

GENDERING THE LATE MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN WORLD



Barbara J. Harris

# English Aristocratic Women and the Fabric of Piety, 1450-1550

Amsterdam  
University  
Press

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# Gendering the Late Medieval and Early Modern World

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*English Aristocratic Women and the Fabric of Piety, 1450-1550*

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*Barbara J. Harris*

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Cover image: Anne Boleyn Shelton (1556), Queen Anne Boleyn's aunt and donor of the stained-glass window at the east end of the south aisle of the church at Shelton, Norfolk. Used with permission of Mike Dixon, photographer.

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To my grandchildren, Isabel Caiden and Beckett J. Harris

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# Abbreviations

Add'l Ms.	Additional Manuscript
BL	British Library
CCR	Calendar of Close Rolls
chap	chapter
CPR	Calendar of Patent Rolls
Ed.	Editor
ERO	Essex Record Office
esp.	especially
GEC	Cokayne, Complete Peerage
HEH	Huntington Library
HMC	Historical Manuscripts Commission
HMSO	Her Majesty's Stationary Office
Inq PM	Inquisitions Post Mortem
insc	inscription
intro	introduction by
L&P	Letters and Papers of Henry VIII
nd	no date
np	no publisher
NRO	Norfolk Record Office

NS	New Series
OS	Old Series
PRO	Public Record Office
pt	part
RCHM	Royal Commission on Historical Monuments
TE	Testamenta Eboracensia
TEAS	Transactions of the Essex Archaeological Society
TNA	The National Archives
TV	Testamenta Vetusta
VCH	Victoria County History

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At home, the connection between my personal life and scholarly work is even closer. My husband Stanley Chojnacki has heard endlessly about *English Aristocratic Women and the Fabric of Piety* and the extraordinary women who grace its pages. He is a wise critic and an inexhaustible source of love and support. I doubt there is another historian of Renaissance Venice who is on such close terms with Anne, Lady Scrope (1498) or Margaret, Countess of Bath (1561). I still wonder at the good fortune that brought us, two historians of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century aristocratic women, together in a partnership that encompasses every aspect of our lives.

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As always, I owe the possibility of writing in my field to the resources of libraries on both sides of the Atlantic. I especially want to mention the British Library and the Institute of Historical Research in London, the Huntington Library in Pasadena, California, and the Davis and Wilson libraries at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Jessica Collins, archivist of the Clothworkers' Company, London, helped me to locate the

companies' records on Margaret, Countess of Kent, who figures throughout this book. The Monumental Brass Society deserves thanks for its generosity in allowing scholars to use its wonderful images without charge.

While I was writing this book, the fabric of *my* personal life was immeasurably enriched by the birth of my only son's children, Isabel Caiden and Beckett J. Harris. They are sources of unending joy to me. I dedicate this book to them in the hope that sometime in the future it will give them great pleasure to know how much they meant to me as I was writing it.

## Preface

Dates appear in the Old Style, but the year is assumed to have begun on 1 January rather than on 25 March. For money, I have used the pre-decimal form in effect until 1971: 20 shillings equaled one pound; 12 pence equaled one shilling. A mark, which was a money of account and not a coin, was worth 13 shillings and 4 pence. Spelling and punctuation have been modernized, except in the case of personal proper names in epitaphs and on tablets and similar objects.

At a time when a laborer in the building trade earned less than £4 a year and a master mason less than £8, the minimum landed income of a nobleman was £1,000 a year and that of an average knight £200-£400 a year. These figures give some idea of the relative wealth of the aristocracy.

Throughout the book, I have called aristocratic women by the titles that they and their contemporaries used. In the case of noblewomen, they were known by their husbands' titles. Knights' wives were called 'Lady' during their husbands' lifetimes, a title that lapsed when their husbands died, because a knighthood was not hereditary. As widows, they were addressed using the honorific title 'Dame'. These are the usages in the women's wills, the only sources in which the great majority of them ever referred to themselves by name. The dates in parentheses after women's and men's names are either the year they died or the year they wrote their wills.

Legal terms, religious terms, terms referring to items of clothing and textiles, and other obscure terms are explained in the glossary.

The books and articles in the footnotes are listed in abbreviated form; the full details are available in the bibliography.





# Introduction

*English Aristocratic Women and the Fabric of Piety, 1450-1550* is the first comprehensive study of Yorkist and early Tudor aristocratic women's role in the flowering of religious art—architecture, sculpture, stained glass, engraving, textiles, and plate ornaments—that transformed English churches in the century before the break with Rome. They enlarged, restored, and decorated their parish churches and other favorite religious institutions; built tombs, stained-glass windows, chantry chapels, and altars; endowed almshouses and schools to perform works of charity and pray for their souls; and donated many priceless and luxurious textiles, jeweled objects, and plate to adorn the celebration of the Mass.<sup>1</sup> The vast majority of these women's projects were designated for the parish churches where their principal manors or castles were located, the parish being the community that formed the basis of their social, economic, and political position. As members of a community's leading family, these women expected and received the deference of the community's inhabitants, a high proportion of whom were their tenants and servants. In return, they built, restored, and beautified their parish churches, the sole public buildings in the majority of these communities, while their commissions were the only art most of their neighbors ever encountered.<sup>2</sup>

Whatever projects they commissioned, the religious purpose of their patronage was the same: to secure perpetual prayers for their souls and the souls of their closest kin. All the evidence indicates that members of the aristocracy continued to believe in the doctrine of Purgatory and to trust in the efficacy of prayers for the dead throughout the 1530s and into the 1540s. Only the intervention of the state interrupted and finally stopped their gifts, providing yet further confirmation of the revisionist argument that widespread, often active, support for the Church and religious status quo existed in the generation or two before Henry VIII's break with Rome.<sup>3</sup> As we shall see, however, the tombs and buildings that aristocratic women built served equally important secular purposes. They consciously planned

1 A chantry was an endowment to pay for perpetual prayers for the soul of the donor and anyone else she specified. It consisted of an altar or chapel dedicated for that purpose and was located in a church designated by the donor; in some cases, it was a separate building.

2 Margaret Aston, *England's Iconoclasts, Volume 1: Laws Against Images*, 16.

3 See, for example, Christopher Haigh, *English Reformations: Religion, Politics, and Society Under the Tudors*; Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580*; Eamon Duffy, *The Voices of Morebath*; J. J. Scarisbrick, *The Reformation and the English People*.

their monuments, chapels, and additions to their parish churches to proclaim their and their families' status and wealth, and to represent their dominant position in their villages. In a culture that believed that the social and political hierarchy formed part of the divine order of creation, they saw no contradiction in projects that embodied both worldly and spiritual aspirations. On a more personal level, the women's commissions gave them a unique opportunity to define their identities by choosing where they wanted to be buried and with whom, and how they wanted to be described in their epitaphs and heraldic shields.

Although historians have written about the commissions and accomplishments of a handful of the wealthiest and most visible of these women—Alice de la Pole, Duchess of Suffolk (1475), Margaret Beaufort, Countess of Richmond (1509), and Margaret Hungerford, Lady Botreaux and Hungerford (1478) come immediately to mind—they have not incorporated the broad achievement of aristocratic women as patrons of religious art into their accounts of Yorkist and early Tudor culture.<sup>4</sup> *English Aristocratic Women and the Fabric of Piety* fills this gap in the historical record. It demonstrates that the daughters, wives, and widows of noblemen and knights were active participants in the movement that transformed and beautified the physical structure of English churches in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. It is a study of a specific aspect of these women's activities, not an account of their complete lives as individuals. Where such accounts exist, they have been included in the footnotes and bibliography.

When they initiated their artistic and architectural projects, Yorkist and early Tudor aristocratic women drew on the personal and material resources they had accumulated while they managed their households and estates, raised their children and arranged their marriages, and cultivated and exploited their families' patronage networks. As they faced death, they turned to projects that would speed them and their close kin on the pathway to heaven and maintain their presence in their parishes.<sup>5</sup> Exercising the kind of agency that had characterized their achievements as wives, mothers,

4 Goodall, *God's House at Ewelme*; Michael Hicks, "Chantry, Obits and Almshouses," 79-98; Michael Hicks, "The Piety of Margaret Lady Hungerford," 99-118; and Michael Hicks, "St. Katherine's Hospital, Heytesbury: Prehistory, Foundation, and Re-foundation, 1409-79," 119-32; all in Hicks, *Richard III and His Rivals*; Jones and Underwood, *The King's Mother*, 72, 203-250; Jones, "Colleyweston—An Early Tudor Palace," in Williams, *England in the Fifteenth Century*, 129-41; Patricia Coulstock, *The Collegiate Church of Wimborne Minster*.

5 Throughout *English Aristocratic Women and the Fabric of Piety*, my discussion of their roles and resources relies on my earlier work, *English Aristocratic Women 1450-1550*. Chapter 5 on widows is particularly relevant.

and widows, they took the initiative in selecting the sites of their tombs, chapels, almshouses and schools, decided whether and how to repair or add to their parish churches, participated in planning their projects, and chose the epitaphs and escutcheons that would identify them and their families on the monuments, windows, and buildings they had commissioned.<sup>6</sup>

*English Aristocratic Women and the Fabric of Piety* is also the first large-scale study of the subjectivity of late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century aristocratic women, a dimension of the past largely invisible in written documents. In this book, subjectivity refers to women's outward expression of their identity and the actions they took as a consequence of it.<sup>7</sup> They developed their identity in a social context in which their families and lineages, class, and activities as wives, mothers, and widows played the principal part. In a period before the appearance of journals and autobiographies and one in which writers rarely used letters for self-reflection, scholars have few ways of discovering how women identified themselves and how these identifications shaped their choices and actions. Although we lack documents of this kind, however, historians can find women's understanding of themselves reflected in their letters and wills, the most important primary sources used in this study. Furthermore, when aristocratic wives and widows built the tombs, chantries, almshouses, schools, and churches that form the subject of this book, their choices reflected conscious decisions about how they wanted to represent themselves, their families, and their religious beliefs. The projects they undertook in the late 1530s and 1540s gave them the opportunity to signify publicly, occasionally in opposition to their families, their response to the unprecedented religious revolution through which they were living.

For Yorkist and early Tudor aristocratic women, the process of defining themselves was particularly challenging because of the complexity of their families, the key social unit against which they identified themselves.<sup>8</sup> Unlike their male kin, who belonged to their natal families throughout their lives, they joined one family after another as they married and remarried, in most cases retaining old ties as they established new ones. Well over 50 percent of the widows of peers and 80 percent of the widows of parliamentary knights remarried.<sup>9</sup> As a result, the foundation of their identity remained fluid long after they were mature adults. It was only when aristocratic

6 On this understanding of female agency, see Joan Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," 28-50.

7 James Daybell, *Women Letter-Writers in Tudor England*, 166-67.

8 On this point see, for example, *ibid.*, 159; Natalie Davis "Boundaries and the Sense of Self," 53-63.

9 Harris, *English Aristocratic Women*, 162.

women contemplated dying and had to choose where and with whom they wanted to be buried that they had to signify—and perhaps even explicitly recognize for the first time—how they defined themselves. The identities the women claimed at this juncture determined the location and design of their tombs, chantries, almshouses, and schools and the churches they designated as recipients of their bequests.

Wherever and whatever they built, aristocratic women's constructions asserted their and their families' power in their parishes. Their tombs and chapels occupied space in their churches that had previously belonged to the congregation as a whole. They filled the nave, aisles, and chancels with tombs, altars and chapels in places that had previously served a communal purpose. Many of them actually blocked the entrances to their chapels with screens or locked gates, displaying their ownership in the clearest way possible. They also asserted their status by decorating the aisles, towers, and windows they constructed and the vestments and ornaments they donated with their family arms. In all these ways, they played a major part in the process that Andrew Martindale has called the intrusion of the laity into the sacred spaces of their churches.<sup>10</sup>

Parishes benefited from the fees that aristocratic women paid for the location of their tombs and chantries, the services of their chantry priests, and the ornaments and vestments they donated to the high altar, but whether their neighbors regarded the exchange as advantageous was irrelevant. Aristocratic women acted as senior members of families that owned most of the land in their community, were its largest employers, and the most effective source of patronage for its inhabitants. They or their families were also often patrons of the church itself, appointing the rector or vicar when the benefice fell vacant. For example, Dame Anne Bigod exercised this right at Settrington, Yorkshire, in 1475; Dame Agnes Cheyne at Chenies, Buckinghamshire, in 1485; and Dame Anne Danvers at Dauntsey, Wiltshire, in 1528.<sup>11</sup> In such circumstances, women encountered few if any obstacles when they undertook the commissions discussed in this book. Looking toward both heaven and earth, they sought to benefit their and their families'

10 Martindale, "Patrons and Minders," 143-78. Martindale ascribed this intrusion to an earlier period and actually claimed that it declined after the thirteenth century. However, most of his evidence came from cathedrals rather than parish churches, where more and more of the gentry and nobility were buried in the Later Middle Ages. On the latter point, Saul, "The Gentry and the Parish," 247-249.

11 *Testamenta Eboracensia, A Selection of Wills from the Registry at York*, III, #78, 226n for Bigod; BL, Add'l Ms, 5840, f. 24 for Cheyne; and Macnamara, *Memorials of the Danvers Family*, 262 for Danvers.

souls and to memorialize their high rank. In the process, they transformed the churches they patronized and contributed to one of the most fertile periods in English religious architecture.

Finally, focusing on the scale and timing of aristocratic women's religious patronage contributes to the ongoing debate about the origins of the English Reformation. Most historians of the period—myself included—accept the revisionist argument that widespread, often active, support for the Church and the religious status quo existed in the generation or two before Henry VIII's break with Rome. Although the evidence about epitaphs and chantries presented here supports that interpretation, it also suggests the need for a more nuanced interpretation of the significance of their patronage. Revisionist scholars have cited the ongoing building, expansion, and beautification of parishes all over England as evidence of their position that the laity continued to accept the theology of Purgatory in particular and the structure and theology of the Church in general.<sup>12</sup> However, as *English Aristocratic Women and the Fabric of Piety* demonstrates, the tombs and buildings aristocratic women constructed were not only statements of religious belief; they were equally important as symbols of and memorials to their status, lineage and wealth. In fact, many noble and knightly families took a proprietary attitude toward their parish churches and turned them into family mausoleums.<sup>13</sup> While historians and art historians have long recognized the interpenetration of spiritual and secular concerns evident in the monuments and chapels that women and men built, their assessment has not led revisionists to articulate a more complex interpretation of the motives that fueled their activity.<sup>14</sup>

*English Aristocratic Women and the Fabric of Piety* is based on contemporary documents such as wills probated in the Prerogative Courts of Canterbury and York, cases in the Courts of Requests, Star Chamber and Chancery, royal grants, statutes, private bills, letters collected in the State Papers, and the Cotton and Harleian Collections at the British Library. In smaller numbers, it also includes marriage contracts, household and estate

12 Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, 131-32; Haigh, *English Reformations*, ch. 1. For a dissenting view, see Finch, *Church Monuments in Norfolk Before 1850*, 69-77.

13 M. G. Vale, "Piety, Charity and Literacy among the Yorkshire Gentry 1370-1480," 9-10; Saul, "Religious Sympathies of the Gentry in Gloucestershire 1200-1500," 103-104; Mark Knight, *Piety and Devotion among the Warwickshire Gentry, 1485-1547*, *Dugdale Occasional Papers*, No. 32; Brown, *Popular Piety in Late Medieval England*, 112-16; 125-27.

14 Among scholars focusing on particular monuments, see, for example, Saul, *Death, Art, and Memory in Medieval England*, 8-9; Nigel Llewellyn, *Funeral Monuments in Post-Reformation England*, 15, 274; Norris, "Later Medieval Monumental Brasses," 184. Among historians of religion, Peter Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead in Reformation England*, 33-34, 286-293; Brown, *Popular Piety*, 254.

accounts, and inventories, many of which are preserved in family archives and local record offices.

Throughout the text, but particularly in chapters one and two on tombs and chantries, wills, both women's and men's, provide the bulk of the evidence for women's patronage. Where the data come from men's wills, I have depended almost exclusively on testaments in which husbands appointed their widows as their sole executors and that contained specific directions that they should build or complete their monuments or chantries. One hundred and sixty (26 percent) of 618 men with surviving wives who appointed their executors chose their widows as their sole executors. I have also used wills in which men appointed co-executors, but singled out their widows as their "principal" or "chief" executor, or instances in which the women probated their husbands' wills alone. Evidence also comes from women's wills which state clearly that the testators had begun or finished the construction of their and/or their husbands' monuments or chantries. Where they had undertaken but not completed these projects, they often directed their executors to do so. Finally, many inscriptions on the tombs themselves, on tablets mounted on the wall, on the walls of their chantry chapels, or on nearby stained-glass windows testify to women's patronage. With the exception of these cases, I have not assumed that women included among their husbands' co-executors commissioned or completed their tombs.

About half of the tombs mentioned in this book no longer exist, but antiquarians and local historians who visited churches in the period kept records of their existence. They reported important details about many monuments that have since disappeared or been severely damaged. The Cole Collection in the Additional Manuscripts at the British Library is particularly useful in this respect. Reference works such as the Victoria County Histories of England, the publications of the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, and the exhaustive county surveys of the buildings of England begun by Sir Nikolaus Pevsner and continued by his colleagues supplement this information.

I have used numbers and percentages to give readers some idea of the frequency with which a particular phenomenon occurred. These figures are not intended as statistics in a contemporary sense. Fifteenth- and sixteenth-century sources are far too varied, even when they are of the same type, to support such claims. The purpose of these numbers is to support the overall argument by suggesting orders of magnitude or the significance of specific examples cited. Readers should understand them as such.

For the purposes of this study, I have defined 'aristocratic women' as the daughters, wives, and widows of noblemen and knights. Because

primogeniture governed the descent of land and titles, the younger sons of noblemen were knights, not members of the nobility. On an economic level, the richest knights and poorest barons enjoyed a similar level of wealth. In political terms, knights and noblemen held the leading positions in central government, were the king's companions and foremost servants at court, and cooperated in governing the counties for the Crown. Knights were also more likely to serve as MPs than other members of the upper gentry. As a result, the daughters of noblemen and knights were more likely to marry knights or the heirs of knights than noblemen or their heirs, but the movement was not all in one direction. Some knights' daughters married noblemen or their heirs, some noblemen's daughters married knights or knights' heirs. All of them belonged to the aristocracy as defined here. While the wealth and status of the majority of their fathers and husbands came from land, a small number of the women's husbands or fathers were merchants and Lord Mayors of London who rose into the aristocracy through their marriages and purchases of land. Thus, of the 230 women whose patronage is discussed in this book, fifteen had husbands or fathers who were merchants and Lord Mayors. They represent one path of upward mobility in the period.

The majority, though not all, of the aristocratic women who commissioned the art and architecture and made the donations discussed in this book were widows in the final stage of familial and managerial careers that had begun when they married for the first time. They commissioned their own, their spouses', and their joint tombs, chapels, stained-glass windows, and other additions to their churches to elicit prayers for their souls and those of their close relatives and to preserve their memory. As patrons, they initiated projects that either they or their deceased spouses had envisaged before they died, playing more or less active roles in designing them or making decisions about particular details. Some finished projects their husbands had begun before they died and followed the men's directions. When they failed to complete them before their own deaths, they directed *their* executors to do so. All of these possibilities will be documented in the text that follows.

The longevity of aristocratic widows meant that they had ample time to plan—and often to oversee the completion of—the projects they patronized: in a group of 351 couples where the death dates of both the male testators and their widows are known, 63 percent outlived their first husbands by more than ten years; 37 percent, by more than twenty.<sup>15</sup> These long widowhoods gave them the time and the opportunity to accumulate the large incomes

15 The figures in this paragraph are based on original research published in Harris, *English Aristocratic Women*, 15-16, 127-29.

and huge amount of luxury goods that enabled them to undertake the building and make the donations of vestments and ritual objects that form the subject of this book. In addition to their jointures and dowers, 466 (75.4 percent) of 618 knights and noblemen who predeceased their wives left them considerable additional income and goods, regardless of whether they appointed them as their executors. While only a minority included additional land among these extra bequests, they left their widows money, clothing, jewels, and plate, often in enormous quantities, as well as household goods and livestock. Women also collected income from land their husbands designated to support their younger sons and provide dowries for their daughters. Although most of this land and the land they held as jointures or dowers descended to their husbands' heirs when they died, widows could usually bequeath much, if not all, of their movable property in their wills. Wealthy, independent, and long-lived aristocratic women were thus able to play an important role in the expensive and wide-ranging investment in English churches that peaked in the first decade of the sixteenth century.<sup>16</sup>

*English Aristocratic Women and the Fabric of Piety* is divided into seven chapters. The first four chapters discuss the monuments, chapels and other structures, sculptures, and stained glass that aristocratic women commissioned for their favorite churches. With a few exceptions, their parish churches were the recipients of this largesse. The fifth chapter discusses women's endowment and building of hospitals, almshouses and schools, most of which were located in and benefited their parishes. Although the charters for these institutions almost always contained provisions for prayers for their souls, they represented a broader vision of the women's responsibility to do good works for their communities. Chapter six focuses on the multiple ways in which aristocratic women used their religious patronage to define themselves for posterity, revealing the complexity of their motives and synthesizing material from previous chapters. Throughout the book, this analysis makes clear that aristocratic women saw their religious and secular impulses as compatible and mutually reinforcing, rather than dichotomous. *English Aristocratic Women and the Fabric of Piety* ends with an epilogue that traces the fate of the buildings and art aristocratic women commissioned, revealing patterns of both survival and loss.

16 For example, Haigh, *English Reformations*, 29, 34-35; Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, 131-34; Duffy, *The Voices of Morebath*, 77; Finch, *Church Monuments in Norfolk*, 69.