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Women in Domesday

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R.V. Lennard once wrote that using Domesday to study society was like exploring the darkness with a searchlight.¹ You discover many individual things in great detail but when you try to focus the beam on a specific question or sweep it to gain a wide perspective it jams. Domesday Book is a frustrating source whose limitations must be appreciated if it is to be used successfully. But it is also a remarkably full account of the areas its compilers chose to cover. As a source for the history of women it poses problems; but without its systematic study the generalizations so often made about the peculiar rights and freedoms of Anglo-Saxon women, or the alleged changes in their status after 1066 are in danger of remaining impressionistic.

Four women may be taken as typical of the sort of information Domesday includes, and the sort of women on whom it focusses. Gytha was one of the greatest women landholders in 1066. She held land throughout England south of the Thames: in Dorset, Gloucestershire, Devon, Cornwall, Wiltshire, Somerset, Berkshire, Surrey, Sussex and Hampshire. In Devon alone her substantial holdings had a capacity for more than 330 ploughs.² Gytha is well-known outside the pages of Domesday Book. She was *countess* Gytha, the widow of Earl Godwine of Wessex and the mother of the ill-fated king Harold. She played an active role in 1066 and after, involved in the rebellion of the south-west against William the Conqueror, forced to flee after the fall of Exeter. The extent of her landholding is an indication of the importance of her and her family.

Asa was also a landholder in 1066; unlike Gytha she is unknown beyond the Domesday record. She was a Yorkshire woman who held three small pieces of land in the East Riding. In 1086 her lands were disputed, a fact which results in extra information being recorded about her in the *claims* section of Domesday. The jurors testified that Asa held her land 'separate and free from the lordship and power of

Bjornulfr her husband, even when they were together, so that he could neither give it, sell it or forfeit it. After their separation, she withdrew with her land and possessed it as its lady (*ut domina*).³ Her freedom within marriage appears outstanding, and Asa could easily become a heroine of women's history, a strong-minded eleventh-century sister. The problem about Asa is the isolation of the information we have about her. Is she typical of eleventh-century women? Does her freedom represent the rights of all women, or at least of all northern women at this date? The nature of Domesday's information, the provision of only occasional insight into such areas and even then the lack of context makes such questions difficult to answer.

Judith was the most important woman landholder in 1086, the date when the Domesday survey was made. Omitting the nunneries, and I am excluding religious women and their especial problems, she is one of about twenty women tenants-in-chief in 1086. Her extensive lands stretched throughout northern and eastern England, from Middlesex and Buckinghamshire to Yorkshire, with a concentration in the east Midlands. Like Gytha, Judith is famous beyond Domesday. Like Gytha she was a countess, the widow of earl Waltheof. She was also the niece of William the Conqueror. Gytha was a Danish woman whose marriage into the English nobility was part of Cnut's conquest of 1016; Judith was a northern French woman whose marriage was part of William's attempts to come to terms with the English nobility after his conquest in 1066. By 1086 Judith's husband was dead, executed for his part in rebellion. Judith was a wealthy widow.

Leofgeat also held land in 1086, not as a French incomer but as a survivor from 1066, one of many lowly English widows still holding land in 1086. She is listed among the servants and thegns of the king in Wiltshire, where she held three and a half hides at Knook which her husband had held in 1066.⁴ Domesday then adds one of its random details: in 1086 as in 1066 Leofgeat did gold embroidery for the king and queen.

The four women above are a small selection from the women in Domesday, but they are a small selection from a small number. There are relatively few women listed in Domesday, a small proportion whether we are considering 1066 or 1086. They raise questions about Domesday as a source for women's history. Few women are listed in the survey, but some are. What are the criteria of inclusion and exclusion? Are those who are included typical of all women, and what can they tell us about the rest and about the nature of women's

landholding in particular in the late eleventh century?

The landholding of all four women was located within the family. Three were widows, one a wife whose relationship to her husband was carefully specified. Domesday makes clear the necessity of approaching eleventh-century women's landholding through the family and its provisions for its members, raising a perennial question of women's history, how far women were united in common experience, in this case of family and household and the property arrangements they entailed? For if all four were wives or widows there was great inequality in their landholding as in their political activity. Did more divide eleventh-century women than united them? Is status as important as gender as a tool of social description? And specifically, if inequalities exist, how far were these the product of, or at least aggravated by recent changes in English society, by the political changes of the tenth and eleventh centuries? Can we generalize from the women in Domesday to all women in the late eleventh century? Can we go further and generalise about 'Anglo-Saxon Women' from this particular moment?

Anglo-Saxon England pre 1066 has often been presented as a Golden Age for women, an age of lost rights, which disappeared at the Norman Conquest.⁵ The idea of primitive rights lost at the Norman Conquest is not one confined to women's history and needs to be seen against a background of thinking about and idealizing the past and using it as commentary on the present which was well established before the nineteenth century. Domesday Book is however an ideal source for posing the particular question of change in relation to women, though the subject can only be touched upon here.

Domesday as a source, and in particular as a source for women, must be the starting point of any enquiry. There is a popular fallacy that everything about late eleventh-century England can be found in the pages of Domesday, a feeling shared by some contemporaries. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicler claimed that William stooped to counting every ox, cow and pig in England 'shameful to relate, though it did not seem shameful to him to do it'.⁶ If this were so the limits of William's shame came at the level of women; there are more pigs than women in Domesday. But the survey had no pretensions at comprehensiveness conceived in any general way. It was fuller than anything which had gone before, hence the Chronicler's comment, but its purposes determined its content.

A prime concern of Domesday was with the king and his rights.⁷

Every shire begins with the royal lands, usually with the royal shire town, sometimes with local custom as it impinges on or has been defined in relation to royal rights. Many shires end with a list of royal servants and royal thegns. Domesday was intended for royal administration, and that administration wanted to know what was the king's due. This included knowing about his tenants and their lands in every shire, in case that tenant forfeited to the king or the lands came into wardship. But Domesday was made in cooperation with the tenants-in-chief who supplied much of the information. Their interest was in its perceived function as registering the right to land of the new Norman tenants who had taken over since 1066. They were an insecure group. Few of them had written title and Domesday Book was to act as a 'super charter' fixing their title to land. This involved not merely the written record itself, but the resolution and recording of outstanding local disputes dating from before 1066 and from the circumstances of a mass transfer of land. In some shires these are listed at the end of the survey in sections entitled 'Claims' or 'Invasions of property'. Domesday was about royal right and Norman title, but it grew out of English administration, both centrally and locally. Behind it lies existing documentation, about geld, lists of tenants-in-chief. Some of the questions asked in 1086 were the long-standing questions of royal government in tenth and eleventh-century England.

These purposes and nature of the survey illuminate the criteria and principles which determined the inclusion or exclusion of women. Before we can simply assume that the small number of women holding land in 1066 or 1086 is a straightforward indication of levels of female landholding at either date those criteria must be explored. Women are not randomly distributed through the text. They are often clustered and grouped with certain sorts of information. Several appear in the royal lands, and another group among the lists of royal servants and thegns at the end of the shire. Most of Gytha's land was recorded as royal land in 1086; Leofgeat, the embroideress, was one of several widows among the Wiltshire royal thegns. There is an odd relationship between sheriffs and women. About a third of the new Norman women listed as tenants-in-chief in 1086 were the wives, widows or daughters of sheriffs⁸ and some English widows are listed in relation to sheriffs and their holdings. With this exception, most of the women listed as tenants-in-chief in 1086 appear among the last names in the list in the shires where they hold land. Judith, for

example, had a huge estate in Leicestershire, but she is fortieth out of forty four tenants-in-chief in that shire. Finally, some women appear in the disputes sections of the text but not in its main body, and there are far more women listed in the fuller versions of the Domesday information preserved for the south west in the Exeter Book or for East Anglia in Little Domesday.

This last fact is easy to interpret but disturbing. Great Domesday, that is the bulk of the survey as gathered at Winchester and now surviving, summarized and excluded information. Wherever the fuller local information has survived, more women can be seen. At Marston Magna in Somerset, for example, Great Domesday has four thegns; the Exeter text names them and two were women.⁹ In eastern England, Great Domesday often records that so many sokemen or freemen held here. Occasionally Little Domesday lists them individually, and some of these *freemen* were women.¹⁰ Whenever Domesday gives more detail women can appear, and this applies equally to the disputes section. In Lincolnshire the main text of Domesday lists four lands held by a man called Wulfgeat; only the disputes record that they belonged to him and his mother.¹¹ The main text is obscuring women's landholding, and for much of England the main text is all we have.

Where women occur in the text their association with other sorts of information suggests that we are hearing about many of them because of Domesday's concern with royal rights. Sheriffs, for example, were the managers of royal lands and dues and as such needed scrutiny. When they gave dowry to their daughters or provided dower for their wives, it might be royal land they were giving. In at least one case it demonstrably was. In Suffolk the mother of the sheriff, Robert Malet, held a huge estate. Some of it may be hers by inheritance, but not the large chunk of the Queen's fee she was holding. Hugh son of Grip, famous for his shrieval depredations on church lands, left his wife very comfortably provided for; a wise king made sure she was not feathering her widowhood with royal land, a wise sheriff may have been anxious to record his wife's dower.

If sheriffs were royal officials, so too were earls, and the wives or widows of earls are among the major female tenants in 1066: Gytha, Godgifu and Ælfgifu the widows of Earls Leofric and Ælfgar, Goda/Gytha the widow of Earl Ralph and Eadgifu the fair, if as seems probable she was the widow of Earl Harold.¹² The motives for recording these women were similar to those which applied to the

female members of sheriffs' families. Gytha certainly held lands which had been royal and which returned to the royal stock after her exile.

Several of the women recorded in 1066 and 1086 were members of the royal family, whose internal arrangements of dower and family provision were especially likely to feature in Domesday. Such women held land on which royal claims remained, or could be made good. Thus in addition to the queens Edith and Mathilda, King Edward's sister Godgifu is a tenant, William's sister the countess of Aumale, William's daughter, Edward's niece Christina, William's niece Judith.

Most of the women recorded at both dates were widows, and again the king's interest is paramount. Before and after 1066 the king was exercising rights of wardship over at least some noble widows (below). Judith is in the survey as William's niece, as the widow of an earl and also as a widow in royal wardship. Widows, largely the widows and sometimes the wives of royal officials, are often grouped together at the end of the shire survey like so many royal assets. Judith's own position was almost always towards the end of the shire list, in spite of the size of her holding. In Cambridgeshire four of the forty-four tenants-in-chief were women. The Abbess of Chatteris is among the ecclesiastical tenants, the other three, Judith, Azelina, widow of Ralph Taillebois and the widow of Boselin of Dives are among the last four, followed only by the holder of a royal office, Erchengar, the king's baker. In Leicestershire of the forty-four landholders, the fortieth and forty-first are Judith and Adelaide, wife of the sheriff, Hugh of Grandmesnil. In this county Godgifu and Ælfgifu, widows of Leofric and Ælfgar appear as tenants.¹³ They were almost certainly dead by 1086, but their association as widows with the sheriff and his holding is still clear. They are listed before Hugh of Grandmesnil, and after the lands of Earl Aubrey, who had returned to Normandy in the early 1080's and whose lands, like theirs, were still in royal/shrieval hands in 1086 awaiting redistribution. And lists of tenants-in-chief in 1066, if such lie behind Domesday, would already have included widows in the king's hands, especially widows of his officials. The principle of inclusion for 1066 was almost certainly identical here to that in 1086.

Many of these women are listed immediately before the royal servants and king's thegns, among whom the entry for Leofgeat was found. She was not alone: in Somerset among the *servientes regis* is the widow of Manasses the cook,¹⁴ in Hertfordshire, a priest and his

sister are *taini regis*.¹⁵ These royal servants are exactly what the survey calls them, people performing specific royal offices and holding land in exchange for it. Once again some women have crept into the survey because they hold directly of the king by service, because of their relationship to his concerns.

Paramount among the principles of inclusion of women in the survey are concern with royal rights, with the activities of royal officials, with wardship, with royal servants. The obvious corollary is a great deal of omission. It was not simply sheriffs and earls who made provision for their wives, widows and daughters, there is nothing uniquely feminist about the eleventh-century royal official! Other men's provision, however, counted simply as domestic arrangements, internal to the estate and of little relevance to the purposes of Domesday. This would have applied especially to dower, a temporary lifetime provision.

Once again the purposes of Domesday must be remembered. If one aim in 1086 was to provide Norman title, what Norman tenant would have wished to stress the temporary holding of wife or widow? Dower was a perennial source of litigation, much trouble could be avoided simply by listing all land as the husband or son's holding. Norman tenants in 1086 exercised some influence over the information which went into the survey, and this included whom they named as their predecessor.¹⁶ The effect of this on the recording of female landholding in 1066 is not straightforward. Where it stood to a man's advantage a woman might be named as a holder in 1066. Asa and her powers over land, for example, are specified because they stood to the advantage of a Norman lord claiming the land in 1086. In general, however, the insecurity and temporary nature of dower and the potential dispute and trouble caused by women's landholding¹⁷ would have militated against naming them as predecessors in 1066, again distorting the resulting picture of women's lands.

The purposes and methods of Domesday thus lead to an underestimate of the amount of women's landholding, and insofar as it grows out of English administration it must have done the same. We must therefore be especially wary of using Domesday for brute statistical purposes, though even here it can yield useful information. The proportions of women in the fuller listings of East Anglian freemen are, for example, comparable to those found in twelfth-century Danelaw charters, such as those listed by F. Stenton in his *Free Peasantry of the Northern Danelaw*, i.e. between 1 in 7 and 1 in

10. Some towns list all tenants, and in Oxford the figure is again about 1 in 7 women.¹⁸ None of these figures suggest that Domesday is hiding a host of female landholders either in 1066 or 1086.

Domesday's apparent limitations as a source are in themselves important facts. Noble women were already living in an environment in which royal power and royal lordship played significant roles, as true for the time of king Edward as for that of king William. Moreover, it was a world in which, although women might hold land as dower and in other ways, that land could still be considered part of her husband or son's estate and listed as his possession. Royal power and male rights here may not be completely unconnected. Temporary family endowments, like dower, are a grey area in the always debatable question of property and rights over it. But some circumstances force clarification of these questions, and one such is the impact of royal administration. The simple question, whose is this land, is a difficult one to answer when many members of a family have varying temporary claims on it. But when governments ask simple questions they concentrate the mind wonderfully and throw the greyest areas into stark relief. In England such questions may have been asked since the tenth century; after 1066 they were asked with growing urgency. The simple answer to the simple question was often that men held this land and in such brutal clarification women stood to lose. The impact of royal power in defining possession and right in this way is worth stressing since I shall be suggesting below that, paradoxically, the same developments of royal power worked in some women's favour.

Domesday is primarily a survey of landholding. It contains many other snippets of information: that Godric's wife fed the king's dogs;¹⁹ that Earl Roger had a female jester called Adelina,²⁰ that in Chester both men and women brewed ale, a situation of equal opportunity which brought equal responsibility since both women and men could be placed on the dungstool if they brewed it badly.²¹ But such snippets hardly constitute a picture of female employment in the late eleventh century. Within its limitations, it is about women's landholding that Domesday can tell us most. And it demonstrates that it was within family and marriage that landed provision was made for eleventh-century women.

Most of the women in Domesday appear as someone's daughter, wife, mother, widow, or more rarely sister. Two of the greatest women landholders in 1086 are nameless. They are recorded by their

family position, the *wife* of Hugh son of Grip, and the *mother* of Robert Malet. Men are also husbands, fathers and sons and gained much of their lands through these family relationships. But men were other things, primarily the men or lords of others, and it is as such that they chiefly appear in Domesday which describes society by lordship not by family. Family and household are the areas where the common experience of women, and the ways in which they acquired land can most fruitfully be pursued. Women like men passed through a domestic cycle which in their case exercised a predominant influence over their lives. The two most important transitions were marriage and the end of marriage, widowhood, and both of these were marked by property changes.

Unmarried women, or daughters before marriage, are the most elusive group in the survey. Daughters certainly had some claim on the family land. Families, or at least the noble families of which Domesday tells us most, recognized those claims at the point of marriage through the provision of a dowry. A handful of sisters, as sisters, are recorded for 1066 and 1086. The land they held was tiny and the brother's control over it is sometimes specified. In Devon in 1066 Ordwulf's sister held one virgate at Croyde. She held it of her brother, whose estate amounted to seven or more manors. She could not separate herself from him.²² In eastern England at a lower social level there are several cases of joint tenure by brothers and sisters. Partible inheritance in this region is the most likely explanation, though Domesday's omissions make it impossible to say how often this placed land in women's hands.

It was when daughters became wives that Domesday normally makes their existence clear. Marriage involved a partial change of family for a woman, and in the cycle of inheritance and social reproduction marriage marked the creation of a new stage of the family, normally a new household with its own property in the eleventh century. Marriage was also an opportunity for creating or underpinning alliances between individuals and families. And it served a primary purpose of guaranteeing the legitimacy, the inheritance-worthiness, of the next generation.

Three sorts of property arrangement accompanied marriage. The wife's family provided her with a dowry or *maritagium*. Already before 1066 a man could expect land or property with his wife, and there are many post 1066 examples.²³ Dowry passed to the couple and was normally held by the husband directly of his father-in-law as an

undertenant.²⁴ Such an arrangement served to protect the wife and her claims, a function of many of the arrangements at marriage, as well as emphasizing marriage as a means of alliance between men.

The other marriage transactions involved the husband and his family. He normally brought with him land or the promise of land, but he specified a dower, lands allocated to his widow for her upkeep after his death. The distinction between dower (*dos*), and dowry, (*maritagium*) is made. In Bedfordshire the land of Azelina, widow of Ralph Taillebois, is sometimes specified as *de maritagio* sometimes as *de dote*.²⁵ Azelina is the *uxor* of Ralph. Domesday significantly uses the same term *uxor* for wife and widow. The property transactions that guaranteed a widow's rights were those which made a marriage.

Among the purposes of these arrangements was the wife's security, which was especially threatened at the point of widowhood, a state already provided for at this early stage. There is no indication in eleventh-century sources that widows normally returned to their kin. Rather the number of them holding with sons in Domesday suggests the opposite. The assumptions behind the property arrangements were that the widow would continue life within her new family unit. Threats therefore came from heirs (children or grandchildren), from her husband's relatives, especially his brothers and from his lord. Such threats were real, even for the wealthiest. Godgifu, widow of Earl Leofric, was deprived of some of her lands by her grandsons, Earls Edwin and Morcar.²⁶

Those threats require stress since the other side of the Domesday coin is the wealthy dowager. Most of the wealthiest women before and after 1066 were widows. At every social level which Domesday reveals widows form an important proportion of women. There is no uniformity in the amount of land they held. The Nottinghamshire customs give a normal dowry of a half of a husband's lands, and one Lincoln priest's widow held precisely that.²⁷ But Roger of Lacy's widow certainly did not have half of his property²⁸ whereas countess Judith kept the lion's share of Earl Waltheof's. Variety is the keynote, in amount of land and in the way it was held. Some widows held directly of a lord; others under a son; some had joint possession with a son or sons; in one case a son-in-law was holding; some mixed joint tenure with a son of some lands and sole tenancy of others. The idea that widows should be provided for was constant. The nature and extent of that provision reflect the endless permutations of economic

circumstance, social pressures, age, sonlessness, character, remind us that every marriage was an individual bargain between individual families with its own unique context and cycle. Behind the common front of widowhood lies a variety of individual female experience.

The high profile of the Domesday widow contrasts with the obscurity of the Domesday wife. Asa was a wife and apparently an independent one. Even during her marriage she held her lands separate and free from her husband. Yet how typical is she? There are other women who appear to hold separately from their husbands; sometimes husband and wife hold land together, yet in most families the wife is invisible and dowry seems always to be held by the husband. Landholding of women within marriage is a difficult question, made all the more so by Domesday's failure to allow us to take apart the property which a man or couple held. Ideally we need to distinguish dowry and dower, land inherited by women as heiresses in their own right, household property, land acquired after marriage, leased and inherited land. Unable to do this, few individual cases can be elucidated. Yet we need also to be aware that Domesday's readiness in 1066 and 1086 to confound all these types of landholding together and list them under the husband is an indication of how blurred these distinctions could be, how far a husband's possession extended to all.

It is useful to remember that wives' claims on land were defined only in the sense that wives were potential widows. The clearest statements about a wife's land are often about her claims to dower, which her husband could not forfeit. A more fruitful question than the holding of land by women in marriage might be the reasons for the clarification of the widows' rights to land after marriage. Widows had certainly been uppermost in the minds of kings making laws and of families since the earliest records. They faced threat and dispute with the least resources to defend themselves. In the context of threat and dispute their claims had been defined over centuries. A wife is a potential widow. Her claims are threatened by some of her husband's possible actions, which therefore need defining, and perhaps by new opportunities which she herself may wish to use. Property, we should remember, is not a philosophical absolute, but a series of claims and rights which are defined in particular circumstances to meet particular needs or threats. Thus if a wife wishes to give or sell land; if her husband wishes to do the same, if there is a danger that he may lose land, the need to clarify claims may be felt. Asa's claims appear to have been defined against an active land market, in which land might

be bought and sold as well as given, and against the threat of forfeiture for crime. These were precisely the circumstances which existed in tenth and eleventh-century England.²⁹ Asa may not be unique, and indeed we shall see evidence which suggests that the protection of dower against forfeiture was considered a pressing question at this date (below). But we need to recognize the situation in which Asa and other eleventh-century women lived. Her claims were resolved favourably and were enunciated in a dispute between Norman lords. But this is not an age of professional lawyers or statute law. She sets no precedent, establishes no general right. Asa shows what *could* happen in the eleventh century, but she cannot be taken as an example of the rights of women. A fluid situation in which a case could be made for a woman's landholding in this way would be a more accurate description, one in which all dispute over landholding was subject to social pressures and individual resolution. It is nonetheless significant that the claims of women were not discounted, either before or after 1066.

Family and household appear to unite women's experience, to justify speaking of 'women in Domesday', but only to a point. Within the domestic cycle itself there were important differences between unmarried women, wives and widows. There were common assumptions, such as that widows should be provided for, but overwhelming individual variation. This variation was compounded by differences in status related to wealth, political power and lordship. All three were factors which differentiated men as well as women and forbid any simple division of society along gender lines.

Lordship was a fact of life for all social groups. Its effects are simplest in the differentiation of free and unfree. Freewomen and female slaves are numerically the most important groups of women in the Survey. Their very presence is a sign of the lord's interest. Slaves were part of his assets, and are listed as such. Freewomen could have different commendation from their husbands, and Little Domesday includes many of them merely in order to record that they had a different lord from their husband.³⁰ Lords had clearly encroached on what we might be tempted to call the preserve of the family. And many noble women felt the influence of that encroachment. For them the lord was normally the king, perhaps a great tenant-in-chief; lordship and royal power were in many cases indistinguishable. The chief areas of encroachment were on the control of widows and heirs, wardship, and through forfeiture which included the danger of the

forfeiture of family land.

The king and his great tenants-in-chief are active lords in Domesday. King William was choosing husbands for some widows, like the widow of the English sheriff Ælfwine, whom he gave together with her land to Richard.³¹ Widows' lands were, as already suggested, listed as royal assets. Other lords were acting similarly, and it is interesting for the whole debate about changes in 1066 that the two clearest examples of lords choosing a husband for an heiress are the English survivors of 1066, bishop Wulfstan of Worcester and Queen Edith. When Sigref, a Worcester tenant, died, bishop Wulfstan gave his daughter and the land to another *miles*,³² and Edith gave land to Ælfsige when she gave him the daughter of her own pre-conquest tenant Wulfweard the White.³³ Not all great noble widows were in royal hands in 1086, not all lesser ones in those of other lords. The claims of family were strong, as they were to remain. The widow of a royal official without sons or with underage children was the likeliest candidate to be under royal control. The development of royal power during the tenth and eleventh centuries was the major reason for this, though the very nature of Domesday as a record of royal rights exaggerates it.

The impact of the lord's control on individual women is difficult to assess. The alternatives are not control or freedom, but control by lord or by family. Later evidence shows that family were quite capable of selecting an aging lecher or impotent child for their womenfolk. In some cases a lord could provide the sort of protection for a widow that the idealized view of lordship envisaged as its *raison d'être*. In Hertfordshire a widow had secured her dower against the church of Westminster by turning to a lord, or rather a lady, Eadgifu the fair.³⁴ In practice the lord's or king's interference could be an intensification of the pressures and demands made by family on women. King and family for example could agree in their attempts to control women's purity. The only difference was that the king made money out of it. The laws of Cnut had stated that the king would protect widows and unmarried women.³⁵ Domesday customs in Chester and Shropshire specify a fine for a widow or unmarried woman who engages in sexual intercourse illegitimately.³⁶ Protection merged readily into payment in the eleventh century.

The king's claims to forfeiture posed a real threat, not only to family but specifically to women as wives and widows. Since the tenth century English kings had been actively prosecuting their rights

to forfeiture, including of inherited land. Æthelred and Cnut had both been driven to promise restraint in these areas and had guaranteed widows' rights to dower. Domesday is still evidence of such protection. The customs of Nottinghamshire and Oxford exempt a widow's dower from forfeiture, and the Oxford entry adds that a dower must have been made clear.³⁷ Exemption was claimed in practice. Scalpi the housecarl had died an outlaw in Yorkshire and as such his land was forfeit. His wife was claiming certain land in Essex as dower, presumably in an attempt to protect it from his forfeiture.³⁸

The effect of forfeiture on women may have been paradoxical. It was a real threat to a widow, as several tenth-century legal cases make clear. But the strong feeling that the king should be a good lord and that family claims should be respected combined to mitigate it. Widows' lands were declared to be exempt, with the result in some cases of actually strengthening widows' claims. Widows' dower was ever more carefully specified, one motive, I would suggest, behind the series of tenth- and eleventh-century English wills.³⁹

Lords were themselves a hierarchy, and the impact of the lord on the life of a female slave in the West country is not the same as that of the king as lord on countess Judith. Domesday society is marked by enormous disparities of wealth and political power. These affected the family experiences of women in ways which cast doubt on the treatment of women as a group. Judith for instance was a widow, one who got control of the bulk of her husband's lands. It would be futile to ignore the fact that she was the niece of William the Conqueror in explaining her fate. Among the wives of Domesday is Queen Mathilda, wife of the Conqueror. Until her death she had been a great landholder and had acted as a regent. Two legal cases over which she had presided are recorded in the Survey, including a court of four shires in the west Midlands where the bishop of Worcester defended his right to land.⁴⁰ Regency is an extension of the wifely role of caring for the household and protecting its inmates. But how many wives sat in judgement over the bishop of Worcester as part of their household duties? Is it more useful to see Mathilda as a wife or as a queen?

The common transitions and experience of the family and household cycle were profoundly modified by status, which in itself needs to be resolved into wealth, birth and political position. The three countesses Gytha, Godgifu and Ælfgifu were among the handful of great women who appear in 1066. All three were widows, but all

three are an expression of the great political power their families had achieved in the period 1016 to 1066. They held dower land, even judicial rights, but in the areas where their husbands had been earls. After 1066 their fates diverged, as did those of their families. Gytha shares the fate of the men of her family, flight and forfeiture. Godgifu and Ælfgifu's family, the earls Edwin and Morcar, debated longer over their attitudes to the Conqueror. These two widows got to keep their dower, died in possession of at least some of it. These women cannot be treated as typical of Anglo-Saxon women, not even of Anglo-Saxon noble women. They are part of a noble group whose power had arisen during the tenth and eleventh centuries, and even within that group fortunes differed greatly. The paucity of our information about so many eleventh-century women should not justify sweeping generalization about them.

That fact alone should make us wary of arguing for great changes in the status of women across the Norman Conquest. And Domesday has already made it clear how far women held land through the same working of family provision in the context of royal power throughout the eleventh century. Some of the brute statistics of Domesday suggest at first sight a deterioration. In Essex, for example, there were 25 women holding land in 1066, 9 in 1086; in Yorkshire, 19 in 1066, 4 in 1086; in Suffolk over 50 in 1066, 7 in 1066. Yet other shires show no decline, even a slight increase, as in Dorset where there were 9 women in 1066 and 10 in 1086 or in Warwickshire, with 8 in 1066 and 9 in 1086. The problems of using Domesday statistically for women's landholdings make all these figures suspect, and the dramatic decreases can all be explained by the ways in which Domesday records the information of 1066 and 1086 differently. There is an enormous apparent decline in the number of all tenants between 1066 and 1086 which has much to do with the way undertenancies were recorded at each date, and with the naming of predecessors. Domesday does not suggest extensive female landholding for any stage in the eleventh century. The wives and daughters of the English aristocracy are as conspicuous by their absence as are those of their Norman successors. It is hard to use Domesday as evidence for a female Golden Age in Anglo-Saxon England.

Yet there are apparent differences, especially at the top of society, which require some explanation. There are fewer large-scale women landholders in 1086 than in 1066. The great women of 1066 were themselves a temporary phenomenon, a product of the political forces

⁴⁰ DB I fo 238v. This unambiguous reference suggests that the entry on fo 48v should also be interpreted as referring to a court over which the Queen presided, viz the case of Aldred brother of Odo who claimed a virgate at Compton *disaisitus fuit postquam rex W. mare transiit, et ipse dirationavit coram regina*.