CHAPTER THREE  
SLAVERY, POWER AND GENDER 

Power, Honour and Gender  

Here before Lammas, God helping, Æthelflæd, the ‘Lady of the Mercians’ took possession of the stronghold which is called Derby, together with all that belonged to it; also four of her thegns, who were dear to her, were killed there inside the gates.1  

This entry for the year 917, taken from the Anglo Saxon Chronicle C, portrays a powerful and successful military commander with devoted warriors. This passage would be wholly unremarkable if it were referring to any of the sons of Alfred the Great yet it does not. In the following entry for 918 the Chronicle relates that Æthelflæd, Alfred’s daughter, went on from this victory to secure control over  

...the stronghold at Leicester, and the most part of the raiding-armies that belonged to it were subjected. And also the York-folk had promised her—and some of them granted so by pledge, some confirmed by oaths—that they would be at her disposition.2  

At first glance these entries would appear to be entirely at odds with the patriarchal society which I have been describing thus far. How was it possible, in a society which valued female possession and control so significantly, that entire armies and indeed territories of men could consider submitting to the over-lordship of a woman? How could any woman, no matter how significant her lineage, become a military commander in a world in which martial activity defined masculinity and feuding frequently revolved around sexual jealousy and a man’s ability  

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2 “Her heo begeat on hire geweald mod Godes fultume on foreweardne gear geyhsunlice þa burh æt Ligraceastræt, 7 se mesta þel þes heres þe þærto hitre weard underpeodæd; 7 hæfdon eac Eforswiceingas hire gehaten, 7 sune on weolde gesæald, sune mid apum gefæstnæd, hit hi on hyre rædenne beon woldon.”, ibid., p. 76. Translation from Swanton, ASC, p. 105.
to protect his women?3 Moreover, what, if any, bearing does this have upon our interpretation of the institution of slavery in the societies of medieval Britain?

If Æthelflæd, Lady of the Mercians, were the only example of such a powerful female figure then we might be able to explain her away as an unusual anomaly, yet she was not. Independent and authoritative women of Æthelflæd’s type, although admittedly a rare phenomenon, existed within all the societies of medieval Britain.4 Furthermore, a closer examination of such women will provide us with a greater understanding of how notions of power and powerlessness were expressed and conceptualised in these societies. We have seen thus far that overt expressions of masculine prowess and virility were intimately related to a man’s social standing and power. This would logically suggest that it would be extremely difficult, or even impossible, for a woman to attain any significant position of power independent of her male guardian. However, this does not always appear have been the case. Women were able to attain power, influence and independence in the societies of medieval Britain. Yet, they did so by operating within parameters dictated, very much, by normative masculine behaviour systems and symbols of status.5 As we shall see, this also has significant implications for our understanding of how these medieval societies perceived those individuals who were labelled as weak and powerless. This, in turn, will highlight the importance of slavery for defining the social and cultural order of these societies.

3 The passages already quoted from the ASC leave us in little doubt that Æthelflæd was the most significant military commander in Mercia during the first decades of the tenth century. E.T. Wainwright has argued that she was the leader of an even wider anti-Norse coalition in the North of England which comprised of English and Danish armies together with forces from Scotland and British warriors from the Strathclyde region, see “Æthelflæd, Lady of the Mercians” in H. Damico et al. (eds.), New Readings on Women in Old English Literature (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 44–55, 51. Similarly, Stafford has remarked that Æthelflæd “…was architect and leader of a great alliance of the kings and rulers of northern Britain, subduer of Welsh princes, Lady of the Vikings of York.” P. Stafford, Queens, Concubines and Dowagers, The King’s Wife in the Early Middle Ages (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1983), p. 118. See also H.M. Jewell, Women in Medieval England (Manchester/New York: Manchester University Press, 1996), p. 39.
