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*Matilda of Canossa's Agency:
An Essay on the Miniatures in a Medieval Manuscript
(Vaticanus Latinus 4922)*

ABSTRACT: *The eleventh-century "Investiture Controversy" was more than just a showdown between King Henry IV of Germany and Pope Gregory VII, and it involved, among others, Countess Matilda of Canossa. Based on the concept of "visual literacy," this essay argues that the miniatures in the illuminated manuscript of the "Vita Mathildis" (Vaticanus Latinus 4922) promote Matilda's agency in a seemingly male-dominated world and raises questions concerning modern preconceived notions concerning medieval gender roles.*

KEYWORDS: *medieval history; art history; Countess Matilda of Canossa; Abbot Hugh of Cluny; King Henry IV of Germany; Pope Gregory VII; visual literacy; gender; agency; Vaticanus Latinus 4922*

Introduction

If recent television shows like *The Last Kingdom*, *Game of Thrones*, or *The Spanish Princess* are any indication, dramas—however loosely—based on medieval and Renaissance history are enjoying immense popularity with audiences, and the same seems to apply to recent video games, think: *Assassin's Creed*. In one such video game, *Crusader Kings III*, players assume the role of individual rulers and attempt to expand their respective dynastic power and influence through the ages. Among the recommended characters in *Crusader Kings III* is Matilda of Canossa, a "historical" countess who ruled most of central Italy during the later eleventh century. Matilda of Canossa (c. 1146-1115) wielded enormous political power around the same time William the Conqueror invaded and ruled England. Her achievements are recorded in a contemporary Latin text, the *Vita Mathildis* ("The Life of Matilda") by the monk Donizo, and this text survives as an original manuscript in the Vatican Library (Vaticanus Latinus 4922). This essay considers how the manuscript of the *Vita Mathildis* and its illuminations (i.e., images) assert Matilda of Canossa's position as a feudal ruler and her agency among the male-dominated social orders of clergy and nobility in the late eleventh century.

To understand the *Vita Mathildis* in its medieval context, we must consider how eleventh-century literacy differed from literacy today. With regard to conventional literacy (i.e., reading and writing), relatively few members of the population—predominately members of the clergy, some members of the nobility, and a few merchants—were indeed literate, and the ability to read (or consume) was certainly more pronounced than the ability to write (or produce). Meanwhile, the ability to understand and interpret images—so-called "visual literacy"—was rather common throughout medieval society. Images on buildings or in books were created to facilitate the comprehension of key information. Many of these images may appear foreign or hard to interpret to us today, but our medieval colleagues would have readily understood that the position of a person, animal,

or object was intended to convey a particular meaning or story. An example of this is any stained-glass window depicting scenes from the Nativity of Christ: the golden disc around the baby's head indicates the child's sanctity or divinity, and the fact that there are three richly adorned (or even crowned) men bowing to the baby means that we are dealing with the adoration of Christ by the Magi (related in the Gospel of St. Matthew, chapter 2).¹

Keeping this in mind, one needs to scrutinize the accompanying images in medieval manuscripts much like actual written texts. Some manuscripts contain the texts of holy scriptures (like the Gospels) or liturgies (like the coronation manuscripts of kings); others feature more encyclopedic works (like the *Etymologies* of Isidore of Seville); yet others relate the "life" (or, in Latin, *vita*; plural *vitae*) of a saint in order to illustrate why an individual had been—or should be—canonized.² While Matilda of Canossa was a close friend of Pope Gregory VII (r. 1073-1085), she was never canonized. Unlike most *vitae*, the *Vita Mathildis* does not promote its protagonist's sainthood; rather, it promotes Matilda's achievements in roles typically dominated by men. A *vita* depicting a woman's life was not new, but one depicting a woman's accomplishments as a noble—rather than a saint—was rather unusual. Thus, when compared to other *vitae*, the *Vita Mathildis* is the exception rather than the norm, and its illuminated manuscript is the physical manifestation of how Matilda displayed her exceptionality.

I. The Manuscript: Vaticanus Latinus 4922

Vita Mathildis ("The Life of Matilda") is one of several titles used interchangeably for the manuscript that interests us here; it is also known as "The Life of Matilda of Tuscany," "The Deeds of Countess Matilda," and "The Life of Matilda of Canossa."³ At first glance, the *Vita Mathildis* is a rather simple-looking manuscript with very few illustrations, especially when compared to other, more embellished manuscripts such as the eleventh-century *Codex Aureus of Echternach* (Nuremberg, Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Hs. 156142). The *Vita Mathildis* is a codex (i.e., a bound book) that is approximately 16 centimeters wide and 21 centimeters in height, bound (at a later date) in red leather.⁴ It contains 90 parchment folios (180 pages) with six pages added to the codex after the original binding; three of the added pages are in the front, the other three are in the back. Most of the folios feature Latin text in Caroline-minuscule script, written in black ink, and a few red

¹ On the concept of visual literacy as pertaining to medieval art, see Herbert L. Kessler, *Seeing Medieval Art* (North York: University of Toronto Press, 2011).

² Michelle Brown, Elizabeth C. Teviotdale, and Nancy Turner, *Understanding Illuminated Manuscripts: A Guide to Technical Terms*, revised ed. (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2018), s.v. "Saints' Lives."

³ *Vita Mathildis: Facsimile Edition*, [online](#), accessed June 13, 2022.

⁴ Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vaticanus Latinus 4922 (*Vita Mathildis*), ms. a. 1115, [online](#), accessed June 13, 2022. The physical description and image descriptions in the text above are based on this digital version of the original manuscript.

subheadings. There are seven blank pages (fols. 3r, 3v, 6v, 7r, 89v, 90r, and 90v) and what appears to be a partial removal or damage to fol. 89. Miniatures—illustrations that occupy the greater part or the entirety of a page—can be found on fols. 7v, 19r, 20v, 21v, 28v, 30v, and 49r, and this essay focuses on the two miniatures found on fols. 7v and 49r. The dominant colors of the miniatures are red, blue, yellow, and black, and their contours appear in dark brown or black ink. The miniatures either depict Countess Matilda and others conducting matters of state, are prominent portraits of clergy, or feature Matilda herself. The manuscript also contains minor illustrations and decorated initials on fols. 9v, 11r, 29r, 47v, 76r, and 84v, usually in red, blue, and gold. Larger red initials can also be found throughout the manuscript (see, for example, fol. 22v).

Recent scholarship has noted that, despite her significance and achievements, Matilda of Canossa has not garnered the attention she deserves, at least not in English academia and literature.⁵ Thus, in 2015, the 900th anniversary of her death (1115) was taken as an opportunity to organize a series of papers and discussions under the heading *Matilda 900* at the International Congress on Medieval Studies (Western Michigan University, USA) and the International Medieval Congress (University of Leeds, UK).⁶ English-language scholarship on the provenance (i.e., the chain of custody) of the *Vita Mathildis* is still relatively sparse; according to medieval historian David J. Hay, the Italian medievalist Paolo Golinelli addresses the manuscript's provenance (in Italian) in his 1984 edition of Donizo's text, *Vita di Matilde di Canossa*.⁷ It appears that the manuscript was created in the Monastery of Saint Apollonius in Canossa, Italy; that it was commissioned and completed near the time of Matilda of Canossa's death (1115) in the earlier twelfth century (c. 1110-1115);⁸ and that the Benedictine monk Donizo (also referred to as Donizone) authored the book and later became the abbot of Saint Apollonius. The *Vita Mathildis* was likely a gift to Countess Matilda for her support of the abbey and may have been commissioned by Matilda herself. During the writing of the manuscript, Matilda was dealing with several uprisings, and this work may have

⁵ David J. Hay, *The Military Leadership of Matilda of Canossa, 1046-1115* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2008), 1: "Countess Matilda of Canossa was the most powerful woman of her time. At present, however she remains one of the most neglected medieval figures in the English-speaking world;" Valerie Eads and Tiziana Lazzari, "Raising Matilda from the Footnotes," *Storicamente: Laboratorio di Storia* 13, art 12 (2017): 1-10, here 2: "Indeed, despite considerable activity in such areas as gender, feminist studies, female lordship and military history [...] the standard English-language biographies of Matilda remain what they were when the eighth centennial of her death was marked in 1915, as World War I raged. While the men in her life, Pope Gregory VII and Emperor Henry IV, have found their biographers, Matilda has not. The only English-language monograph on Matilda published in the eight succeeding decades of the twentieth century was Robert Hollister Rough's study of the Matilda Gospel."

⁶ Eads and Lazzari, "Raising Matilda."

⁷ David J. Hay, "Silensis and Aferesis in the Vita Mathildis: How Donizo's Marginalia Explain the Battle of Tricontai (1091/1092)," *Storicamente: Laboratorio di Storia* 13, art. 18 (2017): 1-30.

⁸ Hay, "Silensis and Aferesis."

been an effort to further legitimize her position and emphasize her abilities as a ruler.⁹ The original manuscript remained at the Monastery of Saint Apollonius until the fourteenth century. It was eventually acquired by the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (the Vatican Library) in Rome, which was officially established in 1475. The manuscript was digitized on or before 2017, and it can now be viewed on the *Digital Vatican Library* platform (*DigiVatLib*).¹⁰ The oldest existing copy of the *Vita Mathildis* was made by monks from Frassinoro (in the Emilia-Romagna) in 1243. The Vatican's digitized version of the original *Vita Mathildis* manuscript serves as the basis of this essay.¹¹

The *Vita Mathildis* does not aspire to see Matilda of Canossa canonized. Rather, its first part establishes her familial lineage, and its second part focuses on her military successes and involvement in the great Investiture Controversy (starting in 1076) between Pope Gregory VII (r. 1073-1085) and King (and future Holy Roman Emperor) Henry IV of Germany (r. 1054-1105). According to Hay, the *Vita Mathildis* has more in common with medieval *Gesta* ("Deeds") than *Vitae* ("Lives").¹² It is written as poetry, primarily "Leonine Hexameters with Virgilian style verses."¹³ The text's biographical portions emulate the concept of the Christian hero in terms of military valor and virtue. Matilda's strength and support for the pope is compared to a "rock," and she is portrayed as being nearly as virtuous as the Virgin Mary. While the attention to Matilda's strength and martial prowess is atypical for depictions of women during this time, her comparison to the Virgin Mary is not. Rosalind Jaeger Reynolds argues that, while piety and subservience to the pope were common in portrayals of women, these virtues were not considered strictly feminine but, rather, desirable for both genders and all members of society.¹⁴ Thus, Donizo's portrayal of Matilda may have been less controversial to medieval readers than modern readers might think. Either way, we must keep these central features of the text in mind as we delve into our analysis of the manuscript's illuminations and how they reflect Matilda of Canossa's agency.

⁹ Robert Houghton, "Reconsidering Donizone's Vita Mathildis (again): Boniface of Canossa and the Emperor Conrad II," *Storicamente: Laboratorio di Storia* 13, art. 17 (2017): 1-35; Rachel Smith, "The Art of Inventing Matilda of Canossa" (M.A. thesis, Arizona State University, 2012), 1.

¹⁰ See above, note 4.

¹¹ See above, note 4.

¹² Hay, *Military Leadership*, 17. *Gesta* (Latin for "deeds") are prose records of military actions and accomplishments; they are usually reserved for male warlords like Robert Guiscard and Roger of Sicily (both contemporaries of Matilda of Canossa).

¹³ Smith, "Art of Inventing Matilda," 3.

¹⁴ Rosalind Jaeger Reynolds, "Nobilissima Dux: Matilda of Tuscany and the Construction of Female Authority" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2005), 110-112.

II. The Manuscript: Matilda of Canossa's Agency

The two miniatures that interest us here can be found on fols. 7v and 49r. The miniature on fol. 7v is the image of a woman – Matilda of Canossa – clad in what appear to be very ornate vestments. She is sitting on a throne that is much larger than herself and has a red backrest, while its outer parts, feet, and flanking posts are in blue. The countess's vestments consist of a red cloak with decorated golden borders, worn over a blue dress or long tunic. At first glance, she appears to be wearing a cone-shaped golden headdress, but this is in fact the hood of her cloak. In her right hand, she holds a vertical branch, and her left hand is positioned over the middle of her torso. On her left – the viewer's right – appears a knight who is wearing a chainmail headpiece (a "coif"), a blue cloak over a red tunic, and boots. He is holding a sword in front of his chest with the hilt angled toward Matilda. On her right – the viewer's left – appears a cleric or monk with a tonsured haircut. He is holding an open book which is also angled toward the countess.¹⁵ Compared to Matilda, her two "attendants" are smaller in scale. The miniature on fol. 49r also features Matilda and two men, but in this case the latter are known. The smallest figure is King Henry IV, kneeling with his head raised toward Matilda. Matilda, to the viewer's right of the kneeling king, is placed higher than Henry and sitting on a large red stool with a white cushion under a red-and-blue arched canopy that is supported by yellow-and-black columns. Matilda is not looking at the king but at a larger figure sitting behind him and to the viewer's left. This larger figure is Abbot Hugh of Cluny (r. 1049-1109) who is holding a red or brown abbot's staff (or "crosier") in his left hand, wearing a brown habit with the hood pulled up over his head, sitting on a carved folding chair with a greenish cushion, and pointing toward Matilda with his right index finger. Meanwhile, Matilda's right hand is gesturing toward the abbot while her left index finger is pointing upward. She is wearing a black or green cloak with decorated golden and red borders over a blue dress or long tunic, and her head is covered with a white veil that is held in place with a golden circlet. Henry's cloak and tunic are inverse to Matilda's (i.e., a blue cloak and a black or green tunic), and he is wearing a golden crown. He is kneeling on his right knee, while his left hand is placed on his left knee. With his right hand near the middle of his torso, he pulls up his cloak. The Latin text below the miniature on fol. 7v reads *Mathildis lucens precor hoc cape cara volumen* ("illustrious Mathilda, I pray that you hold this volume dear"), while the text below the one on fol. 49r reads *Rex rogat abbatem, Mathildim supplicat atq[ue]* (i.e., "the king asks the abbot, and he also begs Matilda").

Fol. 7v shows a person in power. In this miniature, Matilda is the largest person and literally the center of attention. According to Rachel Smith, her portrayal is reminiscent of "Roman Imperial figures [...]. As the larger enthroned central figure, this type of depiction makes her seem both ceremonial and regal while placing her firmly in the tradition of Carolingian and Ottonian miniatures of the

¹⁵ Smith, "Art of Inventing Matilda," 25, states that the cleric is Donizo himself.

Holy Roman emperor.”¹⁶ The image presents Matilda in the same fashion as her male contemporaries. Even more interesting, her image is the very first miniature in the manuscript, leaving little doubt as to what a “visual reader” would see and understand first. The branch she is holding is a *ramus arboris* (“a tree branch”) which represents justice and mediation.¹⁷ A medieval visual reader would have recognized Matilda as a significant ruler in the context of the Holy Roman Empire and as one known for governing justly and capable of brokering agreements between conflicting parties. The image on fol. 7v stands in contrast to the images of women who merely appear as the wives or daughters of powerful rulers, the “usual” roles of women during this time as perceived both by contemporaries and modern historians. A woman ruling in her own right may seem quite astounding; yet even in Matilda’s time, there were women who wielded such power, many obtaining it through marriage or as heirs to their fathers or as regents for their sons.¹⁸ There is, however, no male in the image on fol. 7v granting Matilda her power. She is not portrayed as a regent for an under-aged son; she does not rule her husband’s lands as a widow; and she does not govern for her husband or her father in their absence. She rules with her own authority and judgment, and thus she faces her attendants.

The attendants on fol. 7v exert no control over Matilda, nor are they her equal in size, stature, or decoration. They are smaller and angled toward her, awaiting her command. The knight does not wield the sword on her behalf, nor is the sword his. He simply holds Matilda’s sword, ready for her to draw it when needed, making him more of a representation of her martial power than an individual in his own right. He is not her proxy: should the need arise, she herself will go into battle and lead her troops. The cleric is not writing laws for her, nor does he read the book to her. The book is facing her, ready for her to read and consult, showing that she is both educated and able to discern the proper way to conduct matters of state in accordance with what is written. Based on the image’s subscription (“illustrious Mathilda, I pray that you hold this volume dear”), it is safe to assume that the cleric is, in fact, Donizo, presenting Matilda with a copy of the *Vita Mathildis*, but a medieval visual reader would not have known this. The Matilda of fol. 7v may discuss strategy or other matters with her attendants, especially with the cleric (since she was a staunch supporter of the Gregorian reforms during the Investiture Controversy). However, she ultimately makes the decisions, and the size, placement, and angle of her attendants all indicate this. Thus, the very first miniature in the *Vita Mathildis* is of Matilda “ruling justly” in her own right, an

¹⁶ Smith, “Art of Inventing Matilda,” 25.

¹⁷ Smith, “Art of Inventing Matilda,” 26, refers to Christine Verzar’s work, suggesting that the conical hat indicated a possible connection to Lombardy, and discusses the meaning of the branch in Matilda of Canossa’s hand.

¹⁸ Reynolds, “Nobilissima Dux,” 33-38, explains that most women who did have power were either regents for their sons or had gained power through their marriages (like Clemence of Flanders and Adela of Blois).

undeniable manifestation of her agency. That said, another miniature in the *Vita Mathildis* ascribes further agency to the countess.

The miniature on fol. 49r represents the moment when King Henry IV – technically Matilda's liege lord – asks Matilda for her aid in reconciling with Pope Gregory VII who had excommunicated the king in 1076.¹⁹ A liege lord asking a vassal for aid in reconciling with the church is not necessarily unique or rare. What is noteworthy, though, is that Matilda, a woman who had openly opposed Henry and supported the pope, is the chosen "peace broker." She was, of course, well suited for the position: she was Henry's second cousin and the pope's confidante.²⁰ Yet, the presence and prominence of Abbot Hugh of Cluny are also telling. It shows that even a just ruler must consider the counsel of the clergy to come to a proper decision. The miniature reflects a power triangle, and Matilda is at its apex. Due to Matilda's military successes, Henry would never be able to bring her to heel.²¹ Thus, he humbles himself before his vassal to seek her aid; he is not (or at least not yet) humbling himself in the direction of the clergy (let alone the pope). Meanwhile, despite her superior position, Matilda appears to be leaning toward the abbot, seeking his guidance. The miniature represents a key moment in the Investiture Controversy, and it strongly represents a Gregorian view of politics. Yet, Matilda does not just use this moment to promote papal supremacy; rather, she (or indeed the illuminator) promotes her own agency as a powerful noble.

Matilda does not look at Henry IV, nor is she humbling herself to Abbot Hugh of Cluny. She is in a seated position, like the abbot, but she is the only one covered by an arched canopy. At first glance, the abbot seems more prominent due to his larger size and, ostensibly, his status at the end of the "beseeching chain." Yet, Matilda and her arched canopy take up most of the space in this miniature, and the viewer is first and foremost drawn to her. Why is she the only one seated under the arched canopy? Henry is humbling himself and making a request, and his status as an excommunicate explains why he is "outside." Abbot Hugh of Cluny, though larger and poised to play a prominent role, is nonetheless only a guest at Matilda's castle of Canossa, which explains why he, too, is not under the arched canopy. Matilda is the host, and she enjoys the respect of both temporal (Henry) and spiritual (Hugh) leaders, even though she is "only" a woman. But Matilda is more than a host. As her position in the miniatures on fols. 7v and 49r indicates, she is a lord in her own right, and she is a woman engaged in "power politics." On fol. 49r, she, too, is the one in charge, and this would have been clear to a medieval visual reader. The abbot may be advising her, but Matilda is the one with the most

¹⁹ Smith, "Art of Inventing Matilda," 27; Reynolds, "Nobilissima Dux," 114; Hay, "Silensis and Aferesis."

²⁰ Reynolds, "Nobilissima Dux," 5.

²¹ Hay, *Military Leadership*, 117-149. Hay argues that Matilda's victory over Henry and his Italian allies at the battle of Sorbara in 1082 (and during subsequent campaigns) allowed her to maintain control over most of her lands.

clout. This is corroborated by the miniature's subscription ("the king asks the abbot, and he also begs Matilda"): the verbform "ask" (*rogat*), directed at the abbot, is much weaker than the verbform "begs" (*supplicat*), directed at Matilda. Thus, the subscription ascribes initial agency ("asks," "begs") to the king; the size of the abbot concedes that he, too, has a role to play; but the success of the king humbling himself depends on what Matilda will do next—on her agency. During the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the general perception was that women were weak and men were strong.²² This, however, is not the message of fol. 49r.

Hay has suggested that Matilda's contemporary critics had quite the inventory to decry her. Western Europe was a male-dominated society with a pronounced misogynistic history. Yet, while Matilda's supporters would have had a more difficult task in defending her (and in overcoming their own biases), they proved to be much better at it than their counterparts. Because of Matilda's unique situation as a ruler in her own right and as a successful power broker during the Investiture Controversy, her supporters needed far fewer tools than the supporters of other female rulers.²³ While our modern interpretation of the eleventh century may be skewed due to our preconceived notions and inaccurate modern portrayals of medieval society and the roles it considered "appropriate" for women, Matilda's example shows that a medieval woman could be expected to lead (and did indeed do so), when the need arose.

Research conducted by historian Valerie Eads and others has revealed that medieval women assumed martial roles more often than has been assumed. In fact, according to Eads, men were able to go on expeditions (such as the crusades or "other" long pilgrimages) because they could trust "their" women to safely defend their lands. The problem, Eads argues, is not a lack of examples of medieval noblewomen doing just that but, rather, our modern assumptions concerning medieval society that tend to downplay or outright ignore such examples.²⁴ When discussing Matilda of Canossa's agency, we need to understand that, yes, she was an exception in certain ways, particularly as a female ruler in her own right. And, granted, her supporters had to do some careful maneuvering when they presented Matilda—to the point of not addressing her gender or presenting her as a female

²² Reynolds, "Nobilissima Dux," 78.

²³ Hay, *Military Leadership*, 198-200.

²⁴ Valerie Eads et al., "Matilda of Tuscany-Canossa: Commemorating the 9th Centennial of the Great Countess, IV," *Storicamente: Laboratorio di Storia* 13, art 30 (2017): 1-23, here 4-5: "There are a great many other women whose record is less extensive, but who are nonetheless well-documented [...] I am firmly in the opinion we-have-far-more-exceptions-than-we-need-to-(dis)prove-the-rule camp. So we really need to start looking at women who exercise military power not as exceptions, but as part of the package. In my paper presented at the 20th Barnard Conference, I floated the hypothesis that instead of occasional anecdotes of women defending castles because the men were away doing something else, we should flip that to saying that the men were able to be absent because they knew they could rely on the women to carry out the defense."

paradox – since some of them believed military affairs to be a man's domain.²⁵ However, Matilda was an eleventh-century norm in that she was fully capable of ruling her lands and exhibiting military prowess in keeping with her noble lineage and upbringing. And in this, she was not alone among medieval women.

Conclusion

History is not set in stone; one may gain some historical knowledge by studying stone, but History is not set there. Historians, both amateur and academic, must be willing to study the past in its context and refrain from burdening it with modern assumptions. When we look at sources like the *Vita Mathildis* and its miniatures, we certainly get a sense that Matilda of Canossa was exceptional. But how was she exceptional? How did she achieve her status and exercise her agency in a society dominated by men? Would we consider her exceptional if she had been a man? The answer is not so simple. Her achievements – militarily, diplomatically, legally, culturally, and so forth – are exceptional regardless of gender. Yet, she also did things that were not exceptional for her time but that are perceived as exceptional by us today due to the fact that she was a woman, and because we have preconceived notions of what life was like in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. We know her biography as a *Vita* (a “life”) and not as *Gesta* (“deeds”), almost suggesting that she “lived” but did not “act.” Due to her performing roles normally reserved for men, Matilda should be considered both a norm and an exception. She conducted herself as any noble during her time, but she happened to be a woman. Perhaps we need to ask ourselves what it (still) says about our society today that we find women in “male” roles exceptional and not “normal,” and why we are not paying more attention to those women who played such roles in the past. Perhaps a future historian who plays Matilda of Canossa in *Crusader Kings III* will be inspired and find an answer.

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²⁵ Hay, *Military Leadership*, 198-199.