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Edith and Ediva: Two Women of the Middle Ages

by Maren Ann McKee

(Honors Seminar English 2220/History 2245)

The Assignment: Write an essay based on two sources from *Medieval England, 1000-1500: A Reader*. Give a brief summary of each source and show how they are interconnected.

Edith and Ediva were two women living in twelfth century England. Edith grew up in a convent and later became Queen of England. Ediva became the prioress of a convent. While on the surface these women's lives seem to have nothing in common, it is evident on closer inspection that their stories can shine a light on the conditions of women, and more specifically nuns, in the twelfth century and the attitudes people held about them. The stories of these two fascinating women can be found in *Eadmer's Account of Queen Edith-Matilda* and the *Foundation Documents of Godstow Abbey*.

Edith was the daughter of King Malcolm III of Scotland and his wife Margaret who was descended from the Anglo-Saxon Kings who ruled England before the Norman Conquest of 1066. King Henry I (1100-1135) of England, a Norman, wanted to strengthen his claim to the English throne by allying himself to the old Anglo-Saxon aristocracy. Upon his decision to marry Edith, Henry was faced with a dilemma. Edith had been placed in the convent at Wilton when she was a young girl and it was commonly thought that she had been dedicated as a nun there. If that had been true, she would have been unable to marry King Henry because dedicating oneself to God was considered a lifetime commitment. The convent was most likely an unhappy place to grow up because, as Edith recounts, she "went in fear of the rod of (her) aunt Christina" (*Eadmer's Account*, 98). Her aunt forced her to wear a veil like a nun in order to protect her from "the lust of the Normans" (*Eadmer's Account*, 98) who were pillaging the country at this time. Evidence of pillaging can also be found in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, a yearly record kept by monks from the ninth to the twelfth century. Many instances of the Normans "plundering wherever they went" (*Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 59) are recorded in its pages. Because Edith was seen wearing a veil, she was believed by many to be a nun. In order to prove to Anselm, the Archbishop of Canterbury, who was the leader of the Catholic Church in England, that she was not a nun, Edith told her story to a council of men who were appointed by Anselm to hear her case. Edith spoke of how she was compelled to wear the veil and if she took it off she was scolded and beaten by her aunt. She also told them that her father had always been against her joining a convent as a nun. The council also heard testimony from two monks who were sent to Wilton to speak to the nuns there and to determine if there was any evidence that Edith had been dedicated as a nun. When none could be found, the council of men declared that they believed her story to be true and that she should be allowed to marry the King if she wished to. The Archbishop agreed and Edith and King Henry I were married soon after.

Ediva had a much different childhood than Edith. She did not grow up in a convent but spent her childhood in Winchester as the only child of two parents who "loved and cherished" (*Foundation Documents of Godstow Abbey*, 111) her. It would appear that she had a happy life with them. She was later married to a man named Sir William Launcelence and they had three children together. Their family seems to have been a religious one as their son became an abbot and both daughters went with their mother into her convent and each in her turn later became prioress of the abbey after their mother's death. After the death of her husband, Ediva believed that she had received a message from God that she should build a convent. She thought that it should be built near the city of Oxford

and should have twenty-four women dedicated there. Ediva was granted the lands of Godstow by John de St. John on which to build the convent. She received approval from King Henry I for her project but it was not confirmed by the Bishop of Lincoln until 1138 during the reign of King Stephen. Ediva built the convent at “her own expense and labor and with the collected alms of the faithful” (*Foundation Documents of Godstow Abbey*, 113).

Though their lives follow almost completely opposite paths (Edith was brought up in a convent then left to get married, and Ediva married first then joined a convent later in life), both women’s stories highlight attitudes that were held about nuns during the twelfth century.

In the Middle Ages nuns were thought of as the brides of Christ. Both texts make reference to this idea. Edith is referred to as such, and if it had been true it would have prevented her from marrying any man, even the King. Archbishop Anselm would not have wanted to “take from God his bride” (*Eedmer’s Account*, 98). The documents from Godstow Abbey mention that the nuns there “have eternally vowed themselves to Christ the bridegroom” (*Foundation Documents of Godstow Abbey*, 113). Families who dedicated their daughters to God as nuns would give a gift to the convent. This gift was like the dowry that would have been given to the man who might have married her in another circumstance. An example of this is found in the *Foundation Documents of Godstow Abbey*. There is a charter issued by a man named Vincent Wytham who grants the abbey two of his daughters and “five acres of meadow” (*Foundation Documents of Godstow Abbey*, 115) as their dowry.

Many other people gave land and money to the convents to “comfort the... handmaidens of Christ serving God.” (*Foundation Documents of Godstow Abbey*, 115). In the *Foundation Documents of Godstow Abbey*, there are many references to gifts that were given to it by men and women of rank. For example, for the dedication ceremony of the convent, Walter of Perry gave one virgate¹ of land, Reginald de St. Valery gave one fish pond, and Earl Robert of Leicester and his wife the Countess Amice gave sixty shillings worth of land (*Foundation Documents of Godstow Abbey*, 114). Even the royal family gave money to the new convent. The amount that each member of the family gave was recorded separately. Stephen’s queen, Matilda’s contribution is from her own account suggesting that she had control over her own monetary affairs as did Ediva. Each used her own money to help finance the convent.

As prioress of Godstow Abbey, Ediva would have been responsible for much more than money. She would also have been responsible for managing all of the land that was donated to the Abbey. This could make Ediva a very powerful and wealthy person in her day as land was very important to feudal England. Under the feudal system, a lord grants land to a vassal as a means to support himself. In return, the vassal swears an oath of loyalty to the lord and agrees to support the lord in all matters.

Both Ediva and Edith seem to be confident women who know what they want and how to get it. They are not afraid to ask powerful people for help. Ediva went straight to the King of England to get support for her project. She laid out for him what she thought God was telling her to do and together they came up with a plan to get it accomplished. Similarly, when people were gossiping about her, Edith went to Anselm, who, as the Archbishop of Canterbury, was the highest religious authority in all of England. She asked him to clear up the confusion surrounding her childhood spent in a convent. These women are not afraid of standing up for themselves or of taking control of their own lives. Edith, who was raised in a community where women were in charge of all aspects of life, from land management to the day to day tasks of providing for a large number of people, is not

¹ A plot of land that could be between fifteen and eighty acres.

intimidated by powerful men. Her formative years were spent observing women who held powerful roles in the community. Could this be why she confidently told her story to the council of men (*Eadmer's Account*, 100) that she is telling the truth. She was astute enough to realize that this information could be used by "ill-affected persons to utter scandal in the future" (*Eadmer's Account*, 101) perhaps to undermine the king or herself.

Ediva also went to one of the most powerful people in the country when she asked King Henry I for help. Perhaps her confidence came from her upbringing as a well loved, only child, though it also might have come from her feeling that God was supporting her endeavor. What an easy thing it must be to talk to the King of England when God himself has just sent you a vision? It is also interesting to note the way that Ediva's vision is recorded as fact in the documents for Godstow Abbey. No one questioned her about it, it simply appears to be accepted as the truth by the king, herself and the recorder of the Godstow documents.

Certainly, Edith and Ediva are not representative of all women of the Middle Ages, but they are remarkable people and their lives are worth examining. Their stories can tell readers a great deal about how women conducted themselves and how their actions were received by others. Their lives also give great insight into the lives of nuns and how they were perceived by the outside world. As the brides of Christ, nuns were protected from the outside world, however, they were expected fulfill certain responsibilities and also never to leave their order. In spite of their sheltered lives, nuns were respected members of the community. They controlled land, money and, at least in Edith and Ediva's case, aspects of their own destinies.

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