

## Witnessing Women in Twelfth-Century English Charter Collections

Emilie Amt, Hood College  
International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, 2002

This paper grew out of my ongoing work with two specific charter collections, the cartularies of Godstow Abbey outside Oxford and of Clerkenwell Priory outside London. Both houses were mid-twelfth-century foundations for women. Clerkenwell's thirteenth-century cartulary was published in the Camden Series in 1949. Godstow's early fifteenth-century cartulary is best known from the extraordinary Middle English translation that was made for the nuns in about 1450 and published by the Early English Text Society in 1905-11.<sup>1</sup> But the Godstow English Register, as the translation is known, omits much information, most notably the witness lists, which are found only in the manuscript Latin cartulary.<sup>2</sup> The latter has never been edited—an omission which I hope eventually to rectify.

Women can be witnessed in many roles in these documents. Both the Godstow and Clerkenwell cartularies struck me immediately as being very informative about lay women's activities, particularly as benefactors of the nuns. Was this in fact unusual, I wondered? Did female religious houses provide enhanced "opportunities" (as our development offices would no doubt call them) for women? Did they encourage women's active participation in donations and other convent business? Were male donors more conscious of the women in their own lives when interacting with nuns? In order to pursue these questions, I decided to count women's and men's appearances in various capacities in the twelfth-century charters of these two convents, and in three other charter collections for comparison. Because my primary interest lies with Godstow (I'm working on a history of the abbey), I chose, as samples from male houses, the published cartularies of Eynsham Abbey (a Benedictine house just four miles from Godstow) and the not-

far-distant Cistercian abbey of Thame.<sup>3</sup> The final collection in my sample is the published charters of the earls and countesses of Gloucester, who can also be regarded as neighbors, albeit more distant ones, of Godstow.<sup>4</sup> Within the four published collections, I confined my study to those charters dated to the twelfth century by their editors. For Godstow, some thirteenth-century data is included here because I've not yet been able to date all the charters with certainty.<sup>5</sup> In all five collections, I looked most closely at male and female appearances in four roles: as benefactors, as consentors to grants, as spiritual beneficiaries, and as witnesses.

Of those four roles, "benefactor" is of course the most active and significant. Looking at the individuals appearing either alone or jointly as benefactors<sup>6</sup> in all the charters, I found distinct gender differences between the different collections, from a low of 7 percent of charter-granting being done by women at Thame, to a high of nearly 24 percent at Clerkenwell (you can see these results in Table 1). But in fact there is no real correlation here between the sex of the house and the appearance of women as donors. In between the two extremes, we find Godstow and Eynsham, the neighboring female and male houses, presenting very similar pictures, with, respectively, 15 and 16 percent of benefactors being women.

However, when we separate co-benefactors—those who made gifts or confirmations in conjunction with someone else—from those who acted alone, a clearer gender difference emerges. As can be seen in Table 1, the two female houses both show a higher percentage of all co-granting being done by women. Even more striking is the way in which women acted on their own as benefactors a greater proportion of the time at the female houses of Clerkenwell and Godstow than at the male houses of Eynsham and Thame (this is shown in Table 2). The vast majority of women co-benefactors are wives who are named as such in charters which are pretty clearly the husbands' projects ("Know that I, William, and my wife Matilda, have given etc....").

Women who acted alone, rather than as co-benefactors, were markedly more common as benefactors of the female houses.

The second role I examined in the charters was that of giving consent to the benefactor's action. Here women were more often named in the charters for the two female houses than in those for the two male ones. The third role I looked at was that of spiritual beneficiary (that is, a named individual, almost always a close relative, for whose health, or for the health of whose soul, the grant was ostensibly being made).<sup>7</sup> Here again, people making grants to the female houses more often named women in this role than did those making grants to the male houses, though the difference between female Clerkenwell and male Thame, in particular, is very small. The sources give the impression (and here I haven't actually counted) that women were a bit more likely to name specific family members than were men; many charters omit this formula altogether, or use a general formula like "for my soul and those of all my ancestors." (Personally, I'm always intrigued by the occasional charter-granter who directs the spiritual benefits of the grant toward everyone *except* his or her spouse.)

The patterns among consentors and spiritual beneficiaries, like those among the benefactors, are suggestive rather than conclusive. But what they suggest is intuitively reasonable: that lay women were attracted to the patronage of female houses, that they were sympathetic to nuns, and that they were comfortable interacting with them; and that lay men, when interacting with nuns (as opposed to monks), were more likely to acknowledge the interests of their wives, mothers, and daughters in property, to think of the spiritual good of their female relatives, and perhaps to be guided by those same women's preferences in patronage. Men may also have been more inclined to give away their wives' dowry lands than their own when being generous to religious women. But other factors probably influenced the appearance or non-

appearance of women in certain roles in charters for a given house, including local and family tradition, the tendencies of one or another monastic order, and the habits of the scribe who actually wrote the charter. All these variables had their role to play, too, in the creation of witness-lists.

When we turn to that fourth role, the charter witness, we encounter a dramatic difference in numbers: witnesses represent by far the greatest number of names occurring in twelfth-century charters in general, yet there are very, very few women among those names. As someone who has, over the years, gathered a fair amount of information about family connections (including the names of mothers, wives, and daughters) from charters, I was rather shocked to discover how exceptional it really was for women to witness charters in twelfth-century England. The percentages given in the last column of Table 1 tell the story. In the four monastic charter collections, among thousands of witnesses, there are only 44 instances of women witnessing charters.

So who were the women who witnessed charters? First there are the women witnesses of very high rank, either in absolute terms or in relation to the other people present. Thus 57 of the 96 occurrences of female witnessing in my entire sample feature countesses, and in 4 other cases the female witness is a queen (see Table 3). These 61 cases (involving just nine individual women) make up almost two-thirds of the cases of female witnessing in the sample. But when we eliminate the earldom of Gloucester charters and look only at the monastic sample, we find that, at three of the houses, these high-ranking witnesses were the exception. At Thame, there is only one female witness, and she is Queen Eleanor.<sup>8</sup> But in the three other monastic charter collections, four-fifths of female witnessing involves lower-ranking women—from the baronage,

the gentry, the bourgeoisie, and perhaps even the wealthier peasantry, the ranks that provide the great majority of twelfth-century male witnesses.

When female witnesses occur, they are almost always connected with someone else involved in the charter, and sometimes other special circumstances can be detected as well. For example, in the Godstow Cartulary there are eleven cases of female witnesses other than queens and countesses.<sup>9</sup> Six of these instances represent the witnessing of just one woman, Lucy Clifford, who witnessed three times for her father, once for her brother, once for her husband, and once, along with her father, for one of his tenants.<sup>10</sup> Now Lucy was the sister of Rosamund Clifford, the notorious "Fair Rosamund," mistress to King Henry II and the most famous person buried at Godstow—scandalously, in front of the high altar. Lucy and Rosamund's father consistently mentioned the late Rosamund's soul, along with that of his late wife Margaret, in his charters to Godstow, and he had Lucy witness these documents along with other, male, family members and associates. Clearly he was a man who took an unconventional attitude toward his daughters, and Lucy's witnessing became something of a family tradition.

There are five other instances of non-royal, non-comital female witnesses in the Godstow charters, and in each case there is some connection between the female witness and the donor, or between the female witness and a male witness. One Milicent witnessed along with her son, who himself was quite a humble witness in a rather exalted witness list.<sup>11</sup> Isabel de Witefeld bears the same toponymic surname as two male witnesses in the list where she occurs.<sup>12</sup> A charter of Robert de Meisy is witnessed by his two sons, his sister Emma, and his wife Matilda.<sup>13</sup> And a woman named Alice witnesses once for her mother Agnes, daughter of Payn fitzJohn, in a witness-list packed with members of her mother's household carefully identified.<sup>14</sup> In fact, even when we widen our gaze to take in later charters as well, Alice is the only woman to witness

another woman's charter in the whole Godstow collection of more than 800 documents spanning some three centuries.

The patterns of female witnessing at the two convents in my sample differ in several ways. Whereas Godstow's female witnesses are a group of unrelated women who occur in widely scattered charters, at Clerkenwell most of the women who witnessed charters belonged to, or were connected with, the founding family. After Muriel de Munteny and her husband Jordan founded the priory in the 1140s, they remained active patrons, and their four daughters, as well as Muriel's second husband, were also involved with the house to varying degrees. Of the fifteen instances of female witnessing below the rank of countess at Clerkenwell, ten involve witnessing by women of the Munteny family. In eight of the fifteen cases, the charter being witnessed by one or more women is a Munteny family charter, in four more there is a Munteny connection, and one other woman witness occurs in a charter granted by a married couple closely allied with the Munteny family.<sup>15</sup> Only one woman, Alice wife of Reginald de Warenne, witnesses in the Clerkenwell Cartulary without a connection to the Muntenys; she witnessed two charters for her husband.<sup>16</sup> Also of interest in the Clerkenwell charters is the fact that eight of the twelve separate charters with one or more female witnesses also feature a female benefactor, either alone or acting with her husband; and in one case Muriel de Munteny actually witnesses her own charter—something men virtually never do.

At the male house of Eynsham, we have nine instances of women witnessing charters. Six of these cases are wives witnessing for husbands. Of the remaining cases, one woman is the sister of a male witness, and the last two are women with no obvious connection to either the donors or the other witnesses. There is one case of a woman witnessing a charter where one of the co-grantors is female. Thus Benedictine Eynsham's pattern of female witnessing is similar to that of

neighboring Benedictine Godstow—though this pattern is nothing like that of neighboring Cistercian Thame.

Another particularly striking thing throughout the sample is the nearly complete absence of religious women as witnesses in these English charters. Although the abbots and priors of neighboring male religious houses were fairly common witnesses to the Godstow charters, the abbess of Godstow never occurs as a witness in any of their cartularies. Nor does any nun of Godstow or Clerkenwell, not even the abbess or prioress, or a woman named in the charter as an entrant into the convent, ever witness a Godstow or Clerkenwell charter. At Godstow, instead, we find the convent's male clergy—variously described as clerks, priests, chaplains, and deacons—representing the abbey in its twelfth-century witness-lists, and in the thirteenth-century documents their frequent appearances are augmented by those of laymen holding secular office in the convent: seneschals, custodians, and gatekeepers. With the sole exception of Matilda, abbess of Barking, who witnessed one of Muriel de Munteny's charters to Clerkenwell, nuns simply never witnessed charters for Godstow or Clerkenwell. This is in sharp contrast to the situation described by Penny Gold at the French convent of Le Ronceray d'Angers, where ordinary nuns were frequent witnesses, and at Fontevault, where the abbess and prioress witnessed regularly.<sup>17</sup>

To summarize, then, the Godstow charters, with women of all ranks and many kinds of connections to the abbey, show the most variety in female witnessing; Eynsham is similar but more limited. Clerkenwell had a strong tradition of lay female involvement, including witnessing, among the members of its founding family (one of whom even had an abbess witness for her), but its other benefactors followed what we might think of as a more conservative pattern. At Thame women witnesses were unheard of, and only the queen broke the rule. But everywhere, female witnessing was highly unusual.

Ultimately we are left with the question of why witnessing was such a *male* activity. The legal disadvantages of women in the English courts had no direct bearing on the matter, since charter witnesses were not expected to come into court to testify. But it seems likely that the legal overtones of witnessing (one of the meanings of *testis* in English law was oath-helper) set it apart from the other roles I've looked at here. Making or consenting to a grant was an extension of landholding—which women did all the time. Being a spiritual beneficiary was obviously a suitable role for a woman. But witnessing, while not completely off limits to laywomen, was not really something they were supposed to do in most circles. And nuns, once they entered the enclosed state of the twelfth-century English cloister, disappeared altogether from this particular public stage. Nevertheless, their existence in communities does seem to have engaged their lay female neighbors somewhat more than male houses did, encouraging the activities of lay women in ways not always clear to us, but still discernable in the dry formulas of surviving charters.

**Witnessing Women in Twelfth-Century Charter Collections**  
Kalamazoo, 2002

(Note: For all tables, actions, rather than individuals, were counted.)

Table 1. Women as percentage of persons performing actions in twelfth-century charters

	Female benefactors	Female co-benefactors	Female consentors	Female spiritual beneficiaries	Female witnesses
Clerkenwell	23.5	42.0	34.5	53.9	1.5
Godstow	15.0	46.3	46.2	58.8	0.7
Eynsham	15.7	35.3	25.5	43.8	1.0
Thame	7.1	33.3	27.5	50.0	0.1
Earldom of Gloucester	11.3	33.3	7.7	39.1	5.5

Table 2. Women benefactors acting alone

	Number of women benefactors (sole and joint)	Number of women benefactors who acted alone	Percentage of women benefactors who acted alone
Clerkenwell	60	31	51.7
Godstow	45	26	57.8
Eynsham	33	15	45.5
Thame	8	3	37.5
Earldom of Gloucester	18	16*	88.9

\*All 16 are the *acta* of three countesses of Gloucester.

Table 3. Occurrences of women as witnesses

	Queens	Countesses	Others	Total
Clerkenwell	0	2	15	17
Godstow	3	3	11	17
Eynsham	0	0	9	9
Thame	1	0	0	1
Earldom of Gloucester	0	52	0	52
Totals	5	56	35	96

*Emilie Amt, Hood College*  
May 2002

---

<sup>1</sup> *The English Register of Godstow Nunnery, Near Oxford*, 3 vols., ed. Andrew Clark (London: Early English Text Society, 1905-11).

<sup>2</sup> London, Public Record Office, e164/20.

<sup>3</sup> *The Cartulary of Eynsham Abbey*, 2 vols., ed. H.E. Salter (Oxford Historical Society, 1907-8); *The Thame Cartulary*, 2 vols., ed. H.E. Salter (Oxfordshire Record Society, 1947-8).

<sup>4</sup> *Earldom of Gloucester Charters: The Charters and Scribes of the Earls and Countesses of Gloucester to A.D. 1217*, ed. Robert B. Patterson (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1973).

<sup>5</sup> In counting the Godstow charters I've eliminated all of those which are not actually grants or confirmations to Godstow—i.e., those charters included in the cartulary to demonstrate the history of the property and the right of its holders to grant it to the convent.

<sup>6</sup> For the purposes of quantifying the data, I have included in this category both donors of new gifts and people granting confirmations of grants previously made by themselves or others.

<sup>7</sup> I did not count the donor himself (or herself). I counted other named or specifically designated individuals (e.g., "pro animis patris et matris") but not categories of people ("filiorum meorum").

<sup>8</sup> Thame Cartulary, no. 191.

<sup>9</sup> Queens: Godstow Cartulary, fols. 19d, 20d; countesses: Godstow Cartulary, fols. 51d, 163d, 190d.

<sup>10</sup> Godstow Cartulary, fols. 43, 43d, 152, 152d, 184d.

<sup>11</sup> Godstow Cartulary, fol. 20.

<sup>12</sup> Godstow Cartulary, fol. 54

<sup>13</sup> Godstow Cartulary, fol. 185.

<sup>14</sup> Godstow Cartulary, fol. 26

<sup>15</sup> Clerkenwell Cartulary, nos. 43, 74, 79, 86, 90, 95, 98, 108, 302. The allied family is the Capra family, no. 187; and see nos. 74, 302.

<sup>16</sup> Clerkenwell Cartulary, nos. 21, 22.

<sup>17</sup> Penny S. Gold, "The Charters of Le Ronceray d'Angers: Male/Female Interaction in Monastic Business," *Medieval Women and the Sources of Medieval History*, ed. Joel T. Rosenthal (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1990), 126.