



**University of Guelph  
Department of History**

**MA Thesis Defence**

|                          |                       |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| Student: Nancy Winkleman | Date: Wed., Dec. 7/16 |
| Time: 10:00 am           | Place: MCKN 132       |

**Title**

**Challenging Assumptions of Autonomy:  
The Agency and Social Capital of English Medieval Noblewomen  
during the Twelfth to Fifteenth Centuries**

**Abstract**

Medieval noblewomen did not live waiting to be rescued. There is evidence that they acted with agency and autonomy to determine whether or not to marry, and occupied the leadership roles of estate manager, and military quartermaster. This exploration of noblewomen, in England and Wales during the twelfth to fifteenth centuries, focuses on their ability to exercise agency and employ social capital undertaking leadership roles to advance themselves and their heirs in politically turbulent times. Letters, household records, and government documents establish that medieval noblewomen performed roles conventionally interpreted to be masculine. Medieval noblewomen understood the importance of personal support networks, in addition to being versed in legal and financial issues. Their life experiences and training was critical to safeguarding their personal and economic security and that of their families. This is a topic as relevant today as when noblewomen of the Middle Ages held important leadership roles.

Advisor: Jacqueline Murray  
Committee Member: Steven Bednarski  
External Examiner: Susannah Ferreira

Chair: Matthew Hayday