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## Women's Experiences During the Wars of the Roses

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**WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES DURING  
THE WARS OF THE ROSES**

by

**Mackenzie Van Engelenhoven**

**Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree**

of

**HONORS IN UNIVERSITY STUDIES  
WITH DEPARTMENTAL HONORS**

in

**History  
in the Department of History**

**Approved:**

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## **Abstract**

This paper will discuss the lived experiences of women of the English nobility and gentry during the period between 1450 and 1485, which covers the end of the Hundred Year's War to the end of the Wars of the Roses. It will focus on the vulnerabilities associated with various stages of life of a medieval woman, including childhood, marriage, childbearing, and widowhood, as well as the added vulnerabilities associated with political affiliations at the time of civil war.

A woman's experience in medieval England was highly dependent upon her social status, marital status, husband's political affiliations, and her legal rights. These factors also affect our modern perception as women as victims of the Wars of the Roses. As this conflict was mostly a war of the nobility and since the majority of the records of women that exist from this era only detail the experiences of noble women, the existing information about women during the Wars of the Roses is primarily about those in the upper ranks of society. It is this record of the elite that will serve as the topic of my essay<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Leyser, H. (1995) *Medieval Women: A Social History of Women in England 450-1500*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson. p. 24

## Birth and Death

For a woman living in medieval England, every aspect of her existence was precarious and vulnerable, starting with her life itself. And life was defined by the constant presence of death. As the historian Lawrence Stone wrote, “Death was at the centre of life, as the cemetery was the centre of the village<sup>2</sup>.” Death was an ever-present feature of medieval life, and it was a normal occurrence for people of all ages, rather than just something that happened to the old or the infant. The life expectancy at the time is difficult to know with certainty because of poor record keeping, but to the best of our knowledge, most people who survived infancy lived between thirty-five and forty-eight years<sup>3</sup>. Disease, accident, and war were all ordinary features of medieval life that took the lives of both old and young. The mortality rate in the Middle Ages was also affected by high infant mortality rates. According to surviving records, between fifteen and thirty percent of infants died, but the actual rate must have been higher due to unrecorded births who died in the first few days, stillborns, and miscarriages. And even if a child survived infancy, she remained extremely vulnerable to the hazards of medieval life. Eighteen percent of all children died between the ages of one and five, though rates were much higher in urban areas, which often had poorer sanitation and living conditions than rural areas. In cities, forty-nine percent of all recorded children were dead by the age of two, sixty percent by the age of five. In contrast, a quarter to a third of all children in rural areas died before they reached the age of fifteen<sup>4</sup>. In the period of the Wars of the Roses, most noble families had an average of four children living past birth.

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<sup>2</sup> Stone, L. (1990) *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England 1500-1800*. New York: Penguin, pp. 66-73.

<sup>3</sup> Lancaster, H. (1990) *Expectations of Life: A Study in the Demography, Statistics and History of World Mortality*. New York: Springer-Verlag.

<sup>4</sup> Stone, 70.

Once childhood passed, there was a much greater chance of survival to middle age. However, for women, one of the greatest dangers to their life still remained ahead of them. If noble and gentry women survived their childhood, the next phase of their lives was marriage, followed by childbirth, which was the leading causes of death among medieval women. For noblewomen, bearing children was particularly important, because they were expected to produce a son who would one day serve as heir to their husband's estate. The production of an heir was a woman's primary responsibility in life, and the main reason for marriage. Male children were most desirable in order to keep land in the family. If a woman was an heiress, her family's land would pass to her husband upon her marriage rather than remain in her original family. Ties to land were very important at the time because land was the primary source of wealth for the nobility, making it essential for heirs to be produced so that the land remained in the family. There was a huge amount of pressure for a woman to successfully deliver children that would inherit the family's estate.

Since most women were married in their early twenties and menopause began at forty, the period during which the average woman could give birth was fairly limited, and often complicated. Even if a child was successfully conceived and delivered, the dangers involved with the birth and recovery were great for the mother. Childbirth was the leading cause of death among women in the 1450's. As much as twenty percent of women died in childbirth, and there were others who died afterwards as a result of the strain. The rampant malnutrition and poor sanitation of the era placed great strain on a woman's body, and combined with the effects of childbirth often left women weakened and unable to conceive for a long period after delivering a child. As a result, there was usually a twenty-four month period between births. Malnutrition also made it difficult for women lactating women to maintain a healthy bodyweight. Lactation,

which typically lasted eighteen months post-birth, was also a relatively effective contraceptive because physicians of the time advised lactating women to avoid sexual intercourse<sup>5</sup>.

A woman's ability to produce children could be hindered by many factors. An almost complete disregard for and understanding of personal hygiene led to contamination of food and water created a perfect environment for diseases to be spread, and these often left a woman in less than prime health to deliver children. Also, because their husbands were often a great deal older than they, and the incapacities of these aging gentlemen could also impede the reproductive abilities. Poor health and malnutrition led to infertility among both men and women. Infertility among women was not grounds for annulment, but it often led to infidelity. When a couple failed to conceive, it was almost always traced to the woman. As men were believed to be superior to women both mentally, anatomically, and spiritually, infertility was almost always blamed on the woman, and as a result, they were despised by their husband. A contemporary discourse on virginity, *Hali Meidhad*, comments on the barren woman by saying "her lord loves her and honors her less<sup>6</sup>." Women were also faced with complex images of sexuality within marriage. They were expected to remain good Christians and maintain a "chaste marriage," engaging in sexual intercourse only for the purpose of reproduction, but were also obliged to fulfill a "sexual debt" to their husbands, a contemporary term used to indicate a woman's duty to fulfill her husband's sexual desires<sup>7</sup>.

For noble women, the pressure to produce an heir was increased with the amount of land to be inherited. In the case of a woman such as Margaret of Anjou, wife of Henry VI and queen of England from 1445 to 1461, it was her chief duty, both to her husband and to her country.

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<sup>5</sup> Stone, 63-64

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Jewell, 141

<sup>7</sup> Jacquart, D. and Thomasset, C. *Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Margaret was a French princess brought to Henry's court to marry the king at the conclusion of the Hundred Year's War. Henry was eight years her senior, and considered by many historians to be mentally unstable at the time of their marriage. This circumstance was dramatized by his mental breakdown from 1452 to 1453, which left him vegetative and completely incapacitated. Because of Henry's mental instability, obsession with piety and God, as well as speculation that he may have been homosexual because of his disinterest in his wife, Margaret had a difficult time conceiving. It was seven years into their marriage before she was pregnant, an uncommonly long amount of time for a married woman to go without conceiving a child, particularly a queen. When Margaret did finally deliver a son, Edward Prince of Wales, he remained Henry and Margaret's only child. Margaret never became pregnant again. At this time, as challenges to the Lancastrian line of succession to the crown were being raised by the House of York, Margaret must have felt tremendous pressure to produce an heir. Combined with her husband's fragile health and the probable need of quick succession of the crown, would have added to the pressure. There has been some historical speculation that Henry was incapable of fathering a child and that Margaret turned to adultery in order to produce an heir. This claim is supported by the fact that Margaret first discovered she was pregnant shortly after Henry's mental breakdown, as well as the fact that Edward was their only child. Although these allegations have never been proven, they demonstrate Margaret's desperation to produce an heir for her husband and for her country. Margaret must have felt the weight of responsibility, and understood the necessity of producing an heir. As evidenced by the initiative she took in directing certain aspects of Lancastrian strategy during the Wars of the Roses, she obviously recognized the ineptitude of her husband, and would have felt the pressure to produce a son, in spite of the difficulty posed by Henry's

condition. As a result of her gender and social position, she had few options other than perseverance and hope to produce a son who would prove a more able king than her husband<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Dockray, K., (2000) *Henry VI, Margaret of Anjou, and the Wars of the Roses*. Great Britain: Sutton Publishing.



## Social Vulnerabilities

For a woman during the Wars of the Roses, the experience of early life depended on her social rank. During this era, however, mobility within these top ranks was constant. While women of the noble and landed gentry found themselves spread over a wide range of social and economic standing, these tiers overlapped, allowing for movement between them, primarily through marriage. Though royalty most commonly married foreign brides (England was not ruled by an English-born queen between Henry I and Edward IV, an almost four-hundred year gap), the nobility selected spouses from the upper social ranks of their own country. Though it was often a process spread across several generations, climbing the social ladder through marriage was a particularly common occurrence among gentry families. Many were able to climb into the nobility, such as the Pastons, who moved from gentry to nobility with the marriage of Clement Paston to Beatrice Goneld. Beatrice's brother was a justice of the peace in Norfolk, and in better standing than Clement. This allowed the Pastons to move into a higher social position, which then poised them for a marriage two generations later between William Paston II and Anne Beaufort, daughter of the Duke of Somerset, cementing their place in England's upper nobility<sup>9</sup>.

For these wealthy families, marriage was a matter of business and enterprise rather than free attraction. Lawrence Stone writes that the three main goals of a marriage were "continuity of the male line, the preservation intact of the inherited property, and the acquisition through marriage of further property or useful political alliances<sup>10</sup>." Marriages to this end could be years in the making, and because of short life expectancy, most women were married by the age of nineteen. A woman's husband was almost always chosen for her. Still, until the Act of 1753, no

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<sup>9</sup> Jewell, 120-125

<sup>10</sup> Stone, 42

standard definition of marriage existed. There were many acceptable ways of entering into a marriage, all of which were considered binding. While most of the upper classes obtained a special license when they were married, some young women of the nobility were taken advantage of by penniless men, both foreign and English, who would seduce and then marry them in a lower class, yet still legally binding ceremony, without parental consent. This would create a legal bind for the parents, who were then forced to pass off their daughter's dowry to a disreputable man who did nothing to further their social prospects<sup>11</sup>.

Within a marriage, all women of the nobility and gentry lived by the same set of strict social conventions, the most important of which were virtue and fidelity. The production of a legitimate heir was too important to be jeopardized by questions of illegitimacy, so a woman's chastity was closely watched. Women from royalty to lady were also expected to preside over their households. The historian Rowena Archer wrote, "virtually all women of property could expect to exercise a measure of administrative responsibility wherever and whenever the need arose<sup>12</sup>." They ran their household and servants, as well as oversaw the raising of their children. Women at the time were never thought of as being equal to the men around them, for their influence lay in two different spheres, and a man's sphere was valued above that of a woman. According to the historian Helen Jewell, the difference in these spheres can clearly be seen in the difference between the wills of men and women from the era. Women's wills most commonly bequeathed home furnishings such as drapery, dresses, and jewelry, while a man's will most prominently included horses, armor, and weaponry<sup>13</sup>. A woman's world rarely extended beyond the home. She had no presence in any political, legal, or military matters, even if her husband

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<sup>11</sup> Stone, 34-36

<sup>12</sup> "'How ladies...who live on their manors ought to manage their households and estates". Women as landholders and administrators in the Later Middle Ages', in *Woman is a Worthy Wight: Women in Medieval English Society, c.1200-1500*, ed. P.J.Goldberg (Stroud, 1992, reprinted 1997)

<sup>13</sup> Jewell, 130

was involved in them. The few appearances women make in legal records from the time dealt only with dower and post mortem claims, most typically upon the death of their husband.

If a couple found themselves unhappy in their marriage, most commonly because of adultery, they were not able to pursue a divorce – at the time, the Anglican Church prohibited it. What was then known as a “divorce” was merely a separation of “bed and board accompanied by a financial settlement<sup>14</sup>.” In a case of separation, neither husband nor wife could remarry, making it a less than desirable way out of a marriage. A couple could obtain an annulment if it could be proved that a marriage contract to someone else had existed previous to their wedding, certain cases of common ancestry, or certain instances of neglect or infidelity over a period of three years. Nevertheless, the legal bias that existed against women meant that this last option was extremely difficult for them to prove. A man was much more likely to achieve annulment from his wife on allegation of infidelity. While lower class women caught in a bad marriage were often able to simply run away from their husbands, this was rarely an option for noble women, who were much more carefully scrutinized by the society around them<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Stone, 38-40

<sup>15</sup> Given-Wilson, C. (1996) *Illustrated History of Late Medieval England*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

## Politics

In a time of great political upheaval, women also found themselves burdened with intrinsic political vulnerabilities. A woman's political affiliations were almost never her own choice. They were dictated first by her father's situation in life and then by her husband's, though these two often aligned since marriages between families with similar political affiliations was most common. Any involvement a woman had in political matters was solely through her father and husband's allegiances.

In times of political unrest such as the Wars of the Roses, as well as the period that preceded them as England's fortunes turned during the Hundred Years' War, a woman's political vulnerability increased because the political associations of the men around her grew more important. Allegiance to either the House of York or the House of Lancaster had a great effect on the lives of noblemen and, as a result, their wives. Whichever house held power at any given time actively sought out and punished their opposition in the nobility<sup>16</sup>. One of the most common and destructive punishments of the time was issuing an Act of Attainder, a piece of legislation declaring a person or group guilty of a serious crime, most commonly treason, and punishing them without the benefit of trial. The most common result of an issued Act of Attainder was the seizure of all lands owned by the nobleman. At this time, when much of a person's status and wealth came from his land, the confiscation resulting from an Act of Attainder left both the husband and wife in a precarious position, both socially and financially. However, the wife's

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<sup>16</sup> Gillingham, J., (1981) *The Wars of the Roses; Peace and Conflict in Fifteenth Century England*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.

position resulted from something she had no control over and no direct responsibility towards, yet she still suffered<sup>17</sup>.

Elizabeth Howard, countess of Oxford, is an example of how women were affected by attainder and how women often suffered as a result of the political affiliation of the men around them, specifically their husbands and sons. When her husband John de Vere and oldest son were executed by Edward IV for their involvement with the Lancastrians, Elizabeth was also arrested and held prisoner for several months. Later, when an Act of Attainder was issued against her younger sons for being involved with a plot against Edward IV, she was held prisoner again by Richard, Duke of Gloucester, and surrendered her remaining properties to the Crown. Some historians believe that Elizabeth was mistreated during this imprisonment, and forcibly made to give up her estates. Gloucester may have chosen to approach Elizabeth because of her gender, and believed that she could be easily taken advantage of since she was a woman alone and unprotected by men. As a woman raised in a society where women were they learned the high cost of vulnerability without men, Elizabeth may have believed she had no choice but to surrender her lands; in the wake of her husband and sons' executions, she would have felt particularly powerless. These feelings of helplessness and vulnerability would have made her an easy target for Gloucester. Elizabeth suffered physically and mentally as a prisoner of war, and her imprisonment resulted directly from her husband and sons' involvement in the Wars of the Roses. She also suffered financially when she was coerced into surrendering her lands. Women like Elizabeth can be considered victims of war, since she remained uninvolved in the war effort and yet suffered imprisonment and abuse<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> Pollard, A. J., (2001) *The Wars of the Roses*. New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan.

<sup>18</sup> Hicks, M. (1988) "The Last Days of Elizabeth, Countess of Oxford" *English Historical Review*, 103.

Similarly, women who were left at home while their husbands led armies in to battle or traveled the country for politics were often victimized for their husband's political affiliations. Depending on the political affiliation of the family, some women left at home were harassed by their husband's enemies. This was the fate of Margaret Paston, a woman of the upper gentry whose legacy was preserved by her family's extensive collection of letters. Margaret was married to John Paston, an English lawyer. John often left the house on business or politics, and left Margaret to run his estate. The Pastons were allied with the Yorkists against Henry VI, and as a result were early targets for Lancastrian hostilities. An example of this can be seen in 1448, when Lancastrian soldiers waited until John had left the estate, then attacked it. Margaret and her men at arms were physically expelled from their manor home in Gresham and the leader of the opposing forces, Lord Moleyns, an ally of Henry VI, laid claim to it. Moleyns's men harassed Margaret and extensively damaged the property. When John Paston petitioned to Henry VI to gain recompense, his petition went unheard and he was never compensated for the damage. There exists some debate among historians so to whether the losses of the Pastons suffered because of their Yorkist allegiance under a Lancastrian king or whether it was simply because they were a rather vicious and shrewd business family who would have been targeted because of their malevolence in any age, not just as a result of war<sup>19</sup>. In any event, Margaret Paston's experience remains an example of a woman victimized for their husband's political affiliations.

Though women were not allowed to be directly involved in politics or war, many noble women, like their husbands, found a way to cast their loyalty to a particular side of the war. Some were actively, albeit discreetly, involved in campaigning for a certain faction. An example of this is Lady Margaret Beaufort, the mother of Henry VII, who took a very active role in the

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<sup>19</sup> Richmond, C., 'Paston family (*per. c.* 1420–1504)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, May 2010 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/52791>, accessed 19 May 2011]

overthrow of the Yorkist crown that secured her son's place on the throne<sup>20</sup>. During the reign of Richard III, she used her husband's supposed loyalty to the king to ally herself secretly with the dowager queen, Elizabeth Woodville, against him, in order to secure her son Henry Tudor's claim to the throne. As Elizabeth's two young sons were presumed murdered, the two women contracted a marriage between Margaret's son to Elizabeth York, the eldest daughter of Edward IV, thereby securing his claim to the throne<sup>21</sup>. Margaret also instructed her son, who was at the time in exile in France, about Richard's actions in England so that he knew when Richard was most vulnerable to attack and overthrow. Margaret's active political affiliations were key in securing the throne for the Tudor family, as well as the crowning of Henry VII. However, she understood the limited involvement she could have because of her gender, and instead she cunningly used those around her with more power to manipulate the situation. Margaret understood that a woman alone could do little to change the political fortunes of a nation, but a woman with powerful men around her could have a great, if covert, effect. She and other noble women found ways to be involved in the politics surrounding the Wars of the Roses, even if they were not the direct players. Still, Lady Margaret Beaufort was the exception rather than the rule, and women so politically active as her were rarities at the time<sup>22</sup>. Most women were only involved in politics through their husbands.

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<sup>20</sup> Jones, M.K. and Underwood, M. (1992) *The King's Mother: Lady Margaret Beaufort, Countess of Richmond and Derby*. Cambridge: CUP. pp. 35-38

<sup>21</sup> Jones, M.K. and Underwood, M. 'Beaufort, Margaret, countess of Richmond and Derby (1443-1509)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/1863>, accessed 19 May 2011]

<sup>22</sup> Jones, M.K. and Underwood, M. (1992) *The King's Mother: Lady Margaret Beaufort, Countess of Richmond and Derby*. Cambridge: CUP. pp. 35-60

## **Widowhood**

Even if all the vulnerabilities of a woman's youthful existence were overcome, potentially difficult conditions remained. The most common of these was widowhood, a frequent occurrence among the nobility during the Wars of the Roses. Beyond high mortality rates and short life expectancy of the era, many of the noble and gentry men died in battle, first on foreign and then English soil. Before the Wars of the Roses, England's involvement in the Hundred Years War against France took the lives of between 1.5 and 2 million soldiers from every social class, in both England and France. The English death toll rose towards the end of the War, when Henry VI's drastic measures to pull out of the war led to a turn in English fortunes. When the men who did survive the war returned home to England, they found their land engaged in a civil war that led them to throw their allegiance behind a side and fight for it. This continual conflict, first abroad and then domestic, led to an increase in widowhood in England in the period directly before and then during the Wars of the Roses. Though noblemen rarely serve on the frontlines of battle, particularly during the Wars of the Roses, noble executions for treason were common, as the 'winning side' shifted frequently and loyalty could often prove a dangerous attribute. Noblemen such as Edmund, Earl of Rutland, son of Richard, Duke of York, and Edward, the Prince of Wales, were executed as a result of their allegiances. Both were sons of key noble figures in the Wars of the Roses – one the leader of the Yorks, the other the Lancastrian king. Because the Wars of the Roses were primarily a war of the nobility, it was noblemen who lost their lives when power changed hands.

As a result of this upheaval, many women found themselves widowed. However, widowhood was usually a temporary state; while some young widows would choose to return to live with their families, many remarried and gained new wealth through new marriage. A quarter



of all marriages during this time were remarriages for either the husband or the wife.<sup>23</sup> Most young widows did not have a difficult time remarrying because they often carried with them a large sum of money, either from their family or their deceased husband, that men found quite appealing.<sup>24</sup> Women were often heiresses, and upon marriage the new husband would receive their inheritance as well as a jointure, which was money set aside by their husband upon their marriage in order to support her in case of his death. Jointure usually amounted to one third of his lands<sup>25</sup>. If she remarried, this money passed to her new husband. Most widows also received a dower, which was a widow's share of her husband's estate after his passing.<sup>26</sup> However, if a woman's husband was fighting on the losing side of the Wars of the Roses, he was considered a traitor and the money for his wife's dower was confiscated by the crown. This could cause some financial strain for a new widow, but she was often able to rely upon the money her husband left behind or the wealth of her birth family<sup>27</sup>.

At the time, a woman was allowed to be financially independent if her husband died, so widowhood as a result of the Wars of the Roses was not necessarily an undesirable situation for a woman<sup>28</sup>. In fact, some contemporary authors, such as Christine de Pisan, argued that widowhood was the best situation a medieval woman could find herself in. She maintained that the relative freedom and liberation from men that widow experienced was the most desirable situation for a woman to be in<sup>29</sup>. The historian Colleen Seguin writes that widowhood could be viewed as "the zenith of female power and "the culmination of aristocratic women's careers as

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<sup>23</sup> Stone, 44-45

<sup>24</sup> Jewell, 144

<sup>25</sup> Jewell, 123

<sup>26</sup> Harris, B. J. and McNamara, J.K. eds. (1984) *Women and the Structure of Society: Selected Research from the Fifth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women*. Durham: Duke University Press. Pp. 31-40

<sup>27</sup> Archer, R. (1984) "Rich Old Ladies: The Problem of Late Medieval Dowagers." *Property and Politics: Essays in Later Medieval English History*. Ed. A. J. Pollard. Gloucester: Alan Sutton.

<sup>28</sup> Jewell, 145

<sup>29</sup> de Pisan, C. *The Treasure of the City of Ladies*, trans. S. Lawson. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000. pp. 156-158

wives and mothers, when, unbound by [marriage], widows headed their own households and maintained active business and personal relationships<sup>30</sup>.” The land that most noble widows owned separately from their husbands upon their passing allowed them to retain their prominence in society, but without the dictates of a man to control their influence and keep them within the home, they were free to exercise their influence beyond the home. Most widows found they were able to leave their mark as widows, and many contributed to social institutions and colleges, such as Elizabeth de Burgh and Marie de St. Pol, who jointly founded Clare and Pembroke Colleges at Cambridge. Without her husband, a woman was in charge of a household, servants, estates, and ecclesiastical patronage from her husband.

Women could use widowhood to their advantage, and, through remarriage, could climb the social ladder. An example of this is Alice Chaucer. Though she was born to relatively common parents, through a series of three marriages she died with the title of duchess. Through her first marriage to Sir John Phelip, she inherited a portion of her parents’ land. The inheritance had barely been finalized before Alice was widowed when Sir John died in the Battle of Agincourt in the Hundred Years’ War, and all his lands were left to her. This inheritance made her a desirable potential spouse for young men above her birth station, and made it possible for her to obtain a huge elevation in status through her second marriage several years later to Thomas Montagu, earl of Salisbury. When he died in France in the Hundred Year’s War, she benefited financially by inheriting half his goods and revenues from his lands in Normandy, making her a desirable candidate for a man even higher on the social ladder. When she married a third time, it was to one of Henry VI’s chief advisors, William de la Poole.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>Quoted in Jewell, 133

<sup>31</sup> Archer, R.E., ‘Chaucer , Alice, duchess of Suffolk (c.1404–1475)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/54434>, accessed 19 May 2011]

Yet widowhood was not without its difficulties, and de Pisan also writes that widows needed to be prepared to hold onto what was rightfully theirs. Inheritance in the wake of a husband's death rarely played out smoothly, and widows often had to turn to the legal system to try and cling to what was theirs.<sup>32</sup> de Pisan writes in her book *The Treasure of the City of Ladies* that widows should not expect to receive pity or kindness from anyone, and that widows can expect to find that "such people as were in the habit of honoring you while your husbands were alive...are no longer friendly and have little regard for you." This included the families of a widow's deceased husband, who often made a play to take back the land that belonged to their son rather than let it pass out of their family into the hands of his widow. de Pisan also writes that widows needed to expect to deal with requests about their husband's debts, since many creditors believed they could be more easily obtained from a helpless woman with less knowledge of business and finances than her husband.<sup>33</sup>

Alice Chaucer experienced this public opposition first hand when she was widowed a third time. William de la Pole, Earl of Suffolk, Alice's third husband and the only one that was directly involved in the Wars of the Roses, was one of Henry VI's closest advisors. However, he was later used as a scapegoat for the country's failures in France in the Hundred Years' War. As a result, he was exiled, and subsequently murdered.<sup>34</sup> Alice suffered humiliation and public vilification in the wake of Suffolk's death. She was initially denied all claims to her land and children, and was forced to take her claims to the courts, which were presided over by the king's men, many of whom sided with Henry VI's pronouncement of Suffolk's treason. Before her case had even come before them, they already held a strong bias against her because of her husband's loyalties. However, Alice remained resilient in the face of opposition. In spite of the weakness

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<sup>32</sup> Baker, Derek, ed. (1978) *Medieval Women*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

<sup>33</sup> de Pisan, 156

<sup>34</sup> Goldberg, P.J.P. (1995) *Women in England c. 1275-1525*. Manchester: MUP. p. 37

and vulnerability she may have felt as a widow whose husband's reputation had been tarnished, she was persistent and unflinching in her pursuit of what she knew to be hers. As a result, she was able to secure her ownership of her husband's lands, as well as her dower and jointure, and maintain guardianship over their son. She was also successful in securing a manor in East Anglia that her husband had claimed but had never completely possessed. Though she was a victim of public humiliation that resulted from her husband's reputation, Alice Chaucer ultimately was a beneficiary of widowhood rather than a victim.<sup>35</sup>

During the Wars of the Roses, this hostility towards widows was often even more pronounced as a result of the importance placed upon allegiance. What side a widow's husband had been allied with and who was in power at the time had huge effects on the ease with which her widowhood played out. Widows whose husbands had been fighting on the side opposing the crown often met with increased difficulty in securing the lands that were rightfully theirs.<sup>36</sup> Without husbands, many women remained vulnerable and subject to abuse and disadvantage. An example of this vulnerability is Elizabeth Woodville, widow of King Edward IV. In the wake of her husband's death, she was rendered powerless to protect her two young sons, heirs to the throne, against their uncle, Richard III. When Richard instigated the passage of the *Titulus Regius* on June 25, 1483, Elizabeth's sons with Edward were declared "illegitimate" as a result of a marriage contract Edward signed with Lady Eleanor Butler before his marriage to Elizabeth, and therefore unable to inherit the throne. The act also levied charges of witchcraft against Elizabeth. As a result of this act, Richard took the throne and the two young princes were locked in the Tower of London, where they would eventually meet their deaths. The charge of witchcraft was never pursued, but kept Elizabeth in fear that if she tried to speak out against

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<sup>35</sup> Archer, online

<sup>36</sup> *Women of the English Nobility and Gentry 1066-1500*, ed. J. Ward. Manchester: MUP, 1995. pp. 86-87

Richard and protect her sons, she would be punished. Because women had no power in government, Elizabeth could not fight back against the *Titulus Regius* and the charges against her family. She was also unable to protect her sons from imprisonment. Instead, she sought the aid of the Duke of Buckingham to petition for her son's release, knowing that, as a man in Richard's court, Buckingham would be able to achieve more than she would. However, by the time she contacted Buckingham, her sons had disappeared from the Tower and were rumored to be dead.

In spite of these hardships that afflicted widows, de Pisan wrote with confidence that widows could overcome them and obtain what was owed to them. She recommended that women turn to God, and be kind and gentle in action and speech. She also recommended that widows avoid involvement in any legal proceedings. She likely suggested this course because women were not held in equality to men both in society and in the legal system and were likely to be taken advantage of because of their gender.<sup>37</sup> Still, for most women, widowhood was not a situation they wanted to be in simply because of the feelings of fragility it created. In a society with as strong of a patriarchal control as England was in the 1400's, many women felt their only sphere of influence and comfort to exist within the home. They did not want to take on the legal battles that would await them in courts, and as a result, many widows surrendered what was theirs without a fight. Many women of the era felt that they needed a man to protect them from the inherent societal vulnerabilities of their sex. They had no desire for the independence that de Pisan spoke of as being desirable for widows.

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<sup>37</sup> de Pisan, 157

## **Conclusion**

Medieval women of the English gentry and nobility were united by many life experiences that were virtually universal. High infant mortality rates, poor sanitation, and shorter life expectancies threatened a woman's very existence, and limited the time she would be able to fulfill her primary life duty of motherhood, a responsibility that itself put her life in danger. Women of the nobility and gentry also were all expected to produce an heir for their husband's estate, a social pressure so tremendous that some women resorted to adultery to see that children were born, and infanticide to see that they were male. Women who survived into adulthood and through childbirth were expected to remain home and run their husband's estate. Their sphere was within the family household, an inferior place to that of a man, and they had very little opportunity to exercise their limited influence beyond their home.

During the 1450s, women experienced increased vulnerabilities through the precarious political affiliations of the time. Though women were not directly involved in politics, their husband's loyalties effected them. Politics of the time often resulted in persecution of entire families whose patriarch opposed the house in power, and since that house in power often changed, women remained in a state of near constant political vulnerability that could be altered overnight. They were often persecuted for their husband's political affiliations, such as Elizabeth Howard, Alice Chaucer, and Margaret Paston.

At the time, women were not viewed as equal to men. Rather, they were social subordinates who were taught that they must rely on the men around them to protect them from the dangers of society and life. However, as a result of increased violence that arose with the Wars of the Roses, a greater number of women found themselves widowed and without men to protect them. Though widowhood could be a time of increased independence for a woman, it

could also be a time of vulnerability when she was persecuted by those who would take advantage of her without her husband's protection, such as Alice Chaucer. Many women feared widowhood, simply because they believed that without a husband, they were unprotected. Though many aspects of widowhood were desirable, the underlying fear of remaining unprotected was often the driving force behind a widow's existence.

Through the case studies examined in this paper, it can be concluded that all women of the upper ranks of Medieval England experienced intrinsic vulnerabilities that were attached to the era in which they lived, as well as their social rank and gender. They were repressed by the society in which they lived, which viewed them as intrinsically less valued than their male counterparts. This reliance on men, along with the precariousness of nearly every aspect of their lives, certainly created an undercurrent of fear in every woman's daily existence. Fear of losing her life, not living up to her marital obligations to produce an heir, and fear of the death of their husbands, leaving her self-reliant, would have been the everyday realities of a woman's existence. During the Wars of the Roses, this fear must have been increased because of the dangers associated with politics and war at the time. On top of the dangers to life that existed in commonplace aspects of society, political instability of the mid-1400s could rob a woman of her husband and sons in an instant and leave her exposed to their enemies. This uncertainty and danger must have created a daily sense of anxiety among women whose families were involved in the politics. For woman who lost their husbands and sons because of the Wars and were left to face courts and legal bodies who were already against them because of their husband's political associations, the fear must have been overwhelming.

But from this fear emerged resilience. In spite of the daily vulnerabilities of her existence, the women of medieval England persevered. They carried out their duties as a mother and head

of household, remained loyal to their families in spite of the political vulnerabilities associated with fealty, and fought for what was rightfully theirs if widowed in spite of the bias that existed against their sex. They refused to be beaten down or defined by the dangers within their lives, and did not let fear prevent them from carrying out their responsibilities as a woman. Many of the women discussed in this paper, such as Margaret Beaufort and Alice Chaucer, even found ways to remain true to the restrictions placed upon their sex and still exercise their influence beyond their sphere. Instead of becoming victims of war, fear, and instability that plagued their daily existences, the women of medieval England and the Wars of the Roses persevered, and left their mark upon their country's history.



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