Feminism, Fiction and the Empress Matilda

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Strong women from the medieval era are written in modern fiction for women contemporary to the writers.[1] This is presentism, and as Chandra L. Power has described it, presentism as a 'twofold concern: *writerly presentism*, e.g. a novelist's imposition of the values, beliefs, and practices of modern times onto a past era; and *readerly presentism*, i.e., a reader's perception that a book written in or about the past is, for example, racist or sexist.'[2] The implication of work on medieval queens in this context is clear: writers of historical fiction, regardless of what level of research they may put into their works, are liable to imprint their culturally-specific beliefs onto the past.[3] Readers of historical fiction, particularly if historical fiction is their only brush with the medieval past, are likely to bring pre-existing notions of the medieval world to be one inherently sexist by nature, seeking validity in the problems of their modern world by finding them in a distant past. This view is further shaped by readers' own horizons of understanding: 'historical understanding would be impossible, since the past in its otherness may only be grasped in so far as the interpreter is able to separate the alien from his own horizon.'[4] Furthermore, 'the type of literature women read is linked to their wider world-view'.[5] With this social and cultural shaping, readers would be highly sensitive to portrayals of gender struggle in the medieval past, and the writers prone to overlay a modern understanding of gender onto the past, without sensing separate horizons of understanding. The reading of women's historical literature and romance in the post-feminist[6] world undoubtedly causes complicated and sometimes conflicting conclusions about its use, purpose and even benefits or negatives.[7] Regardless, what is clear is the popularity of the genre, particularly for middle-class women. Romance Writers of America state that in 2013, romantic fiction accounted for 13 per cent of total sales of adult fiction in the United States,[8] and 82 per cent of romance readers are women,[9] with an average annual income of $55,000.[10]

The Empress Matilda, the focus of this chapter, provides a historical character onto which writerly and readerly presentism has been mapped. Historical scholarship has seen multiple works on her: most recently, Marjorie Chibnall's biography (1991), still the standard academic text, alongside popular history books by the Earl of Onslow (1939), Nesta Pain (1978)[11] and Helen Castor (2010). Although it is not unfair to say that Matilda is understudied in current scholarship, particularly in comparison to the wealth of scholarship on medieval English kings, she is certainly not unknown. But the diffusion of information about Empress Matilda into a popular audience has been piecemeal, and she comes to the modern world with a mixed reputation. Marjorie Chibnall describes Matilda in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography:

> Hostile chroniclers…attacked her as haughty and intractable…when she met opposition…with all the firmness that had been accepted, however reluctantly, from her father, it was regarded as unwomanly, arrogant and obstinate in her.[12]

Chibnall clearly presents that a norm in her father was not perceived as a norm in Matilda. It is not the place of this chapter to debate the character of the historical Matilda; it is generally accepted in modern scholarship that she was probably no more or less wilful or authoritative than her male counterparts though her gender worked against her on this count. But the popular press has tended to latch on to the words 'arrogant' and 'haughty'[13] and shift the understanding from a *representation* of Matilda into *Matilda.* Matilda thus comes down in to modern public history as a maligned queen, ready to be rewritten in terms appropriate for readers' expectations and modern experiences.

In parallel to the last few decades of extensive scholarship in women's history and gender history, historical fiction featuring queens as protagonists has also been popular. This is no surprise; in the view of the western world post-1960s feminism, powerful queens give historical examples of strong women that modern women can look to not only as exemplars but also for entertainment and a feeling of a connection to the past, despite the presentism of that connection. Popular culture after the advent of second-wave feminism has felt inclined to apply current forms of feminism onto Matilda; to some degree, the historiographical disagreements about Matilda created a container which can more easily hold modern ideas.[14] The novels based on Matilda's life, perhaps unsurprisingly, are set around the years of the civil war period of the mid-twelfth century, when Matilda was at the highest and lowest points of her power in England. Each novel roughly follows the historical outline of the civil war with fictive liberty taken for dramatic purposes.

Of five novels that I have identified with Matilda as the main protagonist, only three reached a wide readership: Jean Plaidy's *The Passionate Enemies*;[15] Sharon Penman's *When Christ and His Saints Slept*;[16] and Elizabeth Chadwick's *Lady of the English*.[17] These examples of a modern, fictitious Matilda follow the concerns for some women addressed by modern feminism, reflecting a Matilda for the time of her writing. This response to social environment is perhaps unsurprising as the romance genre has demonstrated a 'response to readers' interests and cultural changes in a way that is unmatched by most other types of publishing and popular media.'[18] However, acknowledgement of different experiences and the shift into intersectional feminism has been neglected, reflecting a disjoint not only between the past and the perception of the past, but highlights that these books prioritize the experience and concerns of white, middle-class female readers. Their horizons of understanding have been overlaid on Matilda's medieval experience, rendering others' invisible, and reflecting a writerly presentism that maps onto the readerly presentism of only specific modern women.

The first post-second-wave-feminism Matilda to hit the bookshelves was Plaidy's *The Passionate Enemies* in 1976. The choice of Matilda was perhaps an axiomatic one for Plaidy, who liked to focus on 'women of integrity and strong character' who were also 'struggling for liberation, fighting for their own survival'.[19] Throughout *The Passionate Enemies*, Matilda is certainly portrayed as strong-willed, and working entirely to her own agenda. Characters describe her as a 'fascinating virago,' 'wild, imperious, handsome,' with a 'passionate nature' and 'great spirit' when characters are being kind; 'ruthless,' 'arrogant and overbearing,' demanding, exacting, selfish, imperious, a shrew and virago, 'drunk with power, harsh and without gratitude, and with a 'vindictive nature' when in anger.[20] 'Haughty' is used throughout the novel to describe Matilda in both kinder and more critical moments.[21] Plaidy's Matilda 'wanted power more than she wanted love'.[22]

If love is not an overarching concern for this fictional Matilda, sex clearly is. In fact, Matilda is presented as sexualized – and in control of her sexuality – from the very start of the novel. At her introduction, we see Matilda through the eyes of Stephen, her passionate rival: Stephen dreams of what it would have been like to have married Matilda, or at least seduced her. He ruminates of her own willingness to be seduced when they were young together.[23] Our first view of Matilda herself in turn is a presentation of her in her ornate imperial bed, thinking sexy thoughts of Stephen in return.[24] There is very little covert operation here. In fact, the next time the scene returns to Matilda, she is once again in her bed, longing for the days when she and Stephen would tease and torment each other.[25] There is no doubt that this Matilda is not just sexualized, but comfortable with and in control of her sexuality. Insomuch as Plaidy may be considered in the romance genre, this also provides the main tension in which there is a '[disturbance with] the proper mapping of the "machinery of sexuality" onto the "machinery of alliance."'[26]

In fact, Matilda even wields her sexuality as a tool for control against Stephen as the war between them progresses. When Stephen arrives at Arundel to take Matilda prisoner, she uses the memory of sex, the promise of sex and actual sex to negotiate her release and safe passage to her brother in Bristol – where, Stephen is told, they can meet again for more sex.[27] This is clearly not just a sexually liberated Empress Matilda; this is a woman in charge of her sexuality and making use of it for her personal pleasure as well as her political gain. The mostly-female audience of Plaidy's Matilda would have recognized this drive to power, despite the limitations that society had placed upon her (and their) biological sex; bodily and political freedom were active parts of the 1970s feminism. In alignment with Bridget Fowler's note that 'images of "reformed patriarchy" and formal equality pervade much [historical romance], and this change corresponds to the historical restructuring of relations between men and women around the bourgeois ideals of freedom and equality,' [28] this Matilda reflects a readerly expectation of the changing dynamics between men and women, more reflective of the 1970s and 80s than the twelfth century. As Diana Wallace has pointed out, the exclusion of women from traditional histories 'offers one particularly crucial reason why women writers have turned to the historical novel as a discourse within which women can be made central.'[29] Here Plaidy, perhaps unknowingly, was following the second-wave feminism tenet of reinserting women back into the histories of the Middle Ages, though perhaps 'playing a part unwittingly in classifying medieval women as conforming (or not) to strict gender roles' as the romance genre conventions were too restrictive for more than that.[30] Plaidy's Matilda was a woman for the 1970s, superimposing the horizon of her readers on the horizon of the historical past, and perhaps Plaidy saw very little difference or no othering of the past in her presentation of a feminist Matilda.

The Matilda of Penman's *When Christ and His Saints Slept* represents a much-altered protagonist from Plaidy's unapologetic Matilda of the 1970s. In fact, the different Matilda is on display almost immediately in the narrative, setting the scene and the personal motivations of this Matilda's drive to power. Our first view of her is again from a second-hand view of two women gossiping about the arrogant and sharp-tongued Countess of Anjou who has rejected her husband Geoffrey. One of the two women indicates in veiled language that Matilda's rejection of Geoffrey has 'goad[ed] him into maltreating her,'[31] suggesting that Geoffrey abuses her both physically and sexually.

This is confirmed not a page later, when we first meet Matilda while she is examining her split lip and bruises and refusing the advice of her trusted maid, who is counselling Matilda to be more submissive and respectful to her husband.[32] But Matilda refuses, stating, 'Pride is the only defence I have.'[33] Immediately we have the *raison d'être* for Matilda's actions in the next several decades, and the explanation of her arrogant demeanor: her acquisition of power was the sole way in which she could be free, the only way she would never again need a husband's consent or a father's permission.[34] We see then a Matilda who is a wronged victim, not in possession of her own power but instead a knowing pawn of the men around her, and one who seeks to avenge her victimhood through freedom and power – hence her initial drive to the throne. Her historical political agency is thus removed by ascribing her political drive to personal motivations.[35]

It is important to point out that Matilda's rapes by Geoffrey do not fit the tropes of rape seen in romance novels particularly in a boom in the 1970s and beyond.[36] In that trope, editorial commentary viewed women's rape in fiction as a part of fulfilling a readers' rape fantasy, and an escape from the responsibility of sex. In addition, the trope would allow characters to 'enjoy sexual pleasure while still maintaining their moral purity.'[37] This is obviously a very controversial topic in women's literature, but Penman's use of rape on Matilda has little to do with a defunct trope. Matilda instead is raped and beaten both to humanize her as well as to give her a reason for her immense desire for power – the same trope we now see a backlash against as shorthand for a vulnerable woman and a hated man.[38]

With a protagonist depicted as a victim comes the inevitable victim-blaming. This, seen from characters who are supporters of Matilda's, compounds the complexity of presenting a twelfth-century female victim to a modern audience: a powerful woman being brought low sings of the repression that a twentieth-century audience would expect in medieval times, a readerly presentism that is deemed authentic as it meets the preconceived notions of its audience. A minor female character speaks outright that Matilda 'brought much of her troubles upon herself. If she'd not been so haughty, if she'd been more tactful, more womanly' in her personality, she would not have had to fight both her husband and father.[39] In a further scene, Matilda's three brothers discuss how they might protect her from Geoffrey, but they are negated by one of their wives: '[Matilda] is not blameless either. She puts me to mind of a woman who salts a well and complains when the water is not fit to drink.'[40] This is victim-blaming, twelfth-century style, though this woman is also the only one who demonstrates some understanding of gender politics – as perceived in the twentieth century – in a twelfth-century context: in the next breath the woman explains that a woman in their world did not have much at hand to make their place nicer so she might as well use what she has, which are feminine wiles.[41] Matilda herself tries to believe that if her father knew of her mistreatment at Geoffrey's hands, he would not blame her for the break-up of her marriage, although another character informs her outright that her father believed that she brought Geoffrey's violence to her upon herself.[42] This character, her brother's wife, also blames Matilda for Geoffrey's actions.[43] In fact, despite an insistence that Matilda's lack of feminine wiles makes her culpable for others' actions, her own biological womanliness is once blamed for her failures: one of her own men assumes Matilda is menstruating when she is demanding with the Londoners asking for tax relief, although the Londoners call her ‘unwomanly’.[44] In this Matilda cannot win: her lack of femininity means she is to blame for her controlling father and the physical harm brought to her by her husband, though her unchangeable biology can be used to equally to blame her for the characteristics that make her ‘unwomanly’.

When Christ and His Saints Slept also utilizes themes of difference between men and women, although in all scenarios it is to point out how unfair gender difference played out in the twelfth century. Most of this recognition of difference comes from and through Matilda herself, as the stage on which gender difference is sharply noted. Very early in the novel she pulls a knife on Geoffrey to protect herself against his violence, and he notes that she clearly had not been trained to wield one – something that he finds desirable.[45] In fact, her female inability to fight is regularly mentioned. When she holds London but is not yet crowned, Matilda remarks with frustration that if she had bested Stephen in hand-to-hand combat, no one would doubt her right to rule.[46] Stephen himself notes that her claim to the throne ‘depended on support from men’.[47] When Matilda flees a desperate situation in Winchester, she envies ‘the men their weapons, their male right to self-defence’; her skirts further hamper her riding and leave her with bloody wounds on her inner thighs as she had to ride astride for the sake of speed.[48] In fact, at one point Matilda specifically rages because all of her misfortunes have happened to her because she is a woman.[49]

Sewing is often used as a demonstration Matilda’s lack of patience with ‘womanly’ things. Sewing, needlework and embroidery is often stereotypically used to denote womanly pastimes and pursuits in most periods in the past despite deconstructions that show this to be historiographically and historically a romantic inconsistence;[50] nonetheless, sewing is still used as shorthand for feminine in historical contexts. At one point Matilda is shown in a group of women who are putting together a stitched wall-hanging and Matilda declines to participate:

> She was a very proficient needle-woman…for she was that most driven of beings, a perfectionist, compelled to excel even at pastimes that gave her no pleasure. But *she cared little for female companionship and even less for traditional female pursuits*, preferring instead to challenge [her brother] to a game of chess.[51]

Immediately we can see the dichotomy of Matilda's own gender identification in a way that is sympathetic to a late twentieth-century audience: when placed in a world where sewing is a 'traditional female pursuit' she prefers the more masculine pastime of chess, displaying her flouting of the societal regulation of female behavior. This is seen several times through the narrative. When Matilda is relinquishing her claim and sailing away from England, she visits with her stepmother and both sit with sewing, though Matilda's 'lay forgotten in her lap' as they visited.[52] In fact, at one point Matilda is noted as acting oddly because she *was* sewing![53]

The Matilda of *When Christ and His Saints Slept* is a character steeped in third-wave feminism, and very likely a conscious construction as such. This Matilda is a victim of men as well as historical circumstance, concerned about her work-life balance,[54] is far less sexualized, concerned about her personal relationships with the people in her life, and even sees war as a journey towards self-awareness.[55] The victim Matilda, so desperate for control of her own life, finds a modicum of contentment only for the struggles she had survived; the story, albeit ostensibly about a power-struggle between members of the nobility, is ultimately about Matilda's journey to a greater understanding of herself, a journey to a personal emancipation:[56] an understanding which actually takes away her own historical agency. In establishing her character early in the novel, Matilda notes that she 'has no rights at all, not even over my own body'.[57] She wants no daughters as she does not want them to be used as she is.[58] In fact, overtly feminist statements are indeed made by most of the cast of characters at some point in the novel: Stephen thinks that it is terrible that Matilda's husband and father make plans for her without her input or permission.[59] A secondary female character ruminates that she ‘needed to believe that not all the women in her world had their wings clipped; surely there must be a few still able to soar up in the sky, untamed and fearless and free’.[60] Throughout the novel, statements such as these demonstrate an insertion of a modern, third-wave feminist thought into the mouths of twelfth-century elites, anachronistic as they may have been. In such a way, a period perceived as misogynist becomes more palatable to a third-wave feminist audience; the feminism of the late twentieth century is recognizable in the character, making her both more relatable and more sympathetic. Again, this readerly presentism maps firmly onto a sense of authenticity to the audience, meeting their preconceived expectations of the medieval world and providing no real dialogue with either the text or the past.

Our last Matilda is from Elizabeth Chadwick’s 2011 *Lady of the English*. This too is a Matilda steeped in third-wave feminism, though this can be seen in different forms than in Penman. This Matilda values her own relationship with the most important woman in her life, Adeliza; this Matilda and even Adeliza are also shown with a new level of comfort with and pleasure in their sexuality. This Matilda furthermore continues with the trend of seeing her life as a journey, her war and struggle giving her a better understanding of herself, and highlights the biological and gender differences between her and other leaders of the time, stressing the third-wave importance in difference.

It is in Adeliza’s relationship with Matilda where we see the most important relationship of the novel. Unlike the Matilda of the Penman, they are even represented as sewing together at one point![61] Their first embrace upon Matilda’s return from Germany reminds Matilda that her own mother was not soft and motherly, and she nearly cries at Adeliza’s touch.[62] When they argue about Geoffrey’s treatment of Matilda, Adeliza quickly backs down from her suggestions to Matilda; Adeliza does not want to lose her relationship with Matilda over arguing about a man, as odious as he might be.[63] In fact Adeliza often intercedes on Matilda’s behalf, even when at risk to herself, both with her first husband, Matilda's father, and her second husband, a staunch supporter of Stephen.[64] Their relationship transcends what we might think of as a stereotypical step-relationship to that of a mother-daughter relationship at times, and more like sisters at others. Their bond was represented as one borne of affection, friendship, and kinship. The sisterly bond between them also, at times, interferes with crucial political decisions taken by other characters, such as when Adeliza's husband opts to respect the bond between Adeliza and Matilda rather than his own political alliance with Stephen at the time of Matilda's arrival and sojourn at Arundel.[65] The emotional here trumps the politically logical or even expedient action of handing Matilda over to Stephen.

Both Matilda and Adeliza are also portrayed in sexual terms, with both enjoying their sexual encounters, underlining a new third-wave reclamation of sexual pleasure that may particularly echo trends in feminism beyond the 1990s.[66] Both experience this in separate ways, however. Matilda experiences a healthy amount of sexual pleasure in what is surely, in modern ideas, a very unhealthy relationship. The tension between the desire she and Geoffrey share alongside their hatred of one another sits uncomfortably to modern readers. Although Geoffrey is not portrayed as raping Matilda, as in the Penman, he does cruelly beat her at the beginning of their marriage to the degree that Matilda cannot walk for the pain,[67] and once, after discovering that Matilda was actively working to prevent pregnancy, is portrayed as a sexual predator, although whether this is a scene of rape is ambiguous.[68] But despite this, Matilda acknowledges and enjoys her sexuality. She discovers at their marriage that even though she hates her husband, she enjoys sex with him.[69] When returning from her marital banishment, Matilda ruminates that she still sexually wants Geoffrey, even though she hated him and he beat her.[70] In fact, though the two enter what is essentially a working relationship in seeking the throne for their son, it is only time and distance that weans Matilda from the 'corrosive but compelling' sexual need she felt for Geoffrey.[71]

Matilda's sexuality is also used against her by other characters. In one disturbing passage, a peripheral male character compares Matilda to Stephen's wife Maheut, who is seen as dumpy and motherly, in opposition to Matilda's conflated power and sexuality:

> [Maheut] was utterly loyal to Stephen, and her brisk, motherly manner engendered loyalty in others. When with Stephen in public, she kept her eyes lowered and her mouth closed, cultivating the persona of a modest, submissive wife…
>
> The Empress had no such maternal image to temper her own abrasive nature. If she thought a man was a fool, she said so to his face in front of others, and gave no quarter. She was tall, slender, beautiful, desirable – like a mistress, and while few men would ever strike their mothers [many] would take a fist to a mistress.[72]

Matilda's comparison to being a mistress to Maheut's motherliness is taken to a disturbing conclusion in finding it justification for physical punishment of Matilda. She is 'the potential [victim] of a femininity which is…endlessly defin[es her] in terms of sexual status'; this imagined sexual availability is grounds for blame and punishment,[73] from political to personal to corporeal.

Adeliza, however, has a different projection in learning about her sexuality. We are introduced to Adeliza within the first few pages of the novel, with her first husband atop of her as she waits through sex patiently but not pleasurably.[74] Sex to Adeliza is a means to an end: her role, as the queen, was to provide the needed male heir. However, in her second marriage, sex is different, and, Adeliza is surprised to discover, enjoyable. On her second marriage night, Adeliza is portrayed as orgasming for probably the first time in her life.[75] In modern romance parlance, this is an example of one of the powers of the Mighty Wang, restoring a heroine to orgasm and fertility;[76] indeed, she becomes pregnant almost immediately despite years of infertility with her first husband. Adeliza becomes the modern idea of the wholly fulfilled medieval woman, with loving children, wealth, influence, a loving husband (who even builds separate toilets in the castle for her so that he would not splash the seat![77]) and, just as importantly, an active and enjoyable sex life.

Chadwick's Matilda also expresses a third-wave stress on biological and gendered difference. Menstruation in particular is not only discussed frequently but becomes of particular gendered importance in at least one part of the narrative. As one might expect from a woman whose sole job is to produce an heir, Adeliza at a few moments specifically takes note of her 'flux,' once ascribing it as punishment from God for a deed she did not know.[78] But Matilda's 'flux' takes on a form that has just as severe political impacts as Adeliza's lack of heirs for her first husband. At a crucial point in the narrative, when Matilda and her faction has taken London but are waiting for the coronation and negotiating with the people of London, she is noted as being irritable and having a headache due to menstruation.[79] It is well-considered historical fact that Matilda's inability to reach an agreement with the Londoners caused her ultimate loss of the city; here, the author specifically attributes her lack of diplomacy with the Londoners to not only her mood because of menstruation but more specifically because of the author's unsubstantiated suspicion that Matilda suffered from severe premenstrual syndrome.[80]

This Matilda's negotiation of femininity also plays out in the difference of genders, not just different biology. Very early on Matilda considers the difficulty in being considered having masculine tendencies, such as directness, and thus 'flouting the natural law'.[81] Throughout the novel, Matilda negotiates her gender identity, staying almost on the boundary between what is seen as masculine or feminine. Her role in the Holy Roman Empire is one clearly expressed as queenly and with feminine attributes: being a peacemaker, alleviating suffering, patronizing the arts.[82] Her femininity is played at several points: her power as a woman, even if Empress or queen, is a tool for the power of men;[83] her femininity is 'regulated and expressed through class difference'[84] at the upper echelons of medieval society as a female royal. She is referred to as a vessel for the throne, a particularly female representation.[85] She engages with thinking about her own physical appearance.[86] She is even at one point depicted as sewing, and uses a sewing metaphor! But on top of this Matilda more strongly negotiates her position as a woman in a man's world. She recognizes the lives of girls and women as different to those of the men around her.[87]

Overall, these three fictional Matildas show specific responses to feminist movements. This response to social environment is unsurprising in these novels as the genre, as noted, is known to have responded to cultural changes in a usually parallel way.[88] Indeed the genre of the romance novel itself grew alongside the feminist movement starting in the 1970s.[89] But the three novels also fail to take in account a crucial area of modern feminism: the concept of intersectionality. The concept of intersectionality was first termed by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1991 in dealing with the combined oppressions of being a woman and a person of color, [90] and has since grown in its definition to more widely accept that differing forms of oppression work together. In this case, the concept was not yet in play at the time of Plaidy's writing, though accepting this as rote negates the strong activity of black feminists in the 1970s, the environment which surrounded Plaidy's work on Matilda. Perhaps unfortunately but unsurprisingly in a works that deals with the highest ranks of medieval society, diversity and concepts of intersectionality are also virtually invisible in both post-third-wave works. This is a topic that Power is sensitive to in historical fiction, in the 'lack of alternative voices in any given era [which] serves to deny' alternative experiences, 'conflating the dominant attitudes of an era with all attitudes of an era…The values of the dominant class are seen as the *only* values of an era.'[91]

The most obvious opportunity for intersectionality in these three novels would be in explorations of medieval class, though this is not generally seen. In fact, the most obvious non-elite characters seen in *When Christ and His Saints Slept* are a mistress of Geoffrey, used to give a negative point of view of Matilda, and an apothecary and his family who lose everything in the destruction of Winchester. This man had his own shop, and the family lived above it; in modern terms, these townspeople would have been probably middle-class and not medieval peasants, though certainly not the royalty seen elsewhere. But these middle-class townspeople are not formed characters but merely props of the destruction seen in Winchester and a catalyst for Matilda to consider the death and destruction that her war has wrought. Despite the plight of these townspeople bringing her to tears, Matilda ultimately decides that her war is just, being fought for the rights of her son; class trumps humanity, and the invisible lower class members of society are here only collateral damage. The suffering of the middle class that she sees spurs her into charity, not action to change her course. Indeed, in terms of diversity, all characters in all the books presented are white Christians, despite a sizable Jewish population in medieval England before the expulsion in 1290[92] and certainly a visible Jewish population in Winchester, one of the main cities of action in the book. Hardly the intersectionality one would hope for. With a publication date of the Penman in 1994 and the Crenshaw article in 1991 perhaps the academic ideas had not yet had time to filter into larger awareness by the time of Penman's book, though the same cannot be said for the Chadwick. However, there has been strong recent interest in race, racism, and medievalism by medieval and medievalism scholars,[93] with much of this moving online (following a tenant of fourth-wave feminism) and ergo freely accessible to a large audience.[94] With this growing availability to access quality work on intersectionalism, race, and the medieval, perhaps this disinterest in intersectionality will see a reversal in future fiction on medieval women.

In conclusion, the study of Matilda in modern fiction reveals much about the friction and intersections between the historical past and the modern reader. At the heart of almost all the modern secondary works on Matilda intended for a public audience is the gendered terminology used to describe her in primary and secondary sources. The pervasiveness of her reputation, and the representation used for her by crucial sources that were not in her favor, have been distilled into public knowledge as the actual Matilda: a haughty virago. The importance of her gendered representation creates a Matilda that is ready for adaptation and appropriation for an audience which has been brought up within second- and third- wave feminism in the west. This should be no surprise; as it has been noted, '…in women's hands, the historical novel has often become a political tool…offering a critique of the present through their treatment of the past.'[95] The importance of this ready-to-adapt medieval woman, and one in a position of power at that, cannot be underestimated in altering a modern view of a medieval past, and the readerly presentism this presents. As Toby Litt has phrased it, reading historical fiction renders a casual reader of the genre less able to know more about the past by reading these works, as '[w]hat the reader will do is *feel* they know more about the past…[there are] mental slippages required in order to produce and consume historical fiction.'[96] As Jan Nelis has also pointed out, a history 'stripped of most of its content [becomes] a highly abstract feeling rather than a "history"'.[97] The dialogue that exists between the reader and these texts is one that is passive and subconscious, and with the social framework of feminism, the reader may not recognize the different horizons between the past and themselves. Indeed these novels represent a horizon similar to the readers' own, without an acknowledgement of the otherness of the past itself:

> A dialogue consists of not only two interlocutors, but also of the willingness of one to recognize and accept the other in his otherness…Literary understanding becomes dialogical only when the otherness of the text is sought and recognized from the horizon of our own expectations, when no naïve fusions of horizons is considered, and when one's own expectations are corrected and extended by the experience of the other.[98]

The diversity of representations of Matilda from her contemporary times to our own provide a blank slate on which modern writers and readers view feminism in the past, seeking validation of their own problems and feminist issues through their existence in a long-ago past, refusing a genuinely dialogical understanding of the text or the past. But unfortunately, these viewings of feminist problems via a medieval queen ultimately reflect only one concern, that of the white, middle- or upper-class reader. Unlike Fowler's study of the importance of the romance novel to working-class women readers, without an acknowledgement of intersectionality, these Matildas only give validation to a singular experience and its oppressions, rendering the representations the domain of the white, middle-class reader and their horizons of experience and understanding.

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[1] My thanks to Andrew Elliott, Carey Fleiner, Carol Levin, Kenneth Longden, and the editors of this volume for thoughtful suggestions and comments on earlier versions of this chapter. All remaining errors are, of course, my own.

[2] Chandra L. Power, “Challenging the Pluralism of Our Past: Presentism and the Selective Tradition in Historical Fiction Writing for Young People,” *Research in the Teaching of English* 37:4 (May 2003): 426.

[3] Toby Litt, “Against Historical Fiction,” *Irish Pages* 5:1 (2008): 113-14.

[4] Hans Robert Jauss, “The Identity of the Poetic Text in the Changing Horizon of Understanding,” in *Reception Study: From Theory to Cultural Studies*, eds. James L Machor and Philip Goldstein (Abington: Psychology Press, 2001), 7.

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[5] Bridget Fowler, *The Alienated Reader: Women and Popular Romantic Literature in the Twentieth Century* (Harlow: Prentice-Hall, 1991), 4.

[6] Here, and at any point in this chapter, 'post-feminist' is meant in terms of the western world after the advent of second-wave feminism rather than the current and rather spurious claims of the mid-2010s being a 'postfeminist' climate.

[7] For examples of opposing viewpoints, see Litt, "Historical Fiction," and Julie M. Dugger, "'I'm a Feminist, But…' Popular Romance in the Women's Literature Classroom," *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* 4:2 (24 October 2014), accessed 30 January 2017. http://jprstudies.org/2014/10/im-a-feminist-but-popular-romance-in-the-womens-literature-classroomby-julie-m-dugger/.

[8] Romance Writers of America, "Romance Statistics," accessed 30 January 2017, https://www.rwa.org/p/cm/ld/fid=580.

[9] Romance Writers of America, "Industry Statistics," accessed 30 January 2017, https://www.rwa.org/p/cm/ld/fid=582.

[10] Romance Writers of America, "Reader Statistics," accessed 5 May 2017, https://www.rwa.org/p/cm/ld/fid=582. The surveying information did not include ethnic identities.

[11] Both of which Marjorie Chibnall refers to as 'wholly devoid of scholarly apparatus', *The Empress Matilda* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, 2nd edition), 2-3.

[12] Marjorie Chibnall, "Matilda (1102-1167)," Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Oxford University Press, 2004, accessed 6 May 2017, http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/18338.

[13] 'Matilda was less popular with contemporary chroniclers than Stephen; in many ways she took after her father, being prepared to loudly demand compliance of her court, when necessary issuing threats and generally appearing arrogant. This was felt to be particularly

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inappropriate since she was a woman.' "The Anarchy," Wikipedia, accessed 22 January 2017, www.Wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Anarchy, citing Chibnall 1991; '…her perceived arrogance alienated many of her supporters and she was never crowned.' "Matilda (1102-1167)," BBC History, accessed 22 January 2017, http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/matilda_queen.shtml; '…her arrogance and tactless demands for money provoked the citizens [of London] to chase her away…' "Matilda, Daughter of Henry I," Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed 22 January 2017, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Matilda-daughter-of-Henry-I; '…she had an arrogant and haughty manner and was heartily disliked.' Johnson, Ben, "Empress Maud," History Magazine, accessed 22 January 2017, http://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofEngland/Empress-Maud/.

[14] The same can be said about other medieval queens popularized in modern fiction, such as Eleanor of Aquitaine and Anne Boleyn.

[15] Jean Plaidy, *The Passionate Enemies* (London: Pan, 1976).

[16] Sharon Penman, *When Christ and His Saints Slept* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1995).

[17] Elizabeth Chadwick, *Lady of the English* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks/Landmark, 2011).

[18] Linda J. Lee, "Guilty Pleasures: Reading Romance Novels as Reworked Fairy Tales," *Marvels & Tales* 22:1 (2008), 54.

[19] Bruce Lambert, "Eleanor Hibbert, Novelist Known as Victoria Holt and Jean Plaidy," *The New York Times*, 21 January 1993, accessed 16 December 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/1993/01/21/books/eleanor-hibbert-novelist-known-as-victoria-holt-and-jean-plaidy.html.

[20] Plaidy, *Enemies*, 14-15, 113, 140, 217, 220, 235, 264, 268, 270, 286.

[21] Plaidy, *Enemies*, 101, 120, 130, 231, 235

[22] Plaidy, *Enemies*, 14.

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[23] Plaidy, *Enemies*, 14.

[24] Plaidy, *Enemies*, 28-9.

[25] Plaidy, *Enemies*, 57.

[26] Fowler, *Alienated*, 8.

[27] Plaidy, *Enemies*, 226-9.

[28] Fowler, *Alienated*, 9.

[29] Diana Wallace, *The Woman's Historical Novel: British Writers, 1900-2000* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) ix.

[30] Andrew Elliott, pers. comm.

[31] Penman, *Christ*, 33.

[32] Penman, *Christ*, 35.

[33] Penman, *Christ*, 36.

[34] Penman, *Christ*, 99, 279.

[35] Andrew Elliott, pers. comm.

[36] For a succinct summary, see Kate Ellis, "Gimme Shelter: Feminism, Fantasy, and Women's Popular Fiction," in *American Media and Mass Culture: Left Perspectives*, ed. Donald Lazere (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 217; in more detail and slightly more up to date in Fowler, *Alienated.*

[37] Tan, Candy, "Talking About the R Word," *Smart Bitches, Trashy Books*, 14 September 2005. Accessed 26 January 2017. http://smartbitchestrashybooks.com/2005/09/talking_about_the_r_word/.

[38] Mary Hamilton, "Does Tomb Raider's Lara Croft Really have to be a Survivor of a Rape Attempt?," *The Guardian*, 13 June 2012, accessed 16 February 2015, http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/jun/13/tomb-raider-lara-croft-rape-attempt; Chris Ostendorf, "TV's Rape Problem is Bigger than 'Game of Thrones,'" *Salon*, 22 April

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2014, accessed 16 February 2015, http://www.salon.com/2014/04/22/tvs_rape_problem_is_bigger_than_game_of_thrones_partner/.

[39] Penman, *Christ*, 91.

[40] Penman, *Christ*, 182.

[41] Penman, *Christ*, 182.

[42] Penman, *Christ*, 43-4.

[43] Penman, *Christ*, 46.

[44] Penman, *Christ*, 313.

[45] Penman, *Christ*, 41.

[46] Penman, *Christ*, 316.

[47] Penman, *Christ*, 333.

[48] Penman, *Christ*, 385, 392.

[49] Penman, *Christ*, 418.

[50] Mary Beaudry, "Stitching Women's Lives: Interpreting the Artifacts of Sewing and Needlework," in *Interpreting the Early Modern World: Transatlantic Perspective*, eds Mary C. Beaudry and James Symonds (Berlin: Springer, 2011), 143-158.

[51] Penman, *Christ*, 172; my italics.

[52] Penman, *Christ*, 584.

[53] Penman, *Christ*, 457.

[54] Katherine Weikert, "The Empress Matilda and Motherhood in Popular Fiction, 1970s to the Present," in *Virtuous or Villainous? The Image of the Royal Mother from the Early Medieval to the Early Modern Eras*, eds Elena Woodacre and Carey Fleiner (Baskingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 225-45.

[55] Penman, *Christ*, 548.

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[56] Ealasaid Munro, “Feminism: A Fourth Wave?” *Political Insight* 4:2 (September 2013), 22-5.

[57] Penman, *Christ*, 36, 39, 38

[58] Penman, *Christ*, 59.

[59] Penman, *Christ*, 49-50

[60] Penman, *Christ*, 233.

[61] Penman, *Christ*, 54.

[62] Penman, *Christ*, 25-6.

[63] Penman, *Christ*, 113.

[64] Penman, *Christ*, 116, 257, 281, 294.

[65] Penman, *Christ*, 280-2; 415-18.

[66] R. Clare Snyder, “What is Third-Wave Feminism? A New Directions Essay,” *Signs* 34:1 (2008), 175-96.

[67] Penman, *Christ*, 94, 104-5, 112

[68] Penman, *Christ*, 143-5.

[69] Penman, *Christ*, 92-3.

[70] Penman, *Christ*, 137.

[71] Penman, *Christ*, 451.

[72] Chadwick, *Lady*, 327.

[73] Alison Light, “’Returning to Manderley’: Romance Fiction, Female Sexuality and Class,” *Feminist Review* 16 (Summer 1984), 15-17; quote from 17.

[74] Chadwick, *Lady*, 8.

[75] Chadwick, *Lady*, 160-3.

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[76] Sarah Wendell, “The Bitchery Glossary,” Smart Bitches Trashy Books, 21 November 2011, accessed 9 March 2015, http://smartbitchestrashybooks.com/2011/11/the-bitchery-glossary/.

[77] Chadwick, *Lady*, 466.

[78] Chadwick, *Lady*, 32.

[79] Chadwick, *Lady*, 366.

[80] Chadwick, *Lady*, 523.

[81] Chadwick, *Lady*, 40.

[82] Chadwick, *Lady*, 55.

[83] Chadwick, *Lady*, 129.

[84] Light, “Manderley,” 9.

[85] Chadwick, *Lady*, 36, 148.

[86] Chadwick, *Lady*, 194.

[87] Chadwick, *Lady*, 148, 150.

[88] Linda J. Lee, “Guilty Pleasures: Reading Romance Novels as Reworked Fairy Tales,” *Marvels & Tales* 22:1 (2008), 54.

[89] Lee, “Pleasures,” 54.

[90] Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43 (1991), 1241-99.

[91] Power, “Challenging the Pluralism,” 428-9. Emphasis original.

[92] Patricia Skinner, *The Jews in Medieval England* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2003).

[93] Katherine Weikert and Elena Woodacre, “Gender and Status in the Medieval World,” *Historical Reflections/Reflexions Historique* 42:2 (2016), 3.

[94] In The Middle, the blog of the BABEL Working Group, regularly provides posts questioning the academy, medieval studies, and racism:

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http://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com/, accessed 22 January 2017. In February 2017, The Public Medievalist also instituted a regular series on Race, Racism and the Middle Ages: http://www.publicmedievalist.com/race-racism-middle-ages-toc/, accessed 6 May 2017. See also, amongst others, Helen Young, "Place and Time: Medievalism and Making Race," *The Year's Work in Medievalism* 28 (2013), 2-6; as well as other ways that medieval academics intersect with white nationalism and the alt-right: Eli Saslow, "The white flight of Derek Black," *The Washington Post*, 15 October 2016, accessed 22 January 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/the-white-flight-of-derek-black/2016/10/15/ed5f906a-8f3b-11e6-a6a3-d50061aa9fae_story.html?utm_term=.75dc17dbb7bc.

[95] Wallace, *Novel*, 2.

[96] Litt, "Historical Fiction," 114.

[97] Jan Nelis, "Constructing Fascist Identity: Benito Mussolini and the Myth of Romanitá," *The Classical World* 100:4 (2007), 402.

[98] Jauss, "Identity," 9.