative publicness' in Habermas's terms – when they wielded lordly powers in the absence of requisite men. A telling example is in the extensive – though often anachronistically interpreted – verse-epistle extolling the virtue of clemency that Hildebert of Lavardin, bishop of Le Mans, directed to Adela, ruling countess of Blois, Chartres and Meaux, in the first decade of the twelfth century.

Hildebert opened by describing the widowed countess not only as a woman who ruled a county, but also as ruler who administered so capably on her own that she stood as an exemplar of all he deemed necessary for governing a realm.³¹ Attributing such praiseworthy qualities to God's grace rather than to her nature, Hildebert proceeded to use the countess's female

²⁸ Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, pp. 5–9, 18–19; Goodman, 'Public sphere', p. 4.

²⁹ LoPrete, 'Domain of lordly women', pp. 23–4, 33–4, n. 38.

³⁰ See esp. Cheyette, *Ermengard of Narbonne*, pp. 187–98, 220–32.

³¹ Hildebert, 'Epistolae', in *PL*, clxxi, cols. 144–5 (l. 3) (repr. in P. von Moos, *Hildebert von Lavardin, 1056–1133: Humanitas an der Schwelle des höfischen Zeitalters* (Stuttgart, 1965), pp. 341–3), and partly repr. and trans. in G. Bond, *The Loving Subject: Desire, Eloquence, and Power in Romanesque France* (Philadelphia, Pa., 1995), pp. 202–5, from which all paraphrases and quotations are taken, with my translations, which vary from Bond's largely in order more closely to reflect Hildebert's rhetorical figures). The letter was most likely written in 1102–3, 1107 or 1109 (LoPrete, *Adela of Blois*, pp. 181–2).

sex to construct a series of anaphoric antitheses contrasting the personal virtue of chastity to the socio-political virtue of clemency, while accenting Adela's position as a ruler who embodied both: 'You lay aside what is female when you cultivate chastity in beauty; you restrain the countess when you retain clemency in power. Chastity reconciles one man to you; clemency, the people. Through chastity you acquire a good name; through clemency, favour and support'.³² Clemency, he continued, is the greater good because it benefits more people: 'modesty allows comely ones to look after themselves; mercy in ruling preserves the safety of the realm'. Yet clemency is a virtue only of the powerful, who legitimately come to rule others by the socially acceptable means of inheritance, (s)election or rightful acquisition. As Hildebert expounded upon this theme, clemency becomes a specifically human virtue because it depends on the exercise of reason and binds society together; it thus distinguishes humans from beasts and links rulers wielding their judicial prerogatives to the wisdom and mercy of God. It is the most humane and glorious attribute of princes, as he demonstrated with a catena of quotations from classical authors. Acts of clemency, not cruelty, allow powerful princes to prosper.

In this erudite epistle, the bishop of Le Mans presented a countess to the informed readers at Adela's court as the perfect embodiment of a divinely appointed ruler exercising power over self and others, in order to emphasize the benefits to social order of rational and clement rule by lords of any rank or gender. He appears to have sketched an idealized portrait of Adela's lordly self-control (she could inflict harsh punishments and react violently when angered),³³ but he was writing to a prince whose powers he freely acknowledged and whose behaviour he – as self-appointed moral adviser – hoped to moderate. Yet his comments have all too often been taken to mean that Hildebert viewed the rule of women as unnatural compared to that of men, since he asserted that the countess owed her lordly powers to God's grace rather than to her feminine nature.³⁴ But is he really saying that men are natural rulers, whereas only special divine intervention can make women rulers?

The antithesis of nature and grace was a commonplace to medieval theologians, who used it to explain a variety of apparent paradoxes.

³² See LoPrete, 'Domain of lordly women', p. 34, n. 41, for criticism of Bond's proposed emendations.

³³ LoPrete, *Adela of Blois*, pp. 465 (no. 43), 480 (no. 68), 486–7 (no. 79).

³⁴ E.g., Duby, 'Women and power', p. 77; T. de Hemptinne, 'Women as mediators between powers of *comitatus* and *sacerdotium*: two countesses of Flanders in the 11th and 12th centuries', in *The Propagation of Power in the Medieval West*, ed. M. Grosman and others (Groningen, 1997), pp. 287–99, at pp. 287–8.

Axiomatic was the view that all human nature is vitiated by sin, so that only an act of grace can save individual men and women. The redeemed of both sexes, once sinful humans by nature, could be considered 'gods by grace' as distinct from the one 'God by nature'.³⁵ By the same token, the sin-free but human Saviour, 'divine by nature', could only be 'human by grace', as one of Hildebert's neighbours expressed the miracle of the incarnation.³⁶ But in medieval political theology, the nature/grace dichotomy had one particular application: to explain the powers and special sacrosanctity of anointed rulers. Kings had by grace what Christ the king had by nature, and were thus empowered to act as God's agents on earth. Not all men were kings and it took an act of grace to make a king.

Adela, of course, was not an anointed ruler, but neither was her husband who, like many other French princes, claimed to wield comital authority by God's grace.³⁷ Significantly, Hildebert invoked the nature/grace antithesis in the context of Adela's ruling powers: it was her lordly, comital powers that were conferred by divine grace. Authoritative powers were not hers – or any person's, man or woman – by nature. That God also bestowed on her the power ('virtus') to remain chaste was perhaps an added bonus, since her chastity was a personal – if peculiarly feminine – virtue, narrower in scope than a lord's power to punish others: a power Hildebert hoped that the countess would exercise reasonably.

The antithesis of nature versus grace explained all princes' powers, including Adela's. Hildebert then artfully harnessed it to the antithesis of the feminine as personal and carnal versus the masculine as public and rational to suggest that princely clemency was a greater virtue for all legitimate rulers than was personal chastity.³⁸ Ruling a county, in his commonplace clerical view, depended as much on mental as on bodily endowments, and the human ability to reason allowed good princes both to control their emotions and to rule others as the merciful God would have them do. If the female Adela, represented as embodying all moral and political goodness, could control both self and others through reason, how much more powerful would be her example to her male peers?

³⁵ E. Kantorowicz, 'Deus per naturum, Deus per gratiam: a note on mediaeval political theology', *Harvard Theological Review*, xlv (1952), 253–77.

³⁶ G. Williams, *The Norman Anonymous of 1100 AD* (Cambridge, Mass., 1951), pp. 55–60; Kantorowicz, 'Deus per naturum', pp. 253–77, at p. 255; LoPrete, 'Domain of lordly women', p. 34, n. 46.

³⁷ LoPrete, 'Domain of lordly women', pp. 34–5, n. 47, gives cases of Adela's male affines and contemporary female lords.

³⁸ For Hildebert's illicit sexual activity and support for Adela's brother, father of numerous illegitimate children, see LoPrete, *Adela of Blois*, pp. 179–80.

Hildebert took for granted the gender asymmetry of his age – women were not men's equals – even as he freely acknowledged the lordly capacity of one noted, but far from unique, female ruler of his day.³⁹ God most frequently granted the capacity to rule others to male lords, although in certain regularly and naturally occurring situations, he also granted it to princes who happened to be female. Even women could come to embody the sacred authority divinely conferred on rulers and to represent God's will in the temporal realm. Although, in Habermas's view, such 'representative publicness' inhering in individual 'feudal' lords did not constitute a fully public sphere of governance, the ideological grounding of all lordly authority in the mind of a divine Lord who had vowed to make the last first made ruling women a readily explicable phenomenon.⁴⁰

To conclude: noblewomen in medieval France wielded seigneurial powers less often than did elite men; they were outnumbered by male lords and usually exercised the prerogatives of lordly rule for shorter periods of their lives. Nonetheless, the inheriting daughters, married women or widows who exercised jurisdiction and controlled properties at certain regularly arising phases in the natural life-cycle of dynastic families did so legitimately as active agents, not as place-holding ciphers who passively transmitted lands and rights between men. Noblewomen ruled legitimately and authoritatively in such situations as women (*dominae*), not as transvestite men. In other words, as female lords they did not, for example, routinely cross-dress, and their sexual fidelity to their husbands was valued as highly as any knightly prowess they might possess, if not more highly.⁴¹ Yet however different their styles of lordship, and however vulnerable their gender could make them, the capacity of noblewomen to rule was not denied. Moreover, whether they were actively ruling or 'merely' participating alongside their husbands in court ceremonies designed to display lordly authority, noblewomen came to embody and represent the sacred source of the powers they could both share with men and exercise legitimately apart from them.

These conclusions might surprise those scholars who, consciously or not, universalize notions of public and private realms that were developed in large part to conceptualize the distinctive forms of power relations found in modern states. Such a default position presupposes that all women, as

³⁹ See LoPrete, *Adela of Blois*, pp. 436–8, for some contemporary close neighbours.

⁴⁰ E.g., Matthew XXI:28–31; 2 Corinthians XII:9; LoPrete, 'Women, gender and lordship', p. 1930; B. Newman, 'Flaws in the golden bowl: gender and spiritual formation in the 12th century', in her *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia, Pa., 1995), pp. 19–45, at pp. 25–6.

⁴¹ Further at LoPrete, 'Gender of lordly women', pp. 96–109; LoPrete, 'Gendering viragos', pp. 21–36; LoPrete, 'Women, gender and lordship', p. 1929.

females, are banned from 'public' positions of authority and command. When applied to the medieval world, such presuppositions (mistakenly) turn ruling women into transgressors of prescribed sex roles and usurpers of powers rightly belonging only to men. But that view is anachronistic and incorrect. It is based on the erroneous assumption that there existed in eleventh- to thirteenth-century France a sphere of formal, official power from which women were excluded by law: a sphere women could thus only influence – informally and unofficially – from the outside.⁴²

Even Habermas situated the historical emergence of a literate and informed 'public' in an extended domestic domain as traditionally construed, and juxtaposed the realm of informed public opinion with the authority of increasingly secretive monarchical regimes. And he thought – rightly or wrongly – that such a literate public sphere did not exist – indeed, could not have existed – in the middle ages. That was a time when charismatic individuals – whose powers stemmed from their personal status, attributes and landed possessions – represented through court ceremonial the divine source of their own earthly authority.

I am far from alone in thinking that it is neither appropriate nor useful to construe the lordly, 'feudal' society of eleventh- to thirteenth-century France as 'private' in the ways outlined above.⁴³ But the issues of how to conceptualize 'the public' in this patrimonial, household-centred world, and how to construe the extent to which lords' courts were both 'public' and 'private' spaces, are themes for a different volume. Nonetheless, Habermas's notion of 'representative publicness' has been – and could be more – useful when and if pursued with care. Moreover, analysis of the full range of activities at lords' courts – populated by both women and men, churchmen and lay folk alike – would prove fruitful for assessing noblewomen's 'powers' as deployed in their proper 'courtly' context. That frame of reference would correct the tendency to focus largely on the more visible military pursuits of this ruling chivalric elite – activities in which women personally participated only infrequently, though more by custom than on account of any legal prohibition.⁴⁴

⁴² LoPrete, 'Domain of lordly women', pp. 13–14, 27–8.

⁴³ Alternative approaches appear in much 'feudal transformation' and 'dispute processing' literature (see LoPrete, 'Women, gender and lordship', pp. 1932–3, n. 3; S. White, 'From peace to power: the study of disputes in medieval France', in *Medieval Transformations: Text, Power, and Gifts in Context*, ed. E. Cohen and M. de Jong (Leiden, 2001), pp. 203–18; W. Brown and P. Górecki, 'Where conflict leads: on the present and future of medieval conflict studies in the United States, 1970–2000', in *Conflict in Medieval Europe: Changing Perspectives on Society and Culture*, ed. W. Brown and P. Górecki (Aldershot, 2003), pp. 265–86).

⁴⁴ See LoPrete, *Adela of Blois*, pp. 307–311; and p. 237, for Baudri of Bourgueil's comments.

Three core structures ensured that the capacity of those French noblewomen who did find themselves in positions of command could be 'normalized' and their powers viewed as legitimate as those of lordly men. First, their places in lordly families endowed them with customary rights to inherit and control real property (including fiefs); to exercise jurisdiction over tenants; and to serve as guardians and regents for minor heirs. The significant numbers of medieval French noblewomen who were thereby drawn directly into the realms of politics and lordly rule (as construed in their day) acted 'in public' from within, not by overstepping, the confines of their domestic roles. Second, French noblewomen embodied and transmitted noble status – in a world where all power and authority descended from God in serried, hierarchical ranks. Noble-born women were of higher status and rank than most common-born men, however powerful some such men might become in this highly militarized society. In other words, personal status and social rank trumped gender in eleventh- to thirteenth-century France. Third, however male the hierarchy of the Church, Christianity remained a religion based on tropes of inversion and emphasized the active presence of God's grace in the world. God, not men, made rulers, and his ineffable ways allowed medieval folk to square the circle of gender as it applied to all those noblewomen placed by familial circumstances in the position of ruling lord as well as of decorous lady. As Pauline Stafford has demonstrated for England, if the deeds of lordly men are worthy of note in modern accounts of medieval France, then the deeds of lordly women merit inclusion alongside them, at the centre of historical narratives, where they legitimately belong.