Who’s afraid of Rosamond Merridew?: Reading medieval history in “The journal of Mistress Joan Martyn”

Leena Kore-Schröder
Who’s afraid of Rosamond Merridew?:
Reading medieval history in “The journal of Mistress Joan Martyn”

Leena Kore-Schröder

Virginia Woolf’s interest in history is well known for passing by the authorised, official version in favour of the ordinary and obscure. But why, at the beginning of the twentieth century, was she so interested not just in history, but in history when it dealt with the everyday and the anonymous? And why did she locate this ordinary, everyday history so often in the Middle Ages, launching herself in 1906 into history and fiction with Joan Martyn’s story set in the late-fifteenth century; renewing her interest in the medieval with essays like “Reading” (1919) and “The Pastons and Chaucer” (1925); and at the end of her life developing a sustained analysis in “Anon” that was still based in the medieval period?

Interpretations of “The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn” invariably read its modern-day protagonist, Rosamond Merridew, as a prototype “new” historian, a misunderstood scholar whose radical research ushers in possibilities for a revisionary feminist history. This is a valid analysis, but it begs the question of why Merridew isn’t therefore a more attractive character? Her narrative voice often grates, as when, without blushing, she explains her methods to us as “a confession of my own virtues” (34, my emphasis), or affectedly reveals her age like the coyest of spinsters (32). She condescends to the Martyns, assuming much about their house and possessions, and her presumption that “they would [not] hesitate to sell this old [house], if a good offer were to be made for it” is nothing short of outrageous (36). For all her declared sensitivity to “the lives of men and women and children” (34), she does not show herself a particularly astute judge of character: however unappreciative of his “grandmother Joan’s diary” Mr Martyn may seem to her, that indifference is not supported by his confession that “a man likes to keep his family round him”, and that without the journal and other documents he would feel “kind of lonely” (43). His sentiments reveal that Merridew could not have been more
wrong when, on the doorstep of Martyn Hall, she informed us with all the lofty confidence borne out of many years of research, that “This is the kind of place […] where the owners are likely to possess exquisite manuscripts, and sell them as easily [to] the first rag man who comes along, as they would sell their pig wash” (36). Yet, comically, once welcomed into the Martyn household, she continues to mis-read the signals. Having gathered that Mr Martyn does value his family manuscripts after all, she is more cautious about what she can presume, and where she formerly did not doubt that he would readily dispose of them, she is now equally sure that he will not: wondering if she dare ask him to let her borrow the papers, “Instinct [tells her] that Mr. Martyn was not the man to trust the benevolent impulses of his heart” (44). Wrong again. She is immediately contradicted by the spontaneous direct speech of the next line: “'O Madam, there’s no need to bother about that,' he said, carelessly […] 'If these old papers please you, I’m sure you’re welcome to 'em!’” (44).

Reading with some care, therefore, we do not have to reinforce Merridew's own self-image. Rather, as with all first-person narratives, we should be on our guard from her first line onwards, for it is not only the Martyns who are being patronised. Merridew's opening salvo, “My readers may not know, perhaps, who I am” (33), patronises us as well. Of course we have never heard of her, and thus, needing illumination, we are already relegated to the company of those who do not fully appreciate her true worth. It is a clever opening move, for in not wishing to be associated with Merridew’s doltish critics, we willingly side with her (as almost all critics who analyse this story have done), and thus we endorse her intellectual authority over her inferior fellow historians. Reading against the grain of her first-person voice, however, opens up spaces in which to question how Merridew’s modern-day half of the story is implicated with Joan’s medieval one: what has happened to Joan’s “odd” spelling that Mr Martyn warned would make her difficult to read (41)? His description that Joan arranged her journal by month is also not matched by what we find. Most strange of all, how would Joan have been able to anticipate that she was coming to the end of both her narrative and her life, and head her final section “Last Pages” (60)? Are we to read the medieval half of the story with a willing suspension of disbelief, or is this covert evidence that Merridew has already edited and shaped Joan’s journal?

Such questions underpin the claim that Rosamond Merridew is a dark horse. It is too easy to read her as an unconventional, if not eccentric, figure whose work has been unfairly ignored by the academic establishment of patriarchal males interested only in confirming and promoting the official “our island story”. That, however, is precisely how Merridew would want us to see her: a lone female, who has won whatever academic success she has at the expense of marriage and motherhood; who dares to disagree with the standard practice of explaining history through figures of power rather than those subordinate to it; and, whose methodology is criticised for abandoning historical fact in favour of imagination and narrative. Her note of defiance suggests that she has many critics, but this criticism is hard to identify if we put her work, “The Manor Rolls”, alongside that of her real-life medievalist contemporaries. For example, if we look at the numbers of court rolls published in any decade from 1840 onwards, it is common to count in single figures: one or two in each of the six decades from 1840 to 1880 (before Woolf’s birth, and before Merridew would have been research active); and seven, two, six and one for each respective decade from 1930 to 1970 (at the end of Woolf’s life, and following Merridew). However, the statistics for manorial court rolls published during Woolf’s lifetime and in
Merridew’s period, are strikingly high in comparison: fourteen for each of the three decades from 1880 to 1910; eight in the period 1910-20 (presumably this dip is affected by the First World War); and up again to twelve in 1920-30 (Razi and Smith 2). In other words, the hey-day for research into medieval manorial court rolls is between 1880 and 1910: the very period into which Merridew is written, and towards the end of which Woolf herself becomes engaged with questions about historiography.

What is notable about Merridew’s research, therefore, is not that it is unorthodox, but quite the opposite: in terms of period and methodology her work is typical of historical studies at the beginning of the twentieth century. The Middle Ages were popular, and new historical methods using unpublished and uncanonical sources were being developed not only by the most eminent Oxbridge professors, but by scholars in other universities as well. Neither were the ordinary lives of obscure individuals overlooked: piecing together the everyday was a main reason for studying manor rolls at all. Such archives became important not least because, as a comparatively young discipline in the universities, medieval studies sought to establish itself as a scientific and document-based history that countered the romantic antiquarianism of the Victorian cult of the Middle Ages. There was also keen academic interest in local history, away from centres of power: newly discovered manuscripts led researchers to backwaters, and changes in the structure of municipal government in the late-nineteenth century encouraged such well-received studies of local borough records as those by Mary Bateson and Sidney and Beatrice Webb.\(^2\)

The importance of developing history as a new discipline that embraced economic and social life was never disputed, with the London School of Economics established to fulfil this very purpose in 1895. Furthermore, so much of this socio-economic research was conducted by women, many of them, as might be expected, at the LSE, as well as in the recently-established women’s colleges. For example, in the first volumes of the *Victoria History of the Counties of England* that were published between 1905 and 1911, and which drew heavily upon medieval local records, 78% of the essays were written by women. Indeed, in the years between 1870 and the 1930s, female social and economic historians of all periods were well respected and represented in learned and professional bodies: even the conservative Royal Historical Society was one third composed of women, while the female membership of the Historical Association was “an astonishing 90%” (Melman 18).

Pre-eminently, these female scholars were medievalists, drawn to the period because it offered them a different view on the relations between community and individuality, or the public and the private, from that of the traditional post-Reformation emphasis on the citizen in the political nation-state. Neither were these female medievalists as ostracised as Merridew claims herself to be. The promising career of the already-mentioned Mary Bateson was curtailed by her early death in 1906, but other women went on to various degrees of success, all of them fostered in the climate of medieval studies at the beginning of the twentieth century: some of the better-known names are Elizabeth Dixon, Lina Eckenstein, Rose Graham, Alice Clark, Frances Davenport, Helen Cam, and especially Eileen Power.\(^3\) Born in 1889, dying suddenly in 1940, Power was an established professor at the London School of Economics, author of two seminal and best-selling studies of medieval society, and described by her biographer as “the best-known medieval historian of the interwar years” (Berg 2). Of all these female historians, Eileen Power was what Rosamond Merridew would have liked to be: a prominent medievalist with a brilliant career and formidable publishing record (no children, married only at 46—at 45, Merridew still has hope!), whose achievements were widely respected and influential.
Power's *Medieval People* (1924), which went into ten editions and is still in print today, gives an idea of what Merridew's publications could have been like: it is certainly this book that Woolf buys in December 1940, when she records that "I bought Eileen Power for 6d", and regrets not adding a new cigarette holder to the purchase (Woolf 1984: 345).

Merridew precedes Power by two decades, but neither did Power herself spring from nowhere, for she was trained in those same methods of medieval historiography that Merridew espouses in 1906. It is, therefore, of some interest that Woolf was herself acquainted with Eileen Power. She comes into Woolf's wide network of family connections through the figure of Karin Costelloe, with whom Power was very close friends. Costelloe and Power first met in 1910 and in 1912-14 shared rooms in London. Through Karin, Power quickly became intimate with the Russell and Berenson families: Alys Russell was Karin's aunt; Mary Berenson, her mother; and Ray Costelloe was her sister, to whom Virginia was introduced in 1909 through Lytton Strachey's sister Marjorie, and who married his brother, Oliver, in 1911. It is, however, Karin Costelloe's own marriage to Virginia's younger brother Adrian (in 1914, breaking up the living arrangements with Power) that brings Eileen Power into closest proximity with Woolf. Power was deeply sorry to lose her house-mate, admitting in a letter to Margery Garrett that she was “plumbed to the depths of atrocious misery, because I had taken a dislike to Adrian sixty times greater than my dislike to Hugh Dalton [who had married another close friend] & considered all those Bloomsberries as unsatisfactory folk with whom to have permanent relationships” (Berg 52). However, she came to terms with Adrian and his Bloomsbury connections, well enough to have been invited by Virginia to dinner at Tavistock Square in June 1925 (Woolf 1980: 30), and to have invited her back: in January 1940 Woolf remembers “shar[ing] a packet of choc. creams with [Humbert Wolfe], at Eileen Power’s”, over ten years before (Woolf 1984: 256). This occasion would most likely have been one of Power's regular “kitchen dances” (as she called them): stylish and lively parties that she held in her basement kitchen—and her biographer confirms that Humbert Wolfe was a regular guest. From the early 1920s to her death in 1940 Power lived at No. 20 Mecklenburgh Square, and it is in this kitchen that Woolf would have eaten those chocolate creams. Therefore, in 1939 when the Woolfs themselves moved into the Square, to No. 37, Virginia of course would have remembered Eileen Power (she certainly remembers the kitchen dance, and buys her book), who was then at the height of her academic fame, a strikingly beautiful, famously elegant woman whose presence in the Square could not have gone unnoticed.

The kitchen was a wonderfully appropriate venue, as Power herself must have been aware, for a hostess-historian who introduces her book, *Medieval People*, as “being chiefly concerned with the kitchens of History” (2). Power’s ability to conduct her research of the 1920s and 30s through a “kitchen” point of view, and Woolf’s to devise a fictitious female historian who was doing just that earlier in 1906, testifies to the fact that both women had available to them a historiographical model which strongly inspired and supported their work. That model is F.W. Maitland (1850-1906). Arriving at Girton as an undergraduate in 1910, Eileen Power just missed Maitland’s high-profile presence as Downing Professor of the Laws of England at Cambridge, but she became familiar with his work as her own academic interests developed, and was willingly influenced by his methodology: as her friend and fellow-medievalist Helen Cam rightly observes, “We are all pupils of Maitland” (vii), and it is in this sense that Merridew, and Woolf her creator, also sit at Maitland’s feet.
Maitland’s importance for medieval history as a discipline in the twentieth century cannot be underestimated. He was a practising lawyer whose legal interests in medieval land-tenure led him to extensive research into the manorial court rolls of the Middle Ages. Like Woolf’s Rosamond Merridew, best known for her work, “The Manor Rolls”, Maitland too is renowned for his historical studies and editions of manor, or court rolls. Onwards from 1889, when he published his edition of court rolls in the period 1246-1303, Maitland’s articles and books on the legal complexities of medieval rural English society were based upon careful examination of the documents of its manorial courts. Court rolls are the written records, begun in the thirteenth century, of regular assemblies held by the lord of the manor at his hall, which all tenants were required to attend. At these meetings or “courts” the lord or his representative decided upon what land, and how much, would be held by each of his tenants. These rolls, therefore, furnish the direct link between land and power in the medieval world, not simply by revealing the details of land ownership, but more pointedly, by foregrounding the problematic position of those who neither owned land, nor held land directly from the landlord. Land, and access to it, is therefore a defining feature of the medieval subject, and this Maitland realised by making land ownership the key issue of his research.

Maitland’s greatest contribution, however, was his double recognition that manor rolls are not only important as legal documents, but that they also shed valuable light on social and economic history. When, therefore, Woolf’s fictitious medieval historian announces with questionable modesty that her “researches into the system of land tenure in the 13th, 14th and 15th Centuries have been made doubly valuable [...] by the remarkable gift I have for presenting them in relation to the life of the time” (34), she is only declaring what had been conclusively established by F.W. Maitland before her, whose work marks the real turning-point in the study of medieval history. His imaginative interpretation of the medieval period recognises the fortuitous way in which English common law has grown out of the decisions and ambitions of a self-interested medieval power elite. There is nothing preordained or destined about law founded in such power: its origins are contingent and circumstantial and, therefore by implication, the law can be superseded and changed. To Maitland, each case recorded in plea rolls reveals not so much anything inherently true of the English legal process itself, as of the people who ran it. Commenting, for example, on a particular rule that “lived on into modern times, when it looked absurd enough and did much mischief” (he is responding to observations made by Woolf’s “Uncle Fitzy”, Sir James Stephen, in his book, History of Criminal Law) Maitland nevertheless asserts that “It was the outcome of strict medieval logic” (Pollock and Maitland 2: 509). In other words, laws are never deliberately made to be obscure: at one time in the distant past they had a purpose, and that purpose can be imaginatively rediscovered. This is precisely Merridew’s point when she declares that “I have often made so bold as to hint that the subtleties which delight us so keenly were more a proof of our ancestors’ negligence than a proof of their astounding painstaking. For what sane man, I have had the audacity to remark, could have spent his time in complicating his laws for the benefit of half a dozen antiquaries who were to be born five centuries after he was in the grave?” (34).

It is in the work of Maitland that all the key features Merridew credits herself with are found. Like her, he is interested in the history of obscure everyday lives. Plea rolls concern named individuals, each with a unique case: Maitland’s interest is always in specific detail, rather than general pattern. Then, too, he admits the crucial importance
of uncanonical evidence, and works as readily with incidental archival papers, as he does with official public documents. He also recognises that these are constructed texts, and that they handle their material subjectively. But, rather than seeing this lack of historical objectivity as a problem, Maitland turns it to his advantage by realising that subjective points of view are nothing less than indices of real people in real places at particular times: they afford him with the ability to appreciate what is human. Maitland also traces common law back through a history that is emphatically social: he is not much concerned with spiritual or ecclesiastical questions, for all that the Church was a dominant power in the Middle Ages. Rather, his source material consists of dealings between people, in matters of family and community relationship. And lastly, in order to practice a historiography of this kind, Maitland possesses an unconventionally lively imagination. To understand history in this way, is also to allow for its narrativity.

The joke in “The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn” is that it refers and defers to the work of Maitland without ever mentioning him by name. Merridew’s performance of herself, therefore, should be read as a partly disingenuous one, for if she is not a complete stranger to the “secluded rooms” of Oxford and Cambridge (33), then at least two academics there will have made her acquaintance: Sir Frederick Pollock, elder statesman of the English legal system and Corpus Professor of Jurisprudence at Oxford, and of course, F. W. Maitland himself at Cambridge. Neither man was an academic maverick or outsider. They collaborated on the monumental History of English Law in 1895: a project conceived by Cambridge University Press to capitalise on the names of two Oxbridge heavyweights, and which even over a century later has yet to become a period piece. Thus, the slyly grudging backwards-construction of her admission that she is “not absolutely unknown” (33) should alert us to the fact, that while Woolf projects her voice through Merridew, she nevertheless keeps it firmly, and typically, tongue-in-cheek. I would suggest, therefore, that “The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn” is written with Maitland in mind as its reader. Half-tribute, half-joke, the story is inspired by affection for an admired friend (and he was a very close one) in the same way that the contemporaneous “Friendships Gallery” is written for Violet Dickinson, and much later, Orlando for Vita Sackville-West; Woolf does not reserve such offerings for women alone. Maitland, sadly, was dead four months after the story was written, and this could well be the single greatest reason why Woolf left this otherwise successfully-developed narrative unpublished in her lifetime, for with the death of Maitland she may have lost her prime motivation for writing it.

Woolf’s friendships with Violet Dickinson and Vita Sackville-West are well documented; that with Maitland is not. The reason why the young Virginia had the opportunity to involve herself with medieval history is not because Maitland was so eminent in his field, but that he was so familiar in hers. He belonged to the intellectual aristocracy of the Fisher and Stephen families, and was Leslie Stephen’s regular companion on his “Sunday tramps”. At home with the Stephens at Hyde Park Gate he met and fell in love with Virginia’s cousin Florence Fisher, whom he married in 1886. With his legal background Maitland also fitted seamlessly into the Stephen family; indeed, with Law as the Stephen profession, going back for three generations and extending into the fourth with Thoby (who was destined for the Bar), it is fair to say that the Stephens were nothing less than a legal dynasty: Woolf had the Law in her blood. The family recognised, and kept to its own: just as Maitland’s brother-in-law H. A. L. Fisher wrote the first Maitland biography in 1910, even so did Leslie Stephen request Maitland to write his, published in 1906.
young Virginia, too, was drawn into this family network, invited by Maitland to contribute her own “Note” on her father, and aiding him by editing her parents’ letters.

Had Maitland lived, he would undoubtedly have been a familiar figure in Bloomsbury, not merely because he was a Cambridge Apostle, but for yet stronger reasons of family and friendship. Virginia held Maitland as closely in her affections as Maitland held her in his, as is apparent from his last letter to his wife, in which he gives news of Thoby Stephen’s death. It is poignant to read how Maitland’s last thoughts in this letter are for Virginia, and she would surely have been gratified to know how much faith he had in her in spite of the breakdowns that were already a part of her recent past: “I can’t help thinking of poor Ginia. If her head stands all this anxiety and sorrow and joy, it is a good steady head” (Maitland 1965: 385-6). Maitland was not to know when writing this that he himself would be dead in a little over three weeks’ time. There are, therefore, very particular circumstances that brought Virginia close to Maitland in the 1905-06 period during which she was not only becoming more sure of herself as a writer, but was also attempting to become a teacher of history at Morley College. She respected him professionally, not just because he was writing her father’s life (which alone would have drawn her to him—“It is a blessing we have that book”, she tells Violet Dickinson [Woolf 1975: 271]), but also because of her own involvement in its production. Maitland, after all, helped Virginia to publish her first piece of writing in book form, and that is surely something never forgotten. The sad timing of events would also fix him in her memory, with her father’s biography published but a few weeks before Thoby’s death, only to be quickly followed by Maitland’s own. Her letter to Violet Dickinson after Maitland’s death is as heartfelt as anything she ever wrote on the passing of friends and family: ‘I do admire so few people—none I think as I admired him—and somehow the loss is very great’ (Woolf 1975: 270-1).

Without doubt the young Virginia respected Maitland tremendously, and eagerly hoped for his approval of the short piece that he asked her to contribute. He did like it, just as she admired his finished biography. He needed Virginia to help him with extensive quotation from Leslie Stephen’s private correspondence, and this feature alone renders his biography strikingly different from the conventional model. Much of his book consists of long uninterrupted passages from Leslie’s own personal letters. Thus, not only did Woolf help to research and contribute to a biography that is partly the standard chronology of a life, and partly the voice of the subject himself, but she also witnessed Maitland’s historiographical method at first-hand, which wrote history out of personal and private experience, and treated unpublished source material equally with public and published texts. In Maitland, Woolf had her first example of an historian who, with her own father as subject, was able to interleave personal with public experience in order to explain how the two are inextricably related. There are crossovers of influence here, partly due to Woolf’s admiration of Maitland as man and historian, and partly due to her desire to write history in a way that would be respected by a scholar like Maitland. The result is “The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn”, half of which is narrated by a historian of medieval land tenure; and the other half told in the first-person voice of an English girl living in late-medieval Norfolk. The two sections are contiguous, just as in the Stephen biography Maitland’s own authorised “public” voice as biographer stands beside Leslie Stephen’s personal and private one. Even more to the point, Maitland’s ability to untangle medieval law through his imaginative sympathy with the people who shaped it, is the very talent that Woolf bestows on her historian, Rosamond Merridew.
It is not just Merridew who engages with Maitland’s historiography, however: the whole of the story does so in its concerns with land ownership, which direct the course of Merridew’s scholarship as much as they determine Mrs Martyn’s “Theory of Ownership” over four centuries earlier. The present-day Mrs Martyn immediately draws attention to the fact that “Her husband was a farmer on rather a large scale; but land had sunk terribly in value” (37). The family history is partly charted in terms of land acquisition and loss: one Martyn ancestor “bought the Lower Meadow”; another “sold the Fen Farm” (39, 40). The modern Mr Martyn has every reason to claim that “I learnt a great deal about the land” from Joan’s journal (41), just as Joan’s father in his turn “is wont to sit, when he is at home, with the Manor Rolls and other legal papers before him” (49). Even Merridew negotiates in these same terms, establishing her credentials through reference to a more powerful local landowner than the Martyns: “Mr Lathom, (the great landowner of the place) will tell you all about me” (44). Land is a driving force behind Joan’s marriage contract—her mother points out appreciatively that “You [Joan] might for instance rule over the land of Kirtlings—your land would touch ours” (50)—and indeed, Joan is herself proud of the Martyn estate, to the extent that she is more attached to it than she ever could be to a husband. Even the pull of the feminine and the maternal, away from the masculine and the patriarchal, is still embodied for Joan in terms of land: “Norfolk and the parish of Long Winton in Norfolk is to me what my own grandmother is; a tender parent, dear and familiar, and silent to whom I shall return in time” (52).

It is not for nothing, therefore, that the story presents the “Theory of Ownership” through the ruling matriarchal figure of Joan’s mother instead of a male Martyn. “Thinking back through mothers” in this story entails more than just a spiritual heritage, but rather, goes to the very sources of power in property and possession in a way that has little to do with feminist resistance. Joan’s mother is an unapologetic nationalist whose ambitions for “the management of house and lands” (59) are preparation for the larger political organisation of England as a great nation-state. Are we to read her negatively? Yes, in so far as we measure our response according to Joan’s reluctance to embrace this nationalist, empire-building vision. Woolf places the Martyns of the late-fifteenth century into a very specific historical moment, one which Marx in Capital identifies as the turning-point between one type of socio-economic organisation and another: “the prelude of the revolution that laid the foundation of the capitalist mode of production, was played in the last third of the fifteenth century and the first decade of the sixteenth century [. . .] [in] the forcible driving of the peasantry from the land” (672). Where Maitland, and Merridew following him, studies land tenure in order to better understand the socio-economic history of medieval England, Marx takes the history of land ownership as a mirror in which to see the rise of capitalism. If we go by Marx’s analysis of the late-fifteenth century in England as the period of transition from an agrarian, “peasant” society to one that is capitalist, then Joan writes precisely as feudal England, organised upon the household as a corporate group, shifts into the modern nation-state, based upon individual ownership and capitalist production. In this Marxist “progressive” view it is therefore significant that Joan remembers the way that her mother’s “Theory of Ownership” envisages a future of trade and national prosperity, with “wagons that pass each other going laden to the coast and returning as heavily laden with goods taken from ships” (60). Joan’s mother’s household organisation, with its subsistence economy, looks forward to that of a larger global market. Her daughter Joan fights shy of this system— it is the same one that Woolf in Three Guineas incriminates for privileging one gender over another.
another on precisely these issues of property and ownership—and yet, Joan comes round to accepting it, once she realises that it will also bring stability to the land, with no need for fortified manor houses. Writing as she does at the end of the Wars of the Roses, whether or not it is the capitalist turning-point that Marx identifies, this vision of affluent peace is understandably attractive to her.

The point of Mrs Martyn’s “Theory of Ownership” is not whether we should read it positively or negatively. It forms part of story’s undercurrent of power and land ownership, reaffirming the connection between them in a way which (like Maitland) neither supports nor criticises that relation—even though its assumptions and consequences may be ripe for criticism—but rather, explores the tie between land and subject. Joan Martyn reveals the nature of this tie in her description of the ‘one road’ running through the land. Not the broad and prosperous trading road of her mother’s vision, this is a road of threat to the community and danger to the self: “There is but one road, and it passes through vast lands, where no men live, but only those who have murdered or robbed; for they may not dwell with others in towns, but must pass their lives with the wild beasts, who murder also, and eat the clothes from your back” (49).

Joan refers to the criminal class of men known as “outlaws”—literally standing outside the law—which begs the question of how they can be dealt with by law, if they are not recognised as legal subjects. The outlaw is problematic because, in a society in which selfhood is defined primarily according to landed status, to lack a tie to the land is itself an implicit threat to the idea of order and identity. The outlaw is more “wild beast” than man (his symbol, as Pollock and Maitland observe, is a wolf’s head), and Joan reacts accordingly when she encounters one such figure on a cold afternoon’s walk with her brothers. Without any knowledge of crime, the Martyn siblings assume that he is a malefactor or “Sanctuary man” (52; a refugee from justice in a consecrated church). Looking like a wanderer, without tie to land, he is associated with criminality (robbery, murder or debt; 52) and animalism (“prowling out of bounds in search of food”; 52), in stark contrast to the story’s other wanderer, Master Richard. While the minstrel, too, often lives exposed and eats “like a man who has fed upon hips and haws, and drunk water from the brook” (56), nevertheless his is a sylvan attractiveness rather than a bestial threat: only the artist-figure is permitted to wander in the medieval world. It is significant, therefore, that the beast imagery brims over into the immediately following scene. Here Joan describes how she and Anthony visit one of their own serfs or tenants. For all that they have rights to live and work on Martyn land, Beatrice and Peter Somers are sub-human to Joan, and they merge with the wild-beast “Sanctuary man”. Anthony speaks to the wife as “to some animal who had strong claws and a wicked eye” (53), while Joan doubts that she can even talk, “snarling and howling was her only language” (53). Joan’s horror bears no trace of fellow-feeling or sympathy. She detects no “human sense” in Peter, but only the responses of an idiot (53). She cannot imagine him living other than as an animal, and although it is her brother who insists that the Somers are people who “will tear us to pieces with their fangs”, she does not disagree: Peter Somers’s “ugly face” continues to haunt her on her walk, and “it was like waking from a nightmare to enter our own clean hall” (53).

Joan’s is a complex response, and one that is not easily accommodated by a reading that would emphasise her feminist significance. It reveals the threat of landlessness in terms that Joan realises both socially and psychically. Reading past the subjectivity of her description, we might regard this scene very differently, and foreground either its pathos.
or injustice. For Joan, however, the Somers hovel, with its associations of dirt, animalism and sexuality, is but a continuation of the threat of the outlaw, whereby what is politically and socially dangerous has become internalised by her. In the way that she finds the threat of the outlaw equivalent with that of the serf, it reveals how that threat can never be expelled, for even as it is distanced from what is civilised and proper, it haunts and delineates the borderlands of social order from within. The sanctuary it finds is inside the system itself, just as the Somers hovel is not outwith the Martyn estate, but part of its internal management. Little wonder that Joan feels uncomfortable.

To thus understand history in interrelated social and psychic terms avoids explaining it teleologically. The idea that the real direction of history is always towards a confirmation of the superior present, Maitland realises, is essentially a lawyer’s explanation of history, whereby the past is used to account for a present situation. Maitland’s revisionism comes from his legal re-reading of the relations between past and present, and does not regard English legal history as a continuous progression from simple beginnings to mature complexity: “Simplicity is the outcome of technical subtlety; it is the goal not the starting point. As we go backwards the familiar outlines become blurred; the ideas become fluid, and instead of the simple we find the indefinite” (1897: 9). Maitland’s “blurred” and “fluid” history upsets the unilinear direction of accepted historiography, as is evident from the title alone of his landmark study of the economic and social organisation of early England: *Domesday Book and Beyond* (1897). “Beyond” in Maitland’s formulation is not used in the more usual sense of “afterwards”; for him, “beyond” means before, and presents a challenge to the compass points of origin and consequence. How we take our bearings matters not only to how we read history, but also “The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn”: are we to approach it chronologically from Joan’s moment in 1480 to the present day of Merridew? The arrangement of the two narratives, with Merridew’s preceding Joan’s, would seem to contradict such linearity. Is Merridew, then, meant to contextualise the medieval half of the story? Again, such “progressive” history is confounded, for Merridew’s authority as interpreter grows faint: the story fades away with Joan, and Merridew does not re-enter to complete her function as its framing point of view. Woolf thus places the middle and modern ages into narrative jeopardy, whereby neither can explain, nor account for the other. Rather, both stand in a relation that is in Maitland’s sense “blurred” and “fluid”.

This narrative strategy is the story’s single most radical move, for not only does it refuse the “Whig” sense of progressivist history, by which the past is forever perfecting itself into the (English) present,’ but it also refutes the Marxist historical model, by which pre-capitalist peasant, or communal society is necessarily differentiated from modern social organisation based upon capitalism and individual ownership. Would the 24-year-old Virginia have been able to formulate such a paradigm-shift, so far-reaching in its socio-historical assumptions as to challenge Marx himself? In all probability, no; but she would have been more than able to assume it through F. W. Maitland, who at the turn of the century stood virtually alone as a medievalist whose methodology did not follow the usual polarised route from peasantry to capitalism. Maitland’s ability to transcend the binary historiographical tactics of reading the sophisticatedly complex present against a naïvely simple past is nothing less than revolutionary. Not only does he counteract the evolutionary model of history, but at the same time he also exposes the ideological assumptions of superiority that accompany such a model. His logic enables Woolf to read history in terms of sameness rather than difference: to read across the temporalities of
Rosamond Merridew and Joan Martyn, rather than to keep them separate. What Maitland makes possible for Woolf, therefore, is nothing short of the ability to appreciate what “ordinariness” can mean in itself, for if she seeks to understand an “ordinary mind on an ordinary day” (Woolf 1994: 160) she first needs a history that operates in terms of relation rather than exclusion. In his *Domesday Book and Beyond* Maitland exhorts us to attend to “the thoughts of our forefathers, [and] their common thoughts about common things” (520). Retaining even his periodic cadences in her own prescription to “examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day”, it is in the early “The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn” that Woolf initiates that close engagement with Maitland’s historiography that would carry her through to the last, unfinished “Anon” at the end of her writing life.

---

**BIBLIOGRAPHIE**


NOTES


3. See their work: Elizabeth Dixon, “Craftswomen in the Livre des Métiers,” Economic Journal 5 (1895): 209-28; Lina Eckenstein, Women Under Monasticism: Chapters on Saint-Lore and Convent life Between AD 500 and AD 1500 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1896); Rose Graham, S. Gilbert of Sempringham and the Gilbertines (London: Elliot Stock, 1901); Alice Clark, Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1919); Frances Davenport’s innovative work is discussed in Razi and Smith 8-9; Helen Cam, Studies in the Hundred Rolls (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1921); and lastly, Eileen Power’s two books, Medieval English Nunneries c. 1275-1535 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922) and Medieval People (London: Methuen and Co., 1924). Biographies of these women, and many others, can be read in Jane Chance, ed., Women Medievalists and the Academy (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005). It is a valuable reference work, although weighted towards the American academy. Nonetheless, from the information provided, Woolf’s Rosamond Merridew is an accurate typecast: of the 36 medieval scholars listed who were born before 1900, 26 were spinsters, 4 married late in middle-age, and 4 were married with no children. Only 2 women were both married, and had children—and both, if this tells us anything, were Continental Europeans.


5. Maitland’s major works in this field, all of which underpin my analysis, are: Select Pleas in Manorial and other Seignorial Courts, Selden Society 2 (London: Quaritch, 1889); The Court Baron:
“Precedents of Pleading in Manorial and other Local Courts,” Selden Society 4 (London: Quaritch, 1891); “The History of a Cambridgeshire Manor,” English Historical Review 7 (1894): 417-39; Domesday Book and Beyond: Three Essays in the Early History of England (1897; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1921); and Essays on the Teaching of History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1901)—this last source is a fascinating text to put alongside Woolf’s own history teaching at Morley College; she must have known his book. Finally, there is the magisterial The History of English Law before the Time of Edward I, 2 vols. (1895; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911) which Maitland wrote together with Frederick Pollock (it is widely accepted that Maitland did most of the work).

6. Pollock and Maitland 1: 476: it is interesting to consider that the Woolfs’ own insignia for The Hogarth Press is a wolf’s head.

7. This is meant in Herbert Butterfield’s sense as he argues in The Whig Interpretation of History (London: Bell, 1931), which itself is a critique of Thomas Babington Macaulay’s method in The History of England from the Accession of James III (1848-55).

RÉSUMÉS

Cet article replace le personnage de Rosamond Merridew, qui apparaît dans “The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn”, dans le cadre des études et de l’historiographie médiévistes du début du vingtième siècle; il se démarque de l’image que ce personnage veut donner d’elle-même, celle d’une historienne férue d’expérimentation, féministe et marginalisée, et montre que son travail est typique de l’histoire médiévale en tant que discipline universitaire de l’époque. Tout en reconnaissant l’importance de médiévistes contemporains tels que Eileen Power (1889-1940), cet article s’attache essentiellement aux travaux de F.W. Maitland (1850-1906) qui portent sur l’organisation légale et socio-économique de l’Angleterre du Moyen-Âge et fournissent en fait le véritable modèle de la nouvelle Histoire, si souvent attribuée à Merridew. Ceci permet de lire la nouvelle en termes de pouvoir, de terre et d’identité, questions dont Woolf aurait eu connaissance par l’intermédiaire de Maitland.

AUTEURS

LEENA KORE-SCHRÖDER

University of Nottingham, U.K. Teaches in the School of English Studies at the University of Nottingham, England. She has published widely on Woolf as well as John Betjeman and Herbert Read, and is finishing a book on Woolf and the uses of History.