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**More than Power, Luxury and Sieges: An Analysis of Interpretative Strategies
for Representing Female Perspectives in Three European Castles and Palaces**

Master's Thesis

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I have prepared this thesis independently. All the views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited.

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ABSTRACT

This study is set to analyse how female voices are incorporated into the narratives of European castles and palaces, and how different interpretative tools are used to reflect female agency. Through three case studies, examining the permanent exhibitions of Leeds Castle in England, Stirling Castle in Scotland and Wilanów Palace in Poland, the research aims to analyse the impact of various interpretative media, the narrative choices made and the influence of space on narration. The research seeks to enlighten current practices, recurring concerns, areas for improvement, and seemingly effective strategies with the goal of encouraging heritage sites to broaden their focus and incorporate women's voices into their narratives. It also presents methods that may help diversify historical interpretations while enhancing inclusivity. Through display analysis, this study highlights the potential of enhanced female representation to provide more diverse perspectives on the past and to challenge prior gender structures.

Keywords: feminist museology, female agency, castles and palaces, heritage interpretation

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1. Introduction

This dissertation explores the possibilities of interpretation in European castles and palaces to represent female agency. Through three case studies: Leeds Castle in England, Stirling Castle in Scotland and Wilanów Palace in Poland, a deep display analysis aims to reveal how the examined heritage sites tell the stories of female figures, with a particular emphasis on the interpretative strategies and narratives employed.

As some of the most visited heritage attractions, castles and palaces serve as valuable testimonials of the past. Their significance encompasses tourism, education, contributions to architecture and the arts, the shaping of collective identity, and the evocation of nostalgia and memory (Timothy, 2021; Emerick, 2014). However, despite their value, they have been criticised for symbolising highly hierarchical and inaccessible power structures, mostly commemorating wealthy, royal, political or military figures without portraying broader layers of past social interactions (e.g., West, 1994; Savage and Wyeth, 2020), idealising the past (Christensen, 2011) or providing controversial political narratives (Gilchrist, 1999).

Moreover, feminist critique raises awareness of the frequent absence of women's voices (e.g., Gilchrist, 1999; Dempsey *et al.*, 2020), which correlates with the general underrepresentation of female artists, perspectives and contributions in museum, historical and cultural narratives (e.g., Machin, 2008; Krasny and Perry, 2020; McConnell and Fazio, 1996). Nevertheless, the specific characteristics of castles and palaces further intensify this shortage.

The common absence of female perspectives is particularly problematic, considering that women are not a minority group but account for half the population (Cramer and Witcomb, 2018). Neglecting women's stories and contributions endangers the ability to present a multifaceted picture of history. As Colella (2018: 255) states, it may "corroborate a limited, stereotypical version of masculinity linked to orthodox ideas of heroism and success".

Castles and palaces are encouraged to broaden their interpretations, moving beyond presenting an idealised picture of wealthy estate owners without addressing various aspects of the past. Due to new courses in museum education, the role of museums and heritage sites has expanded from collecting, displaying, and preserving to becoming inclusive educational venues (Black, 2012). Attention has increased on societal issues such as decolonisation, repatriation, the inclusion of minority voices and globalisation (Bergsdóttir, 2016).

In response to these trends, several heritage sites have begun reconsidering their history, for example, reflecting on their colonial past, trying to incorporate the stories of lower social classes and broadening their exhibitions with fresh perspectives. Temporary exhibitions such as *Sugar and Slavery – The Penrhyn Connection* (2007) at Penrhyn Castle in Wales (National Trust, online), which presented the site owners' links to the transatlantic slave trade; Hampton Court Palace's after-hours audio journey in England (2025) that concentrated on the women who lived or worked in the palace (Ward, 2025), or *Looking Allowed? Diversity from the 16th to the 18th century* (2024) at Ambras Castle in Austria, which reflected how diversity existed during the Renaissance (Schloss Ambras, online), are just a few examples that demonstrate the progress being made in widening perspectives and interpretation.

To support inclusivity and deepen historical interpretations, adding women's stories is both a promising and essential strategy. However, to do so effectively, it is necessary to explore how heritage sites can integrate female perspectives and challenge dominant patriarchal narratives. Recognising the scarcity of women's voices is only the first step; analysing how these voices are incorporated when present is another issue that requires further investigation. Women's representation in castles and palaces is generally understudied, and the existing literature mostly highlights the absence of women's stories, primarily from archaeological or historical perspectives (e.g., Dempsey, 2021a; Gilchrist, 1999). Research from the angle of museum education remains a significant gap.

Another understudied area, both in general and specifically within the context of castles and palaces, is the investigation of how interpretation can help diversify the stories told and influence female representation.

Although a single consolidated definition of interpretation does not exist, this paper adopts the concept of interpretation as a widely recognised educational activity that helps communicate ideas, highlight the significance of natural and cultural heritage, while displacing the focus from factual information towards awareness, understanding and empathy with an aim of promoting inclusive public discourses (Puczkó, 2006; Timothy, 2021; Nowacki, 2021; Beattie and Schneider, 2018). Interpretation can take many forms, including guided, audioguided or self-guided approaches, and diverse strategies may range from theatrical plays and re-enactments to interactive and multimedia devices (Timothy, 2021; Ham, 2013; Piehl and MacLeod, 2012).

Capitalising on the power of interpretation is considered highly valuable in engaging visitors and aligns with several educational theories (e.g., Dewey, 2012; Kolb and Kolb, 2005; Falk and Lynn, 2000, 2016), which claim that a personalised learning experience is vital. Moreover, interpretation has the potential to promote female agency. As Hooper-Greenhill (2000) highlights, new interpretations may shed light on formerly invisible histories and deepen contextual and specific knowledge.

This is well illustrated by the adoption of the Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites by the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) in 2008. Through this policy, cultural landmarks are encouraged to capitalise on interpretation within their educational activities (ICOMOS, 2008).

This means that research on interpretation is necessary to understand how it can be an educational tool for further progress. Combining feminist theories with the academic and practical background of interpretation provides a relevant framework for analysing how different interpretative strategies could contribute to the representation of women in castles and palaces.

1.1. Aims and Objectives

Resolution 4 at ICOM's 28th General Assembly in 2013 represents an important step in advocating for the development of a Gender Mainstreaming policy. A chief part of this agenda is the proposal to widen gendered interpretations and to increase narratives from the perspective of gender within museums (ICOM, 2013).

Taking this agenda into consideration, this paper argues that integrating the stories of women into the permanent exhibitions of castles and palaces presents an excellent and vital opportunity to diversify standard accounts and address significant, often overlooked aspects of history. This approach may not only diminish gender stereotypes and enhance critical thinking about traditional gender roles, but also has the potential to foster a more delicate understanding of the past (Vendramin, 2012; Hall, 2005). Therefore, it is important to highlight and study the opportunities of castles and palaces in increasing female representation.

Despite the common absence of female perspectives in castle and palace narratives, certain heritage sites are closely linked to notable female historical figures; thus, their exhibitions need to emphasise this connection. Accordingly, through case studies, this research seeks to

analyse how selected castles and palaces with significant connections to female figures incorporate female agency into their permanent exhibitions, focusing on the following research questions:

RQ1: How are the different interpretative tools used to support the incorporation of women's voices?

This question aims to highlight the variety of interpretative services employed at the three sites to convey female viewpoints, including traditional approaches and interactives, while focusing on how they are used to tell the stories of female figures.

RQ2: In what ways is female agency represented in the written and audioguide narratives of the selected castles and palaces?

This analysis of the interpretative texts keeps the language and narratives in focus, with particular emphasis on how the complexity of female experiences is depicted, which themes are most prominent, which storytelling techniques are applied, and how these narratives align with the recommendations of feminist scholars.

RQ3: How does spatial context influence female representation and the narration of women's stories at the selected heritage sites?

This question investigates the impact of space, the differences in narrative, including whether women's stories are integrated throughout the venue or limited to areas specifically associated with women, and in which spaces women's perspectives are most prominently displayed.

By critically observing various interpretative media, narratives and the influence of spatial arrangements on the inclusion of women at selected heritage sites, this study seeks to highlight the prospects of these attractions for allowing a refined understanding of history. This in-depth analysis may benefit museum professionals and heritage sites by providing insight into current practices and identifying areas for improvement. Castles and palaces that already incorporate female perspectives may reconsider certain aspects of their activity, while historical houses that have thus far neglected to include women's stories may come to recognise the importance and potential of broadening their interpretative focus.

1.2. Methodology

First of all, an extensive review of academic literature helps establish a theoretical foundation for understanding gender-related issues at historic estates and within heritage interpretation. Besides theory-focused literature, practical recommendations of feminist scholars, organisational objectives, the educational impact of heritage interpretation and the special characteristics of castles and palaces will be discussed.

To answer the research questions, an extensive display analysis will be conducted that includes studying the existing interpretative materials, such as exhibit labels, multimedia resources, storytelling techniques and audioguided tours to gain a picture of how women's experiences are illustrated in the castle and palace narratives. This analysis will be guided by a series of methodological frameworks, namely the critical museum visitor approach proposed by Lindauer (2006) and Moser (2010), critical discourse analysis (CDA), narrative analysis and feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA), all of which will be explicitly discussed in the Methodology chapter.

Within the case study methodology, the three selected venues, Leeds Castle, Stirling Castle and Wilanów Palace, serve as concrete examples of current practices. Acknowledging that these cases only provide a limited perspective since examining other castles and palaces may lead to contrasting findings, they help illustrate various strategies, concerns and opportunities related to female representation.

Without the intention of comparing the three selected sites and finding the best models, the analysis focuses on how each venue tells the stories of female figures, with particular attention to the narratives employed. This analysis is necessary to promote further discussions about female agency in castle and palace narratives, shed light on efficient strategies or inconsistencies, and encourage heritage sites to place greater emphasis on complementing their permanent exhibitions with the female gaze.

1.3. Selection and Description of the Sites

Several components were considered before selecting the three sites for analysis, including their relatedness to prominent female historical figures, which is evident both in their history and promotional strategies; their accessibility by public transport; their educational commitments and efforts to enhance inclusivity; and the author's personal academic background and familiarity with the sites' histories. After finding several estates fitting the

scope of this study, three categories were manifested, each complemented with a heritage site belonging to the given category:

- (1) “Ladies’ castles and palaces” – These sites have a stronger historical connection to female figures than to male ones. (Leeds Castle, England)
- (2) Castles and palaces with strong historical ties to women – In these cases, the association with female historical figures significantly influences both the site’s history and its interpretive strategies. However, due to the site’s broader cultural significance, it cannot be classified simply as a historical landmark associated with women. (Wilanów Palace, Poland)
- (3) Male-dominated narratives with notable female figures – Although several prominent female historical figures made significant contributions to the site’s history and their stories are well integrated into the narratives, these venues do not prioritise female perspectives over male ones. Still, they lay a large emphasis on integrating women’s voices. (Stirling Castle, Scotland)

The three chosen venues all align with the criteria of their category. Leeds Castle is a perfect example of a ladies’ castle, as it is promoted as a historic estate “run by queens and heiresses” (Leeds Castle, online a). The castle functioned more as a fortified manor, prioritising artistic and domestic comforts over its military role, which made it a beloved residence for several English queens between the 13th and 16th centuries. Since 1974, when its last private owner, the Anglo-American heiress, Olive Baillie, placed the estate in trust to be opened to the public, the Leeds Castle Foundation has managed its ownership (Laws, 1998; Hargan, 2004). Reflecting the castle’s history, the main narratives foreground the stories of both the last female owner and the medieval queens who inhabited the castle and contributed significantly to its history and architecture.

Wilanów Palace belongs to the most symbolic buildings of the Polish aristocratic culture from the 17th to 19th centuries. The magnificent Baroque residence was built in the late 17th century, during the reign of King Jan III Sobieski and its ownership later passed through members of the royal family and wealthy aristocrats. Several notable royal and aristocratic women contributed to the palace’s development, including Queen Marie Casimire, Elżbieta Sieniawska, Izabela Lubomirska and Aleksandra August Potocka, all of whom were among the most prominent noblewomen in Polish history. However, due to the palace’s pivotal role in Polish national memory, its significance cannot be reduced to its association with the

women who shaped its history (Bate, 2020; Wilanów Palace, online a). Nevertheless, their involvement enables the exploration of how they are represented in the exhibition.

The third case study is Stirling Castle in Scotland. Serving both as an important fortification and a prestigious royal residence, it hosted the coronations of several Scottish kings and queens (Wormald, 2000). Being the home of these royal women and given the intentional inclusion of women's voices as part of Historic Scotland's devotion to enhance inclusivity (Historic Environment Scotland, 2024a), the castle offers an excellent opportunity to analyse how female perspectives can be presented in a stronghold with chief residential, strategic and military purposes.

Although differences in function, organisational structure, and geographic and historical context should be taken into account, Leeds Castle, Wilanów Palace and Stirling Castle could enlighten important matters regarding female representation. Their distinctions and diverse educational practices are believed to help identify a wide range of interpretative strategies, which is the main aim of this dissertation.

2. Literature Review

This chapter begins with the presentation of literature on feminist museology, museum education and feminist discourses in heritage studies to emphasise the importance of enhancing female representation and illustrating ongoing discussions, trends and practical recommendations. Then, the following section foregrounds the significance of heritage interpretation, both in general and with a particular focus on how gendered interpretation can benefit museums and heritage sites.

Considering that castles and palaces are the foundation of this research, a separate section outlines the characteristics of these sites. Following a brief introduction that explains castles' and palaces' place within the heritage sector, the discussion will turn to the role of interpretation within these historic estates, as well as current research and educational practices related to female representation.

Bringing together the distinct bodies of literature on interpretation and female representation in castles and palaces is set to establish a thorough theoretical background that supports the central argument of this thesis and provides the framework for the data analysis presented in the Findings chapter.

2.1. Feminist Discussions on Museum Education and Heritage Studies

Feminist academic scholarship, along with research on feminist museology and museum education, has gained increasing recognition since the second half of the 20th century. Feminist scholars, activists, curators, and organisations shed light on the patriarchal bias in history, art history, and museum exhibitions and started to insert gender discourse into the frameworks of museums and heritage sites (Colella, 2018; Hein, 2010, 2007; Nochlin, 1971).

In contrast to studies on gender, which are not solely limited to studying women's experiences but also examine gender as a broader analytical category (Meade and Wiesner-Hanks, 2021) and differently to women's history, which typically situates women within traditional historical categories and narratives, feminist scholars adopt a more critical stance and categorise gender as problematic and more complex set of relationships. Instead of simply adding new female-focused subjects to existing narratives, feminist historians aim to integrate gender into historical analysis and understanding, questioning and critically reevaluating the historical narrative itself (Lake, 1988; Matthews, 1986; Scott, 1986).

Although feminist ideas stem from various academic disciplines which means that a wide variety of theoretical frameworks and viewpoints are utilised, moreover, regional and cultural contexts are also important factors that must not be overlooked, these academic discourses share a common focus: they discuss important topics related to female agency, such as misrepresentation, absence, exclusion, and oversimplification (Botte, 2020; Cramer and Witcomb, 2018; Hein, 2007). In contrast to early feminists, who have often been criticised for universalising women's experiences, more recent scholarship has placed greater emphasis on intersectionality and issues of class, ethnicity, age and sexuality (Spelman, 1988).

The establishment of approximately 100 Women's and Gender Museums worldwide is one way to raise larger awareness of gender-related matters and definitely promotes feminist adult education and fosters new forms of feminist historical consciousness (Clover, 2022). However, at other museums and heritage sites, the application of a feminist theoretical framework remains relatively rare. Depending solely on Women's and Gender Museums does not change the long-embedded patriarchal gendered practices still prevalent in many institutions (Clover and Sanford, 2024).

Similar to feminist museology, feminist heritage studies also advocate for studying gender as an analytical category. Smith (2008) claims that gender-neutral heritage does not exist; heritage has been defined, identified, valued and preserved through masculine values shaped by elite social classes. This has contributed to the lack of major sites or places connected to women's history being registered as heritage. Moreover, the way of storytelling and its extent in these heritage sites often legitimise gender stereotypes. The broader social, cultural and historical contexts must be considered to avoid incomplete understandings of gender and the misrepresentation of diverse gender identities in heritage interpretation and conservation.

Shortliffe (2015) extends Smith's critique by stating that the entire framework must be restructured, as adding women merely as a footnote provides only superficial benefits. Writing women back into history should be the primary goal of gendered heritage discourse. Rather than asking different questions, the same questions and topics should be discussed, but through a different lens. As a potential solution, Reading (2015) proposes framing gender in terms of how the changing constructions of masculinity and femininity influence what is considered valuable and what gains heritage status.

The recognition of the need to discuss the role of gender is an important step toward enhancing inclusivity within museums and the heritage sector, however, achieving institutional change that is effective both in theory and practice remains more challenging. The main question is how to alter centuries-old traditions and challenge “re-enforced normative notions of gender” (Clover and Sanford, 2024:249) without repeating past mistakes or legitimising gender stereotypes, misrepresentations or omissions. As Lykke (2010:12) states, a major challenge of feminist research is that gender relations are both ‘subject and resistance’ to change. Besides, while the growing recognition of and academic interest in gender-related issues is beneficial in raising awareness of various concerns, it also creates less certain categories.

As an alternative to uncover the hidden embeddedness of patriarchal values in the museum environment, Clover and Sanford (2020) created *the Feminist Museum Hack (FMH)*, a feminist adult education approach that uses a range of questions to challenge the authority of museums and promote a shift from passive to active observation in the service of feminist change. By studying their list of questions and analysing museums through this framework, changes may be implemented based on their findings, potentially serving as an initial step toward broadening the scope of exhibitions. Moreover, although different strategies are required depending on the museum’s collection, theme and purpose, certain general trends, concerns and subjects that have emerged in academic discussions are generally worth considering.

Drawing on Trotter (1996), Cramer and Witcomb (2018) identify four crucial points that require further investigation and discussion: the mainly masculine thematic focus of a large number of museums (for instance war, transport, industry, frontier life); the male-oriented values that still play a pivotal role in exhibitions; the lack of research into women’s material culture; and the difficulty of representing women’s domestic work, which is often invisible or considered less important than masculine values. As a proposal for progress in these areas, Mayo (2003)’s practical advice is worth considering, namely, placing women into the central frame; exemplifying which group of women’s experiences are being presented by emphasising race, class and location; representing female-defined historical experiences such as childbirth, domestic work and activities typically associated with women; and highlighting women’s impact on male-dominated areas.

These arguments, together with the emphasis on distinctions in women's and men's perceptions of past circumstances (Mayo, 2003), are particularly beneficial in castle and palace environments. Widening the historical meanings by changing the framework and adding a feminine lens, fresh perspectives may emerge, which have the potential to raise further questions, cover multiple facets of the past, challenge former power structures and lead to different understandings than before.

Although focusing on history museums instead of castles and palaces, Cramer and Witcomb (2018) underscore this argument by claiming that incorporating women's voices to challenge historical narratives enables a shift away from portraying history as an expressionless, fact-based chain of important events. Their research indicates that the growing inclusion of women's voices in Australian social history museums has led to more personalised exhibition narratives, which have significantly increased critical engagement with the past and the display of gendered experiences.

Another way to draw attention to those gendered aspects of social life that have long been marginalised is to lay a larger stress on illustrating women's everyday lives. Anderson and Winkworth (2018) critique the general absence of women's domestic work in historic house museums in Australia, particularly considering that scores of objects have the potential to showcase the complexity of women's labour in the home.

The greatest challenges in foregrounding everyday activities and domestic work in exhibition narratives are deeply rooted in heritage discourses, where grand achievements have traditionally been prioritised. A masculine focus and the desire to showcase what is perceived as great, important and monumental often overshadow the appreciation of daily routines and women's work like washing or cooking that leave no monument (Wylie, 2007; Anderson and Winkworth, 2018). Laurajane Smith (2006) heightens awareness of the authorized heritage discourse and sheds light on heritagesation's strong priority on materiality, monumentality, elite histories and grand narratives that transmit the values and experiences of dominant social classes, at the expense of everyday heritage and the experiences of local communities. This leads to the exclusion of alternative histories, Indigenous viewpoints and the perspectives of marginalised communities. Feminist museology advocates for changing this framework and aims to take the focus from grand achievements to everyday heritage.

Despite its benefits, placing too much emphasis on everyday activities typically associated with women also carries several risks. Anderson and Winkworth (2018) acknowledge that stressing domestic work like spinning, weaving, or cooking can lead to the romanticisation and nostalgisation of these activities. Moreover, as Porter (1988) claims, suggesting that women in the past barely left their homes and reducing their roles to sewing and other domestic activities provides an extensively underdeveloped portrayal.

Therefore, these arguments show a modest gap in studying and developing practical solutions for representing women's everyday lives without resorting to stereotypes or offering oversimplified portrayals. As a possible approach, West (2003) proposes employing various storytelling techniques to tell the reality of work without overromanticising the activity. For example, in the case of a historic kitchen, illustrating the heat, dirt, and physical demands can reveal the contrasting experiences and emotions connected to a neat historic house. This approach is especially beneficial in castles and palaces, as it extends interpretation and integrates the stories of staff members. However, West does not clarify how these methods should be applied, and this slightly vague recommendation complicates their implementation by museum professionals.

Another central element of feminist research is how women are portrayed in exhibition narratives. Porter (1995) raises awareness of the tendency of the imprecise and idealised representations of women and the prioritisation of narratives that fit these ideas, leading to discomfort when women's roles cannot be integrated into the whole, general narrative. These trends may legitimise or even contribute to stereotypes and fail to address the complexity of real experiences. Decades later, Clover (2022) identifies similar patterns, noting that women are often placed into underdeveloped, passive or domestic roles; in other cases, the stereotype of idealised femininity limits the ability to provide compound portrayals.

Studying a wide range of curatorial texts and labels in art and history museums in Canada and the United Kingdom, Clover and Sanford (2024) attribute the strong masculine framing of society to the didactic nature of these texts, which often include elitist and technical jargon. They argue that even when the texts pretend to be gender-neutral, the protagonists are predominantly male, implying that maleness is taken as the norm. This established practice ultimately fails to challenge gender stereotypes.

To confront this framework, giving more power to interpretation and focusing on different angles could be a beneficial strategy, which may not only support gender equality and

decrease stereotypes but also have huge potential to develop the educational value of museums and heritage sites in general.

2.2. Heritage Interpretation

The concept of interpretation has been widely discussed; however, a single, extensive terminology does not exist and it is subject to new ideas and principles in light of rapid technological and societal changes. Most definitions determine interpretation's role as a form of communication with a crucial educational function, aimed at addressing natural or cultural heritage (Beck and Cable, 2002; Puczkó, 2006). An increasing number of heritage sites are capitalising on the benefits of interpretation and equipping their exhibitions with assorted interpretative strategies, as their ability to support both education and visitor satisfaction is acknowledged (e.g., Beattie and Schneider, 2018; Moscardo and Ballantyne, 2008; Ham and Weiler, 2007).

Freeman Tilden (1883-1980) is recognised as the pioneer of heritage interpretation, having developed its underpinning philosophy and defined it as “an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than to communicate factual information” (Tilden, 1977:8). Thus, interpretative activities transform heritage sites from attractions into learning spaces and their educational dimension significantly influences visitors' connection to heritage sites (Staiff, 2016). Interpretation can lead to ‘understanding, which is followed by appreciation and finally results in protection’ (Tilden, 1977:38).

Tilden introduced six main principles, which became fundamental for future research on interpretation: (1) the necessity of relating the place to the personality or life experience of the visitor, (2) clarifying that interpretation and information are two different terms with interpretation being “revelation based upon information”, (3) calling interpretation as an art that combines several arts and is, to some extent, teachable, (4) instead of instruction, provocation is the main aim of interpretation, (5) interpretation should present a whole story rather than a part, and (6) different approaches are needed to address adult and child visitors (Tilden, 1977:9).

Tilden's guidelines offer vast freedom for heritage sites in developing their interpretative strategies, as there is no one straightforward way for provocation or for appealing to the visitor's personal side. At the same time, Tilden advocates for direct interactions with people's emotions. For example, asking visitors what they would have done in similar

circumstances is an effective tool for provoking thoughts and encouraging active participation. In the case of castles and palaces, this emotional dimension of learning has the potential to narrow the divide between visitors, historical figures, and everyday people of the past.

Expanding on Tilden's argument, there is a growing trend of assigning interpretation the potential to contribute positively to society. Uzzell (1998) and Beck and Cable (2002) suggest that although interpretation is rooted in the past, it has the power to reflect on such universal concepts as justice and civic responsibility. Enhancing critical thinking and critical reflections on the past could alternatively be connected to contemporary issues (Marcus, 2007), which can also reflect on moral choices in visitors' own lives (Bedford, 2001). Uzzell supplements this rationale by emphasising interpretation's ability to offer an outlook to the future and discuss alternative forthcoming scenarios, which may include planning of the environment, and encouraging people to make choices about the kind of society they wish to live in. Similarly, Beck and Cable address interpretation's role in gifting hope to people, which may contrast the environmental degradation and human suffering with beauty and joy.

Although the authors' arguably overly optimistic views may not reflect the societal and technological directions of the 21st century, their ideas are nonetheless cardinal in empowering interpretation with transformative potential and advocating for its use in the heritage sector. Moreover, in a castle and palace environment, connecting the past with present and future dilemmas may increase these sites' ability to discuss relevant contemporary societal issues. The main shortcomings of these studies are the limited evaluation of the effectiveness of different interpretative strategies. Theoretical academic discussions are not necessarily consistent with visitors' expectations and experiences; therefore, studies featuring visitors' engagement are crucial to explore.

Observing more than 300 interpretive programs across various units of the U.S. National Park Service (NPS), Stern et al. (2013) identify through qualitative and quantitative data that successful interpretation can stem from enhancing visitors' knowledge, inspiring them to explore further and encouraging self-directed actions that support individual learning. However, although their research evaluated visitor satisfaction, it did not continue to monitor long-term engagement with the topic. Consequently, it is difficult to assess the effectiveness of the interpretative methods in this regard.

Another factor that hinders the impactful evaluation of different interpretative media in education is the dominance of research focusing on tourism and visitor satisfaction (e.g., Ablett and Dyer, 2009; Light, 1995) rather than on the learning experience. Although this lack of research makes the practical implementation of different interpretative strategies challenging, the Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites, adopted by ICOMOS in 2008, could serve as a valuable framework to follow.

The ICOMOS Charter highlights the role of interpretation in preserving both tangible and intangible heritage and identifies the following as its main goals: increasing public awareness and understanding of the cultural heritage site, communicating their meaning, safeguarding and respecting their authenticity, contributing to the sustainable conservation, encouraging inclusiveness, developing technical and professional guidelines, and providing educational resources for people of all ages (ICOMOS, 2008).

In line with this agenda, recent trends emphasise participatory visits and building on creativity. Positivist theories are particularly popular and inclusiveness belongs to the main aims of interpretation (Nowacki, 2021).

In harmony with the commitment to inclusiveness, Resolution 4 at ICOM's 28th General Assembly in 2013 articulated the recommendation for museums to capitalise on telling narratives from a gender perspective (ICOM, 2013). In consequence, although various interpretative media are generally powerful tools for diversifying stories and integrating female perspectives into narratives, feminist and gendered interpretation may offer a more direct approach to reflecting female agency. Therefore, it is important to discuss the relevant literature.

2.2.1. Feminist or Gendered Interpretations

Feminist scholars typically agree that creating gendered interpretations has the potential to provide a more balanced and nuanced presentation of the past. While making heritage sites more inclusive, these interpretations can also address historical and systemic inequalities (Dempsey *et al*, 2020).

The recent directions of research foreground the gendering of materiality (e.g., Daybell *et al*, 2020; Oudshoorn *et al*, 2002) or mundane objects (Christensen, 2011). However, studying existing narratives and exploring methods to integrate additional sources, for instance, oral history, letters and diaries or historical accounts, to reveal gender-related issues

remains an underexplored area. Studies on these segments would be essential in the context of castles and palaces. At the same time, deriving female-centered narratives from materials and objects has the ability to expand the narratives within castles and palaces, especially when the lack of trustworthy accounts endangers the incorporation of female perspectives.

Conducted as part of an international project between academic scholars and museum professionals at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London and the Vasa Museum in Stockholm, the study by Daybell et al. (2020) offers valuable practical recommendations. As part of this initiative, a methodology for developing gendered interpretative tools was established through a series of workshops. Additionally, the feasibility of these proposals was tested in a museum environment using case studies focused on two hats.

The proposed methodology recommends achieving three goals: making the gendered aspects of the objects visible; revealing their gendered impact within and beyond society; and offering a way to expand and diversify gender representation in museums. The materiality of the objects, different genders' roles in sourcing the raw material, their effect on gender dynamics in particular societies, the production process with its gendered conventions, as well as their use, design, and interpretation, were investigated. The findings suggest that with these methods, important gender-related issues were revealed, for instance, the basically unacknowledged work of female makers, the negotiation of masculinities and femininities through fashion, and the connection between materiality and objects.

Similarly, Oudshoorn et al. (2002) demonstrate, through an exhibition on gendered artifacts in the Netherlands and Norway, how technical objects can be equipped with gendered interpretations, revealing multiple layers of gendered culture. Supporting this argument, Christensen (2011) presents the potential of everyday objects to convey gendered interpretations in a historic house environment, arguing that mundane items such as costumes, textiles and household goods can illustrate gender conventions. For instance, ceramic tea wares have the ability to depict aspects of family life, gendered Victorian practices, and political activism. Christensen recommends interpreting material culture from a practical approach, emphasising how people interacted with objects, how meaning was constructed through everyday use and the roles these objects played in society.

These studies are particularly important because they connect theory and practice, and may urge museums and heritage sites to dig deeper to find important connections by investigating the materiality of the objects, particularly when the lack of accountable sources jeopardises

telling the stories of women. Moreover, these methods might help heritage sites present the working conditions, daily activities and opportunities of lower social classes. In castles and palaces, the hidden stories of female servants and maids could be uncovered through materials or simply by focusing on the objects they used.

This approach is not only beneficial for illustrating the activities of servants and household members, but also serves as an efficient tool for introducing the lives of elite women. When presented in the appropriate context, costumes, textiles or other household items have the potential to represent individual stories, collective experiences and social phenomena. Furthermore, by revealing the gendered aspects of these objects or materials, visitors may be encouraged to critically evaluate former power structures and, by starting from the visitor's individual belief or personal familiarity, meaningful connections can be formed between people of the past and those of the present (Lowe, 2015). As Ham (2013) asserts, the main aim of interpretation is to inspire visitors to find personal meanings, therefore, presenting and gendering everyday objects and materials can help build a bridge between past and present. For instance, pondering their own relationship to fashion or cooking through a costume or tea mug, visitors might contrast their own experiences and lives with those who lived centuries ago.

The greatest shortcoming of these studies is their failure to investigate visitors' reactions; consequently, there is no evidence on the effectiveness of these gendered interpretation strategies on the visitors' learning experience. Monitoring visitors' engagement with this topic could be a further direction of research.

2.3. Castles and Palaces

Belonging to the most frequently visited, marketed and well-known tourist attractions, castles and palaces play a pivotal role in the European heritage sector. They charm both domestic and international visitors and traditionally offer a wide range of educational activities (Timothy, 2021). Besides their appeal to the public imagination, their strong association with national or local identity typically amplifies their status as important national or local landmarks, blending both tangible and intangible traces of the past or symbolising a particular historical period (Savage and Wyeth, 2020; Young, 2017).

This study focuses on the permanent exhibitions designed within castles and palaces from the perspective of education. Consequently, interdisciplinary discourses, for instance, questions from academic disciplines like archeology, history, art history or architecture will

be addressed only briefly. At the same time, it is necessary to present some key functional and terminological concepts to clarify their role and opportunities in the heritage sector, providing a deeper understanding of how these similarities and differences influence interpretation strategies.

Medieval castles are an important research topic across various academic disciplines. Additionally, castle studies, an interdisciplinary field encompassing archaeology, art, history, architecture or cultural studies, also portray the complexity of studying these structures (Link, 2015; Mercer, 2006). One of the main problems of castle studies is the strong polarisation over how to define and research castles. Throughout the 20th century, scholars were sharply divided on whether castles should be regarded solely as fortresses with defensive military functions or also as residences (Speight, 2005). Wheatley (2004:2) argues for viewing the medieval castle as a “meaningful architecture, involved in a sophisticated series of ideological relationships with its cultural context.” This perspective suggests that castles cannot be reduced to their military function alone, as they also played significant cultural and ideological roles. Beyond their defensive capabilities, castles were important symbols of religious ideas and beliefs, power, and social status, embodying ideas of authority, defense, and lordship.

From the perspective of museum education and inclusive heritage interpretation, this approach is particularly beneficial. Interpreting castles as spaces of human behaviour and interaction allows more room for incorporating human-focused narratives while still acknowledging the military function of castles (Speight, 2005).

In the case of palaces, human affiliation is more self-evident, as they were mainly built as residences for royalty, nobility and the wealthy elite. Their primary function was to provide a luxurious lifestyle rather than serve a defensive purpose. They embody meanings and merits adopted by society and are furnished with various identities, ranging from national, cultural, imperial and social values (Kraikovski and Shukurova, 2017; Johnson, 2002). The great narrative potential and educational value of historic houses lie in their ability to reflect social rituals and private lives associated with their surroundings. Moreover, by capitalising on visitors’ emotional connotations to the house, these sites serve as meaningful testimonies to history and specific periods, providing an incomparable and unique setting that conserves, exhibits or reconstructs real atmospheres (Pavoni, 2001; Pinna, 2001).

According to ICOM, both castles and palaces fall under the category of house museums (DEMHIST, online). Although the main advantage of historic house museums lies in their strong relation to the particular indoor and outdoor setting, this advantage can also present one of the greatest challenges in managing these venues. While the strong spatial bond may put visitors into direct contact with the past, architectural barriers, financial constraints, preservation policies and the prioritisation of conservation needs often overshadow curatorial objectives. Furthermore, ensuring physical accessibility proves to be burdensome in many cases, potentially undermining efforts to enhance inclusivity (Pinna, 2001; Murzyn-Kupisz, 2019; Timothy, 2021).

Thus, exhibitions in castles and palaces are often criticised for failing to portray a comprehensive picture of history and for focusing solely on elite, patriarchal stories or national and political narratives (Wyeth, 2023; Dempsey *et al*, 2020; Gilchrist, 1999). Their static nature and tendency to idealise the past are additional aspects that require further progress (Christensen, 2011). The frequent omission of voices from lower social classes and women contrasts with the findings of archeologists and historians, who suggest that castles and palaces were not merely connected to the elites; those people who provided service for the owners also belong to the historical narratives of these estates. The absence of their stories results in a less comprehensive interpretation of the past (Wheatley, 2004; Wyeth, 2023).

Hanks *et al.* (2012) advocate for the use of micro-narratives, personal stories and oral histories to replace contested narratives and dissonant voices with multivocal viewpoints. At the same time, it is acknowledged that, in some cases, the plurality within an exhibition may reduce clarity. Illustrating a place's significance to visitors unfamiliar with history and supplementing this with stories and personal narratives can sometimes be challenging. Not every venue has enough resources to present history in an easily digestible way while also providing a platform for multiple interpretations.

Vagnone *et al.* (2015) go even further, arguing that historic house museums reflect political and social propaganda by being selective, biased and offering only a partial truth. They also state that these museums fail to contribute meaningfully to contemporary discussions; in many cases, the visitor experience is not engaging enough to justify the cost of preservation, and the curation is often narrow and superficial. The article takes a relatively harsh stance on historic house museums, failing to acknowledge the progress made at several heritage

sites. Moreover, considering the broadness and diversity of historic houses as a singular category (Pavoni, 2001), such strong generalisation is another significant shortfall, especially since being biased and under-curated are two very different concerns.

Nevertheless, despite these contradictions in their arguments, the authors raise some important points that need to be discussed. Mainly, the still-emerging trend in several castles and palaces, to fulfill their educational roles by offering a limited number of explanatory texts focusing narrowly on room arrangements, which fails to fully engage audiences.

To progress in this regard, giving a platform for interpretation might be a beneficial strategy. Consequently, the ICOM International Committee, DEMHIST, specialised in the conservation and management of house museums, recommends adopting different interpretative service types to highlight a venue's historical, architectural, cultural, artistic and social significance (DEMHIST, online).

Similarly to this agenda, several heritage sites and organisations (e.g., English Heritage, online a; Historic Environment Scotland, 2024a; National Trust, 2024; Europa Nostra, online) have begun reinterpreting their objectives and exhibitions with the purpose of diversifying narratives, enhancing inclusivity and providing a more complex learning experience. By facing difficult legacies, presenting the stories of servants and laying a larger emphasis on women's contributions, previously hidden storylines are starting to gain attention.

This shift in interpretation strategies provides a valuable opportunity to analyse exhibitions through this lens and to investigate how these institutional aims are implemented in practice. Accordingly, the case studies in this research (Leeds Castle, Stirling Castle, Wilanów Palace) focus on heritage venues that aim to widen their narratives and where the residential function of the site promises the utilisation of storytelling and the creation of human-centered exhibitions. The lack of previous studies on these sites from a museum education perspective offers a further opportunity for an exhibition-focused review.

In the case of Leeds Castle, previous research has primarily focused on tourism. Laws (1998) explores visitor satisfaction by examining service design concepts and visitor experiences. The study suggests that although the castle offers accommodation and serves as a venue for various activities like golf, weddings, and conferences, day visits remain the most typical.

Stirling Castle has more frequently been the subject of research, mainly from the perspectives of architecture or archeology (e.g., Campbell and Mackechnie, 2011; Ashbee, 2004; Crone and Fawcett, 1998), with studies focusing on different parts of the castle, for instance, the restoration of the Great Hall (Fawcett, 2001); or the interpretation of the Stirling Heads (Rush, 2020). Historical investigations exploring the castle's significance on the medieval royal court are also common (Harrison and Historic Scotland, 2011; Oram, 2008).

Although not exclusively concerned with Stirling Castle, Aitchison (1999) describes the masculinisation of Stirling's heritage as influenced by the films *Braveheart*, *The Bruce*, and *Rob Roy*. The author claims that, in consequence of the growing tourist interest following these movies, the narratives of Stirling's main heritage attractions started to prioritise masculine, military, and nationalist storylines. The shortcoming of this study is that, having been written before 2000, it does not take into account the changes in Stirling Castle's agenda, which has increased the representation of women and promoted inclusivity. At the same time, some central elements in the site's narratives and the statue of Robert the Bruce in front of the castle clearly reflect the trend outlined by Aitchison.

Studies on Wilanów Palace in several languages, mainly in Polish, but also in English, German, or Italian, are collected in the annual "Wilanów Studies" (*Studia Wilanowskie*), reflecting the palace's significance in Polish historiography, architecture, and archeology (Wilanów Palace, online b). Although similar to Stirling Castle, most research foregrounds the historical, art historical or architectural importance of Wilanów (e.g., Alkemade, 2019; Arciszewska, 2006), several studies also focus on the female figures associated with the palace, primarily within the field of history (Leyk, 2020; Czarniecka, 2020), indicating the site's value in presenting these women's stories.

Arciszewska's study (2006) is particularly useful for analysing the exhibitions at the palace, as it illustrates how the use of the building expresses different ideas of national identity and illuminates how the palace's architectural modifications symbolised gender roles in specific historical periods. For instance, the stuccoed plants and fruits in the Queen's Cabinet, along with the ceilings in the Queen's Antechamber, represent marital obedience and fertility, reflecting the gender divisions and the patriarchal structures of the state in the 17th century.

2.3.1. Interpretation in Castles and Palaces

After presenting key aspects of gendered interpretations earlier in the Heritage Interpretation section, it is now necessary to introduce previous research on interpretation that narrows the

focus to castles or palaces. Although such studies are limited in number, their relevance in understanding current practices, opportunities, and challenges is inevitable.

Interpretation is regarded as a highly valuable strategy within castles and palaces for foregrounding human-centered narratives and emotionally engaging visitors. Nevell and Nevell (2020) argue that new interpretations may challenge preconceptions about castles, the Middle Ages, gender roles, and the everyday lives of people in the past.

Challenging visitor prejudices is particularly useful in light of the findings of a 2006 study conducted by the social research agency BDRC, which helped Historic Royal Palaces understand the prior knowledge and interests of potential visitors (Lipscomb, 2010). The study suggests that the majority of respondents were seeking human-centered approaches and wanted to learn more about the feelings and mindset of people in the past. Instead of data-based, impersonal texts, most respondents prioritised stories that conveyed human emotions. To relate more closely to historical figures and periods, they expressed a desire to encounter real people with feelings, not just some names, dates and facts. Other surveys support this argument (Dempsey *et al*, 2020), indicating that a large number of visitors wish to learn more about everyday life and are interested in how people lived, including their clothing, education, what they ate and other seemingly trivial details.

This emphasis on human-centeredness is also backed up by Hanks (2012:28), who, drawing on the example of Shakespeare and other popular, timeless authors, argues that the success of narratives “operate(s) on two principal levels simultaneously; charting the rise and fall of nations, monarchy and empires, whilst also chronicling the everyday, mundane lives of individual protagonists.” This argument suggests that castles and palaces need to strike a balance between presenting grand historical narratives and offering micro-stories that involve broader society.

Extending these arguments, Wyeth's (2023) article offers a more practical approach, drawing on the author's professional experience as a curator at English Heritage. Through several case studies, Wyeth argues that placing people at the center of public curation holds great potential. By focusing on the story of an individual, a combination of greater reliability and human warmth may help bring the past closer to contemporary audiences. As an example of an effective interpretative strategy, Wyeth cites Warkworth Castle in Northumberland, England, where the story of a castle household servant named John is used in the exhibition to present his life, the castle spaces he worked in, and a significant national event he

experienced during his lifetime. Personalising these stories can help visitors relate to them more easily and draw comparisons between their own feelings and universal experiences, such as the transition from childhood to adulthood or the societal and class burdens people face.

Furthermore, this approach enables a more detailed description of the historical period. Given the lack of resources in many cases, this method may also be useful for integrating the perspectives of women from lower social classes while presenting societal and historical phenomena of the given era.

Similar to Wyeth, both Young (2017) and Murzyn-Kupisz (2019) argue that historic houses possess great narrative potential due to the authenticity of the building, or at least the perception of it. Visitors are less likely to focus on the arrangement and selection of objects, and more on their imaginative interpretation. Storytelling and emotional connections play a significant role, as people's bond with the building may enhance their experience, spark their imagination, and challenge their understanding of history.

These studies that recommend prioritising human-driven interpretative strategies, storytelling and micro-narratives, encourage castles and palaces towards the shift from focusing on room arrangements, architectural features, and the overreliance on presenting the story of the space rather than the people who once inhabited it.

Bringing the residents of a site closer to contemporary audiences and capitalising on storytelling is particularly valuable when we consider that history education is neither completely fact-based nor entirely objective (Marcus and Levine, 2011). This perspective is supported by historians like White (1987) and Rüsen (2005), who advocate for the use of narrativity in historical interpretation. Preziosi (2009) indicates that museum narratives are stagings and are rather the construction of desired origins, portraying history as a society wants its history to be instead of illustrating what it literally was. This highly selective process demonstrates how staged narratives can naturalise fictions and stories as facts and the truth. As such, interpretation offers wide opportunities to construct narratives and provides a platform to interpret the history of the place from feminist perspectives, or to utilise storytelling as a method for presenting more personalised fragments of the past and for integrating women's voices.

Despite common trends highlighting storytelling's positive impact, Dean (2025) and Lipscomb (2010) point out that several historians present contrasting views and warn against

its negative effects on historical accuracy. Colouring stories and enhancing dramatic elements may lead to an overemphasis on events, individuals, and tendencies that were relatively insignificant from a historical perspective. Furthermore, while storytelling can diversify narratives, in some cases, it has the opposite effect and might increase stereotypes and prejudices. Oversimplifying, overromanticising or overdramatising the past can result in a return to a singular narrative rather than fostering the desired multivocality, or transmission of biased and subjective messages instead of reliable portrayals (Puczkó, 2006). Heritage interpretation has also been accused of fabricating comforting and nostalgic images and myths about the past (Uzzell, 1998).

These challenges show that heritage interpretation is a valuable educational tool, but finding the best-working strategies requires thorough research, community engagement, discussions, and the consideration of site-specific characteristics. In the case of castles and palaces, adopting a wide variety of interpretation techniques holds great potential for enhancing female agency. However, before beginning this process, it is necessary to discover the most significant gender-related concerns in current practices.

2.3.2. Female Representation in Castles and Palaces

Female representation and gendered interpretation in castles and palaces is a field of museum education and museology that is fundamentally understudied; developing strategies to better incorporate female perspectives requires more research and academic discussions (Dempsey *et al.*, 2020). It is also striking that research focusing on female representation or gendered interpretations in castles and palaces primarily comes from the field of archeology or history. Studying these exhibitions from the perspective of museology or museum education remains a significant gap. Moreover, while most studies highlight the absence of female agency, less attention has been paid to examining how women's stories are integrated when they are present.

Heritage discourses are often criticised for prioritising masculine values by glorifying heroes, grand battles, and heroic wars, which reflect the patriarchal values embedded in heritagisation. (Glichrist, 1999; Lake, 1988). At the same time, more and more heritage sites are placing greater emphasis on incorporating female perspectives through diverse approaches. These methods range from podcast series and blog entries (e.g., Historic Royal Palaces, online) to platforms for women's stories on the websites of given attractions (e.g.,

English Heritage, online b), as well as female-centered tours or audio journeys (Ward, 2025) and online exhibitions (Durham Castle, online).

Creating temporary exhibitions that foreground the stories of women is another common trend. Several examples can be found all over Europe. Just to name a few: the *Maids and Mistresses* exhibition at seven country houses in Yorkshire (2004) (Yorkshire Country House Partnership, online); *The Women of Berkeley Castle* in Gloucestershire (2021) (Historic Houses, 2021); *The Art of Power: Habsburg Women in the Renaissance* at Ambras Castle in Innsbruck (2018) (Fössel, 2018); or the Finnish Turku Castle's *The Princess's Journey* (2022-24), focusing on Princess Catherine Jagiellon (City of Turku, online).

Developing a temporary exhibition to present women's stories is a great initiative, however, the temporality of these exhibitions is not always followed by the integration of these perspectives into the institution's central narrative (Clover and Sanford, 2024). Furthermore, temporary exhibitions do not change the absence of female perspectives in permanent collections and main narratives.

To progress in these aspects, an important article by Dempsey et al. (2020) brings together several studies and the outcomes of a collaborative workshop with heritage practitioners and academics across the United Kingdom on medieval castles. Emphasising that female agency is often omitted at several heritage sites, the workshops tried to give answers on how to better incorporate female voices. The need to address interpretative issues in order to enhance female representation in medieval castles was clearly outlined; however, participants largely agreed that simply adding women's stories in a superficial way results in poor interpretation. Focusing more on seemingly mundane items and overlooked segments of the past was proposed as a way to illustrate medieval lifeways in a more nuanced manner.

The absence of women at medieval castles was highlighted by Sagrott (Dempsey *et al*, 2020), who examined 73 castles under the care of Historic Environment Scotland to study how gender is portrayed. Moreover, by analysing several guidebooks, the findings suggest that mentions of men drastically outnumber those of women. According to the author, this is peculiar given that recent guidebooks were written with the intention of including women. Still, in practice, the gap remains substantial. While acknowledging the difficulty of telling women's stories due to the limited availability of sources on their roles in the medieval period, Sagrott suggests that the material record and the investigation of multi-vocal object biographies should receive greater emphasis. Laying a larger stress on materiality is in

consensus with research findings on gendered interpretations (Daybell *et al.*, 2020; Oudshoorn *et al.*, 2002) as outlined earlier in this chapter.

When female perspectives are highlighted in the narratives of castles and palaces, it is important to discuss how it is incorporated. The tendency to portray women as passive actors and to categorise them as wife, mother, daughter, mistress, etc., of a male figure has been strongly criticised (Conkey and Spector, 1984). However, there has been progress in this regard, and there is growing interest in acknowledging women's achievements without reducing their roles to their relationships with men (e.g., English Heritage, 2024; Historic Environment Scotland, 2024a; Leeds Castle, online a).

Despite this advancement, a major concern remains that gendered interpretations generally focus on the exceptional stories of notable, elite women. A key problem with this approach is that these women, placed within traditional narratives of male power, represent only a small part of female experiences and fail to foreground the importance of women's hidden activities, such as domestic work, childbearing, and supporting male family members. Moreover, notable historical figures like female royals, queens or influential aristocrats who exercised power in similar ways to their male counterparts do not represent all elite women, and their perspectives differ significantly from those of women from lower social classes (Lerner, 1975; Dempsey, 2021a; Dempsey *et al.*, 2020).

The practice of representing only influential historical female figures in narratives has been criticised (Dempsey, 2021b; Gilchrist, 1999), as it may lead to the conclusion that only those women who exercised power in traditionally male-dominated ways (such as political or economic power) are considered significant in historical narratives. Instead of valuing women's roles in other areas of society and reflecting other cultural, social and domestic roles, the identities and representations of these historical figures are often tied to attributes traditionally associated with male power. As Matthews (1986) points out, treating women according to masculine standards of significance creates a value system in which what men have historically deemed important is prioritised over other forms of experience.

Dempsey (2021b) advocates for recognising female agency outside of male power and placing a larger stress on incorporating into narratives the lived experiences of women's gendered roles, like how elite women managed their households, formed friendships, engaged in religious activity, gave birth and carried out everyday tasks, including weaving, reading, and gardening.

Another common problem, highlighted by Dempsey (2021a; 2019), is the depiction of spaces connected to women without offering a meaningful illustration of the daily practices that took place in these areas. Gender-related spatial arrangements and power dynamics are often prioritised over the everyday lives of women, which leads to the exclusion of women's domestic experiences.

Gilchrist (1999) points out that gardens and covered walkways are typical architectural features that have the potential to be associated with women living and working in castles. However, her observations underscore the need for greater focus on studying female representation within castles and palaces from the perspectives of museum education. From an archaeological standpoint, gardens and covered walkways may be valuable in representing female agency, but Gilchrist's research does not take into account that these are traditionally under-curated areas in castles and palaces.

Perhaps a more straightforward approach would be to explore why different social groups used the spaces of the castle in gendered ways. Huyck (2020) advocates for focusing on the potential of space usage and the explanation of daily activities associated with particular spaces to reveal important layers of individual lives and social contexts. Stressing whether and how people shared spaces, outlining personal or secret areas, and highlighting who determined the use of space, as well as the role of different architectural styles in shaping gender expectations, could serve as a foundation for interpretation. Searching for meaning in different spaces, for example, locations where women experienced emotional events such as proposals, childbirth, or where they hid secret personal belongings, is crucial for making these stories more relatable to contemporary audiences.

Overall, the large absence of women in the narratives at castles and palaces could be diminished by laying a larger stress on including women's stories. At the same time, simply adding some notable elite female figures without meaningfully illustrating various segments of their lives does not solve the issue of underrepresentation. Moreover, placing a larger stress on women-identified spaces in historic estates is recommended as a central element of interpretation.

3. Methodology

3.1. Rationale and Research Questions

This desk-based dissertation undertakes a comprehensive display analysis of the permanent exhibitions at three selected heritage sites: Leeds Castle in England, Stirling Castle in Scotland and Wilanów Palace in Poland. Through these case studies, the research examines how women's perspectives are presented within these historical settings. Drawing on the arguments outlined in the literature review, along with critical analysis and on-site observations of the three venues, this research aims to identify current practices, examine in depth the implementation of gendered narratives at the selected sites, highlight areas for improvement and propose practical recommendations for museum and heritage professionals.

As stated in the literature review chapter, castles and palaces hold a special place in the cultural heritage sector, as they possess enormous educational and touristic value. However, they are often criticised for lacking inclusivity, failing to represent a complex history and conveying hegemonic narratives (e.g., Savage and Wyeth, 2020; Vagnone *et al*, 2015; Christensen, 2011). This research, therefore, aims to address two significant gaps. First, it highlights castles' and palaces' potential to adopt modern museum education practices and to capitalise on interpretation and storytelling with the aim of offering new perspectives, enhancing both learning and the visitor experience. Although several studies discuss interpretation and inclusive practices in these settings, the number of such studies is still limited. In particular, the focus on castles and palaces through the lens of museum education is understudied compared to touristic, archeological, and heritage-focused research.

Furthermore, this dissertation posits that more castles and palaces possess the historical context and legitimacy to represent female agency than is currently reflected in prevailing practices. As such, this study aims to contribute to ongoing discourses on gender in the heritage sector. While most studies (e.g., Dempsey *et al*, 2020; Gilchrist, 1999; Conkey and Spector, 1984) investigate female representation from historical and archeological perspectives, analysing the exhibitions of castles and palaces in terms of their educational significance is a major gap.

The following research questions aim to fill this underaddressed area by exploring current practices and critically examining concrete examples:

RQ1: How are the different interpretative tools used to support the incorporation of women's voices?

RQ2: In what ways is female agency represented in the written and audioguide narratives of the selected castles and palaces?

RQ3: How does spatial context influence female representation and the narration of women's stories at the selected heritage sites?

Drawing on the constructivist paradigm, it is acknowledged that the author's interpretations are constructed (Smeyers and Verhesschen, 2001) and that observations may be influenced by the researcher's own social and personal characteristics. The interpretative nature of analysis means that the author's attitudes and beliefs cannot be entirely disregarded (Barker and Galasiński, 2001; Hammersley, 2011; Cohen *et al*, 2018).

3.2. Methodology

Feminist theories have been adopted as the fundamental theoretical framework, as discussed in the Literature Review chapter. However, since outlining practical approaches belongs to the main aims of this study, interdisciplinarity and the integration of theories and recommendations from various disciplines are prioritised. Accordingly, practical approaches from scholars who focus on women's history and gendered interpretation, as well as those who offer inclusive practices without a particular emphasis on gender-related discourses, are also incorporated.

The display analysis is guided by the critical museum visitor approach suggested by Lindauer (2006) and Moser (2010), which provides a relevant methodological framework for analysing museum displays. Lindauer proposes the concept of the critical museum visitor and encourages examination of how the visual, written, and spatial features all contribute to the exhibition, what objects are presented, in what ways, and for what purposes. The importance of attending to what is left unspoken and kept off display is also stressed, as this can reveal how exhibitions not only depict historical events but also enact social relations of power.

Moser also highlights the potential of museums and heritage sites to communicate pivotal messages by drawing on a wide range of display strategies. She argues that every element of an exhibition, such as architecture, location and setting, space, design, colour, light, subject, message, text, layout, display types, exhibition style, audience and reception, contributes to

meaning-making and needs to be critically analysed during the visit. Following Moser's suggestions, I search for the connections and examine the display elements to understand how they are employed to convey meanings, both independently and collectively. Although some general observations are necessary when analysing the selected exhibitions, the main focus is on how female perspectives are incorporated. Specifically, how the displayed objects address female agency and how the narratives, including written texts, audioguides, and complementary interpretative media, engage with these themes.

Lindauer and Moser highlight the importance of direct attention to design elements such as wall colour, architecture, lighting and physical barriers between the audience and artefacts. In the case of castles and palaces, museum professionals face different challenges compared to other museums, as they must balance preservation requirements and certain design and decorative features are already given. Taking these factors into consideration, wall texts and quotations, room decorations and object displays are examined, both in terms of how they support interpretation and, in some cases, how they contribute to the absence of female perspectives.

Since particular emphasis is placed on the narratives employed, this study investigates the writing style, word choice, narrative structure, and themes within the textual guidance of the exhibitions, focusing on general narratives, gendered narratives, the differences and similarities in the presentation of male- and female-related stories, and the ways in which female perspectives are included. As Lindauer and Moser recommend, searching for absences is crucial; therefore, the research not only investigates how women's stories are presented but also examines which stories and themes are overrepresented and which perspectives are omitted.

To examine the narratives, the textual and audioguide interpretations, critical discourse analysis (CDA) is also applied. CDA provides a framework for researchers to analyse language, discourse and discursive practices. It helps illuminate the social and political context, as well as wider sociocultural practices; therefore, it is frequently employed to discuss issues related to gender, racism, identity, and organisational or institutional discourse (Smith, 2006; Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1993; Waterton *et al*, 2006). In this research, gender relations are the primary focus.

Furthermore, narrative analysis is conducted, which, similarly to discourse analysis, aligns with different ontological and epistemological positions concerning the social world, its

explanation and construction, but the role of personal experiences and observations receives a more fundamental role (Bruner, 2004). Two main aspects are considered in the narrative analysis: the function of these narratives in aiding interpretation, and how they portray events, occurrences, social and historical phenomena, especially in relation to female representation. The coherence of the texts and framings, the use of first- or third-person narratives, and the narrative strategies employed to depict different themes are also examined.

Since female representation is the principal focus of this research, feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) is another method adopted. FCDA complements critical discourse analysis with feminist structural analyses and examines the social and political dimensions of gendered discourse. It investigates what gendered languages are embedded in museum texts and their impact on maintaining or challenging patriarchal hegemony (Clover and Sanford, 2024; Machin, 2008; Lazar, 2005).

Following these methodological guidelines, three heritage attractions are explored within the case study methodology. One of the main advantages of case studies is their capability to conduct in-depth investigations and explore phenomena that are not yet fully identified, to provide detailed descriptions or explanations, and critically examine theoretical assumptions (Cohen *et al*, 2018; Ashley, 2021). Yin (2018) claims that case studies are particularly useful for answering research questions that begin with 'why' and 'how'. Since this research focuses on current practices and investigates how castles and palaces represent female experiences, the case study methodology is well-suited for critically analysing the work of various heritage sites.

Another advantage of case studies is that they are illustrative, can enlighten crucial issues, are accessible, and can be executed within a limited timeframe (Cohen *et al*, 2018). Acknowledging that case studies are not necessarily representative and generalisable and their findings are highly context-dependent (Thomas, 2011), conducting case studies at the three selected sites helps identify concrete examples and match how they align with the theoretical background presented in the literature review. Although the limitations of case studies prevent the identification of general trends and patterns, focusing on different cases allows major themes and some recurrent concerns related to female representation to be outlined.

This research does not intend to compare the selected heritage sites or find the best-working methods. Instead, through multiple examples, it seeks to shed light on key issues, opportunities and current practices regarding female representation. In addition, effective methods, inconsistencies, challenges, and ideas for further research are aimed to be revealed. These are important steps toward understanding which castles and palaces have the potential to develop more female-focused storylines, how the general characteristics of a site influence the interpretative strategies, and how ideas that work effectively in theory can be implemented in practice.

3.3. The Selection of the Sites

The process of finding castles and palaces ideal for case studies began with a search across Europe, with the hope of discovering sites that have a strong connection to female historical figures. During the selection process, two key factors were considered: historical background and promotional strategies. While some castles may have a stronger historical connection to female figures, they do not necessarily emphasise this in their promotional or interpretative approaches. Conversely, there might be sites with less significant historical association with women that incorporate female perspectives eminently. Although such sites could offer valuable insights, they fall outside the scope of this study.

After identifying several castles and palaces that fit my criteria, I established three categories:

- (1) “Ladies’ castles and palaces” – sites where female storylines are central.
- (2) Castles and palaces with strong historical ties to women – estates, where the history of the site and the exhibitions are closely connected to female figures. However, due to their broader national, local, or cultural significance, their interpretation cannot be reduced to their association with these women.
- (3) Male-dominated narratives with notable female figures – sites where, considering their history, female perspectives are not prioritised, but the presence of one or more notable women makes it essential to incorporate their stories.

I selected one castle from each category: (1) Leeds Castle; (2) Wilanów Palace; (3) Stirling Castle. Although the three cases differ in several aspects, ranging from their functions, regional contexts to their significance in local or national memory, I believe these sites can offer important revelations, provide a greater diversity in identifying issues related to female

representation and gendered interpretation, and they illustrate a range of interpretative strategies that may be applicable to historical estates with varying degrees of connection to female figures.

It was also important to include castles with different organisational structures. Leeds Castle is managed by the Leeds Castle Foundation, Stirling Castle by Historic Environment Scotland, and Wilanów Palace is overseen and funded by the Polish Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, while also being part of a European network, namely, the European Royal Residences Association (ARRE).

Practical considerations were taken into account, and castles easily accessible by public transport were preferred. Due to time constraints, it was also important to choose locations that could be visited within the available timeframe. Furthermore, to enable a critical analysis of the portrayal of various historical female figures and phenomena, priority was given to castles and palaces whose historical contexts aligned more closely with the author's background knowledge, based on former studies and personal interest.

Moreover, since interpretation is the main focus of this study, castles and palaces were selected based on their use of diverse interpretative media, their strong educational commitment and their role in attracting tourism and contributing to local or national heritage. I specifically chose sites with an important residential history to explore how they attempt to tell human-centered stories.

3.4. Description of Research Sites

Located in proximity to London, Leeds Castle in Kent is one of the most visited heritage sites in the United Kingdom. It is promoted on its official website as a historic estate “run by queens and heiresses” (Leeds Castle, online b) and features a museum exhibition centered on female narratives. Beyond its appeal as a tourist attraction, a mesmerizing castle with a grandiose park surrounding it, the castle functions as a multifunctional venue, hosting cultural, professional and private events, while certain parts of the estate operate as accommodation. Besides tourism, education plays a pivotal role, with extensive activities designed to engage visitors in the site's history through family-friendly events and educational programs (Laws, 1998; Leeds Castle, online b).

Leeds Castle is an exciting example of a medieval castle whose history, promotion and on-site narratives focus primarily on female perspectives, with men's historical contributions

overshadowed by the emphasis on women's stories. Although originally built as a Norman stronghold, the castle never held an important strategic or military role. Its only recorded siege occurred during the time of Queen Isabella of France (1308-1327), who used military force after being denied access to the castle by the noblewoman Margaret Badlesmere. As a result, Leeds Castle became more like a fortified manor and household with significant artistic and domestic value and became a beloved place of several medieval queens of England. From the 13th century until the reign of Henry VIII (1509-1547), the castle remained the home of England's queens (Leeds Castle, online a).

The current design of the castle largely reflects its 20th-century appearance. Between 1926 and 1974, Leeds Castle was owned by the wealthy Anglo-American heiress Olive Baillie, who transformed it into a country retreat and hosted prominent figures from politics, the arts and culture, for instance, Winston Churchill, Charlie Chaplin or Daphne du Maurier (Leeds Castle, n.d.). Since Lady Baillie's death, the Leeds Castle Foundation has managed the castle and remains committed to presenting it as an inclusive venue (Hargan, 2004; Leeds Castle online c).



Figure 1. Leeds Castle.

The second case study is Stirling Castle, one of the most important castles in Scotland, a major fortification located on a volcanic rock above the River Forth. Because of its important strategic position, the castle has always been a vital stronghold. Besides its principal military function, it also served as a royal residence. From the 15th century onward, the Stewart monarchs undertook significant architectural developments to create a prestigious

Renaissance dwelling. James V (1513-1542) and Queen Mary of Guise (1538-1542) commissioned the construction of the Great Hall and Royal Palace to impress other European royals and emphasise the Stewarts' greatness. Today, these areas have been recreated after ten years of research and are perhaps the main attractions of the estate (Harrison and Historic Scotland, 2011; Historic Environment Scotland, 2024b)

Although the castle cannot be described as a female-dominated site, the contributions of Scottish queens have played an important role in its history and in the narratives associated with it. Queen Joan Beaufort (1424-1437) brought her son, James II (1437-1460), to Stirling for safekeeping after the assassination of her husband and ruled Scotland for two years as regent. Mary of Guelders (1460-1463) and Margaret of Denmark (1469-1486) also established their courts there. After the death of James V, Mary of Guise played a central role in the completion of the castle. She gave birth to her daughter, the future Mary, Queen of Scots, at Stirling. James V died six days after the birth of his daughter, and the infant Mary was crowned queen at Stirling Castle. Mary of Guise became regent of Scotland and based her household at the castle, strengthening the site with French troops and new artillery defences in response to internal conflicts and threats from England. Mary, Queen of Scots (1542-1567), spent her early years in Stirling until 1548, when she was sent to France. After returning to claim the Scottish throne, she spent much of her reign at Stirling Castle (Historic Environment Scotland, 2024b).

These are just a few examples that demonstrate how, despite its military significance, Stirling Castle also served as a home for Scottish royal women, female members of their households, and other women in their service. Moreover, in line with Historic Environment Scotland's policies aimed at enhancing inclusivity, the exhibition within the castle places strong emphasis on highlighting women's contributions and incorporating female perspectives, including the stories of non-royal women who lived or served in the castle.



Figure 2. Stirling Castle.

The Museum of King Jan III's Palace at Wilanów is located on the outskirts of the Polish capital, Warsaw, and encompasses elements reminiscent of the other two castles. The impressive Baroque palace, surrounded by a vast park complex and often referred to as the "Polish Versailles", is similar to Leeds Castle in that its residential function is cardinal. However, like Stirling Castle, the palace holds an important place in Polish national memory. This luxurious residence of the Polish aristocracy reflects the aristocratic culture of the 17th to 19th centuries. Built by King Jan III Sobieski (1674-1696) in the late 17th century, the palace became a home and summer residence for Polish royalty. In 1720, it was purchased by one of the wealthiest women of 18th-century Polish society, Elżbieta Sieniawska (1669-1729). From that time on, ownership of Wilanów Palace passed through several hands, including members of the royal family and wealthy aristocrats. After Sieniawska, another noblewoman, Izabela Lubomirska (1736-1816), made significant efforts to develop the palace, while later, Aleksandra August Potocka (1818-1892) managed the estate for 25 years (Bate, 2020; Wilanów Palace, online a). The history of the palace provides a compelling opportunity for analysis, as it was not only a chief landmark of Polish royalty and nobility but also a site where wealthy women played a major role in shaping its spaces.



Figure 3. Wilanów Palace.

3.5. The Process of Data Collection

After selecting the three venues and engaging in relevant literature to establish the theoretical foundation, arrangements for on-site observations began. To support an effective analysis of the exhibition, a sheet was prepared with guiding questions and notes that blended feminist critiques, heritage interpretation, and literature on castles and palaces with the methodological framework. This guideline was vital in drawing attention to specific issues identified in the literature. Each heritage attraction was explored on multiple occasions, both with and without the use of an audioguide. Leeds Castle was visited in April, Stirling Castle in May, and Wilanów Palace was initially examined during a longer stay in March, followed by a return visit in June for further investigation. The analysis, therefore, reflects the exhibitions in their state at the time of observation and does not account for any subsequent modifications or updates.

The initial visits aimed to provide a general overview of the structure of the exhibitions and narratives, with later visits narrowing the focus to gender and female representation. Written on-site notes and photographic documentation were collected, including transcripts and images of interpretative media, labels, explanatory texts, and physical spaces, multimedia, and audioguide scripts. They were gathered to enable later analysis, with a special focus on decoration, design, and textual guidance.

After collecting data, processing the documented written notes and photographs began with the systematic management of the records, followed by a deeper analysis and the presentation of my arguments in the Findings chapter.

3.6. Limitations

This desk-based research provides an in-depth display analysis of the permanent exhibitions at three selected heritage sites from the perspective of a critical museum visitor. While conducting empirical research and interviewing museum professionals could have offered further insights into the realisation, organisational background, and curatorial and educational concepts behind these exhibitions, it might also have altered the nature of the analysis. Gaining background information about interpretative strategies could have compromised my position as a critical museum visitor, as it may have influenced how the collected data was read and understood.

Personal bias is another chief limitation, as personal values and beliefs may have influenced data collection, and the research's subjectivity cannot be ignored.

This study addresses self-guided and audioguided interpretations, as guided interpretations involve personal, face-to-face encounters with an interpreter and the narrative is strongly shaped by the guide's individuality and personal storytelling techniques (Beattie and Schneider, 2018). Therefore, studying the narratives used by costumed interpreters at Stirling Castle or during guided tours at Wilanów Palace falls outside the focus of this paper. At the same time, investigating how guided interpretations are employed to incorporate female perspectives and educate visitors about women's experiences could suggest future directions for research on interpretative strategies.

Language is the primary tool for analysing narratives; therefore, in the case of Wilanów Palace, studying texts translated into English shifts the focus away from the original language, representing another major limitation of this study.

Finally, although Stirling Castle houses The Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders Museum, this part of the heritage site is not examined due to the distinct characteristics of military museums.

4. Findings

4.1. General Observations

Although the three cases do not necessarily reflect general trends in the representation and narration of female figures from the past, some common observations emerged across all three venues, which may suggest similar strategies in other European castles and palaces as well. This study does not claim the existence of definitive patterns; however, highlighting these similarities may help raise awareness of hidden or less clearly recognised issues, which could be useful when curating exhibitions and developing educational activities within heritage attractions.

First of all, the purposeful emphasis on female historical figures suggests a general shift aligned with inclusive practices in the heritage sector, aiming to increase multivocality and redress traditional male-dominated narratives in castles and palaces, as clearly stated in the policies of various heritage sites (e.g., Historic Environment Scotland, 2024a; English Heritage, online c; Leeds Castle, online c). It was upfront that women's stories were intentionally incorporated, even when the lack of historical records challenged the presentation of a comprehensive picture. At the same time, the extent to which women's stories were represented varied, strongly influenced by the history and other special characteristics of each venue.

In the case of Leeds Castle, the main narrative focuses on the wealthy 20th-century female owner, while the site's medieval history is primarily presented through the lens of seven queens. Departing from normative interpretations and the traditional emphasis on male historical figures helps to challenge preconceptions and the hegemonic narrative of the past (Cento Bull and Reynolds, 2021; Nevell and Nevell, 2020). Furthermore, this female-dominated framework actualises the methodology proposed by feminist heritage practitioners (e.g., Smith, 2008; Shortliffe, 2015), who advocate for interpreting the same history from different perspectives, thereby challenging dominant patriarchal narratives.

At Stirling Castle and Wilanów Palace, this whole shift in framework is missing. Although gendered perspectives are thoughtfully positioned, resulting in a well-balanced presentation of both female and male experiences, the main narratives focus on political and cultural power. At Stirling, the castle's military role dominates, while at Wilanów, the palace's significance in the Polish aristocratic lifestyle forms the central narrative. This is

understandable, given the history and function of these two sites, and it further praises the smart curatorial strategies that allow for a rich and detailed portrayal of several women.

Despite the overall effective incorporation of female experiences, the substantial distinctions between self-guided and audioguided interpretation seriously influence both the general frameworks and female representation. Leeds Castle is the most impacted by this disparity, as the medieval past of the castle is underrepresented without the audioguide. In Stirling Castle, particularly the Royal Palace is influenced by this duality; furthermore, while various interpretative media are employed across the whole venue to integrate the stories of lower social classes, the audioguide lacks this storyline. At Wilanów Palace, the illustrations and mode of interpretation are similar; however, the audioguide allows more room for storytelling, bringing the protagonists of the exhibition, both male and female, closer to the audience.

This inconsistency, observable to varying degrees across all three venues, underscores the need to investigate feminist approaches and female representation through a practical lens. Recent research conducted in a castle environment (e.g., Beattie and Schneider, 2018) indicates that significantly more visitors engage with self-guided interpretation compared to audioguided formats, which affects their satisfaction. This suggests that even modest contrasts between the two methods may influence visitors' learning experience.

At the selected heritage sites, the text panels, object labels and other interpretative media utilised in the rooms often offered only limited integration of women's stories, with an overreliance on the audioguide to fulfill this role. Given that not all visitors take advantage of this service and that only the ticket price at Leeds Castle includes access to the audioguide experience, this inconsistency may significantly affect visitor engagement with female-focused topics. Furthermore, my observations suggest that adequate space to comfortably listen to the audioguide is available only at Stirling Castle.

4.1.1. Narratives

Studying the written and audio interpretative texts, particularly the language used to portray female and male individuals, the impact of feminist scholarship is clearly evident. The texts were crafted to depict women as active agents, attributing to them power and qualities like intelligence, talent, good judgement and courage. At the same time, the consistent praise of the women featured in the exhibition narratives falls short of offering a critical evaluation of

their actions. Presenting some of the controversies surrounding them, especially in the case of royal women, could provide conflicting viewpoints.

While the portrayed women were continuously described as noble, highly literate, talented and cultured, a slightly critical tone was detectable only at Wilanów Palace, where Aleksandra August Potocka's insistence on covering the naked sculptures was pointed out, as she had begun to oppose "obscenity" as she aged. On the one hand, the word choice successfully empowers these women; on the other hand, presenting only positive characteristics aligns, to some extent, with the idea of maleness as a norm, a tendency highlighted by Clover and Sanford (2024). Women need to be exceptional to be integrated into the exhibitions, whereas in the case of men, there is no mention of their intelligence or talent.

Illustrating divergent positions could serve not only to provide a multifaceted portrayal of these women's lives, but also to challenge former gender structures. For example, although the exhibition at Wilanów Palace does not address these aspects, Queen Marie Casimire was a controversial figure in her time, as will be discussed later in this chapter. By focusing on her critics, visitors could be encouraged to consider the extent to which historical gender norms influenced the negative perceptions of her. This includes questioning whether Marie Casimire's extensive political activity, seen as incompatible with the expected role of a queen in that region, contributed to her negative image, and what the tone of the personal accusations reveals about past gender relations.

Despite the slight shortcomings of this empowering word choice, the risk of portraying women solely as wives, mothers or daughters of male individuals or stressing their contributions only in male-dominated areas (Hein, 2007) is smartly diverted. This is reflected in the language used, which in several cases refers to male historical figures as the son or husband of a female individual. The word choice follows the narrative, adjusting the framing to stress who the central figure of the story is, thereby highlighting women's significant historical role (Porter, 1990). Expressions like 'kings with their queens'; 'ruled with him', referring to the future king as 'her son', or labeling Henry VIII 'the great-grandson' of Queen Catherine de Valois, suggest a higher recognition of royal women's agency and represent a transition from reducing their roles to mere accessories to male historical figures.

Furthermore, the three examined sites suggest a conscious shift from representing elite women's stories solely through a masculine form of significance and instead provide greater space for the incorporation of female-defined historical experiences (Mayo, 2003). The roles of female individuals are no longer portrayed exclusively as those of royal or aristocratic women with political power and the ability to rule a country, or as agents of patronage, an approach strongly criticised by feminist scholars (e.g., Dempsey, 2021a; Hein, 2007). Thus, diverse interpretative strategies are employed to expand these portrayals by emphasising women's daily activities, for example, their interest in music or their talent in drawing.

Moreover, by focusing on rumours or employing first-person narratives to give voice to these female figures, their experiences with childbirth, love affairs, charitable activities and religious devotion are revealed, resulting in a more balanced representation of female perspectives in both typically female-associated and male-dominated areas. This approach is also in harmony with recent research (e.g., Lipscomb, 2010; Dempsey *et al*, 2020) that illuminates visitors' increasing expectations in getting acquainted with the daily activities and more trivial segments of the lives of people who lived in the past. All three exhibitions aimed to fulfill this demand.

Despite this great balance, some themes beneficial for diversifying the learning experience are entirely omitted across all three venues. Although it is repeatedly stressed how a royal marriage and the arrival of a queen from a foreign country affected the royal court and its influence on the customs, the cultural events or the political alliances, no attempts are made to reveal these women's and their household's experiences of leaving their home countries, their ability to speak different languages, their education, travels and their adaptation to a new environment. This potential could be fulfilled by laying a larger stress on incorporating women's personal testimonies, including letters, memoirs and diaries, which are either absent or only indirectly referenced in the three venues (Lerner, 1975).

Providing greater space for personal testimonies could also meaningfully enrich the portrayal of women from lower social classes, who are generally underrepresented and whose introduction lacks gendered interpretations. Among the three examined sites, only Stirling Castle makes significant efforts to introduce the occupations of individuals of lower societal status, however, the tasks and responsibilities of male servants and household members are described in more detail than the experiences of women in similar positions. This illuminates the problem of taking a few elite female figures, depicting their stories and considering

female representation complete, without offering a comprehensive illustration of the broader spectrum of other experiences (Dempsey *et al*, 2020).

Although the lack of historical records often hinders the integration of non-elite women, the proposed focus on materiality (e.g., Daybell *et al*, 2020; Hill, 2016; Oudshoorn *et al*, 2002) and the derivation of narratives from simple objects and household items (Christensen, 2011) could be a possible framework for telling the stories of servants, maids or other household members. Due to the omission of their activities, the great potential to shift from elite-centered narratives to more inclusive ones is at risk.

Besides the lack of trustworthy sources and the general absence of non-elite voices in castle and palace narratives, the possible reason for the underrepresentation of women from lower social classes may be in correlation with the prioritisation of individual stories over collective experience. At all three venues, the lives of some notable women with clear connections to the heritage site are elaborately depicted, while the collective experiences of women from the same historical period receive little attention. The prioritisation of introducing individual destinies over turning to the broader historical context in which these women lived limits opportunities for educating about gender relations in the past.

Clover (2024) claims that integrating both individual and collective experiences is crucial for uncovering masculine narratives and relocating women from the margins to the center, while also elucidating the socio-historical mechanisms of gender exclusion. Although the individual stories presented at the three examined sites peel some layers of general experiences and expose certain social phenomena, a greater emphasis on exemplifying collective female experiences could contribute to narratives with increased multivocality.

The focus on individual experiences is complemented by a trend of incorporating female perspectives through spectacularity. At Leeds Castle and Stirling Castle, the main interpretative methods involve actors, or costumed interpreters and living history. Wilanów Palace's permanent exhibition lacks these elements; however, the *Visit with the Queen* guided tours, whose analysis lies outside the scope of this study, incorporate similar approaches (Wilanów Palace, online c). First-person narratives and allowing women to relate events from their own viewpoints encourage direct communication with visitors and promote a close, empathic relationship (Hanks, 2012). However, the benefits of living history in challenging traditional gender roles have been questioned (Hunt, 2004), indicating that while

costumed interpreters are valuable, they are more effective when supported by other interpretative media.

4.1.2. Space

In regard to space, my observations suggest a negligible dependence on it when presenting women's stories. While at Leeds Castle, all rooms are narrated with a female-centered approach, at Stirling Castle and Wilanów Palace, spatial arrangements only modestly influence the extent of representation and the way of narrative. Naturally, in rooms associated with royal women, this relationship plays a more significant role, but by and large, female perspectives are proficiently integrated throughout the whole venue and the interpretation of spaces connected to female figures is not solely reduced to their stories.

On the one hand, this minimal dependence on space suggests an all-embracing weaving of women's perspectives throughout the exhibition; on the other hand, the proposed focus on the gendered aspects of spatial usage (e.g., Dempsey, 2021b; Huyck, 2020) is less accentual. Capitalising on the spatial context by laying larger emphasis on illustrating women's daily practices and emotional experiences in specific rooms presents an unrealised potential for widening the narratives.

4.2. Leeds Castle

Building on its historical association with women across different centuries, Leeds Castle offers a female-focused permanent exhibition, serving as a strong example of how women's contributions can be integrated into castle narratives. At the same time, the dominance of narratives centered on the wealthy 20th-century owner of the site appears to contradict Leeds Castle's organisational aims of integrating "marginalised voices that dared not speak in the 1930s" (Leeds Castle, online c).

The castle's association with various female figures is evident from its online promotion, which promises "a glamorous history filled with strong and visionary women." (Leeds Castle, online a). This approach is supported by two main narrative directions: introducing the medieval queens who contributed to the castle's present form and focusing on its last private owner, the American heiress, Olive Baillie, who donated the castle to the Leeds Castle Foundation. At the beginning of the visit, it is emphasised that Leeds Castle's uniqueness lies in the fact that, compared to other castles in Kent run by men, this original

fortress became a homestead or a place of relaxation, with the medieval queens having made a greater contribution to the castle’s architecture and history than their male counterparts.

During the on-site visit, it becomes clear that the castle’s 20th-century condition and the story of its last owner, Olive Baillie, are prioritised over its medieval past. This is especially evident in the narrative choice to contextualise the medieval queen’s experiences by explaining that Miss Baillie was not the first female figure to make significant contributions to the castle’s development. This imbalance is more prominent in the self-guided tour, where the explanatory texts and leaflet illustrate mainly the functions of the rooms during Lady Baillie’s ownership; the only strategy to incorporate the medieval queens’ inputs is through the cinematic experience *Queens with Means*. Conversely, the multimedia guide provides a more balanced presentation of the two central narratives and through smart connections, the castle’s 20th-century history is effectively interwoven with the medieval times.

Main interpretative tools (Leeds Castle)	
Booklet <i>The Weekend Retreat of Lady Olive Baillie</i>	This resource is available by QR code in several languages at the beginning of the visit, or can alternatively be rented or purchased at the visitor center or other souvenir shops. It focuses on the castle’s 20th-century history, mainly foregrounding the introduction of Miss Baillie, the design elements of the castle, and the phenomena of English country houses in the 20th century.
Information boards within the rooms	Very limited number of explanatory texts, primarily describing the room arrangement and focusing on the castle’s 20th-century history.
Cinematic experience <i>Queens with Means</i>	It depicts the medieval history of the castle by presenting the stories of seven English queens, Eleanor of Castile (1278-1290), Margaret of France (1299-1317), Isabella of France (1327-1358), Anne of Bohemia (1382-1394), Joan of Navarre (1403-1413), Catherine de Valois (1422-1437), Katherine of Aragon (1509-1533), who played an enormous role in the castle’s history. After a short introduction, actors portray these queens and, through first-person narratives, address visitors by telling their own stories.
Multimedia guide	The multimedia guide is included in the ticket price; it combines audio narratives, graphic elements, and the cinematic experience while blending the castle’s medieval and 20th-century history.
Decorative elements	The decoration includes cushions featuring information about the medieval queens, additional items and furniture that fit the central narrative, as well as quotes on the walls, paintings, and portraits.

Figure 4. Main interpretative tools (Leeds Castle).



Figure 5. The booklet *The Weekend Retreat of Lady Olive Baillie*.

Blending the two focal points of the exhibition is supported by both the narratives and the design and decoration. The latter two underscore the castle's devotion to focusing on female perspectives. By showcasing the clothing collection of Lady Baillie and everyday spaces and facilities such as her game room, bathroom, library, and private rooms, the exhibition brings visitors closer to the everyday life, interests, and typical activities of a society lady of that period. Furthermore, by displaying portraits of female figures collected by Miss Baillie, for example, family portraits, the painting of dancer and actress, Lola Montez, and the painting collection of Tudor women, the castle not only preserves Miss Baillie's collecting interests but further expands its female-oriented exhibition.



Figure 6. The displayed paintings include Miss Baillie's collections, portraying women (Lola Montez, left; Olive Baillie with her two daughters (right))

These aspects demonstrate the castle's efficiency in merging the visual, written and spatial features of the exhibition (Lindauer, 2006). Using the Salon as an example to illustrate these thoughtful connections, the multimedia guide begins by introducing the vivid parties and events held at the castle, underpinning the central narrative of showcasing the castle as a "much-loved country retreat of Lady Olive Baillie" (Leeds Castle, n.d.:2). It presents the glamorous heiress and her extravaganza in the 1920s and 1930s, but concludes by explaining the medieval architecture of the space, linking it to a fragment from one of the medieval queen's activities, in the case of Salon, how Queen Isabella besieged the castle.

By displaying objects, furniture, and interiors that symbolise the castle's function as a weekend retreat, for example, in the Salon, a long tray of champagne, the decoration effectively supports the written and audioguided narratives. At the same time, to counterbalance this central interpretative focus, cushions are placed throughout the whole castle, which match the dominant design elements in style but feature brief facts about the lives of the medieval queens. This approach supports both narrative directions of the exhibition.



Figure 7. The decoration in the Salon aligns with the central narrative.



Figure 8, 9. The cushions help reflect on the castle's medieval and 20th-century history.

Although this skillful blending of different historical periods results in a multifaceted learning experience, the considerable gap between the self-guided and the audioguided interpretation introduces a degree of inconsistency. Without access to the multimedia guide, the cushions and other references to the medieval past remain slightly out of context. Furthermore, in terms of spatial use, this duality occasionally leads to narrative choices that are not entirely optimal. For instance, the Servant's Corridor is used to hang the portraits of the medieval queens associated with the place, however, Leeds Castle's inclusivity devotions might be better aligned with using this space to tell the stories of the servants who once worked there.

Minimising explanatory texts and opting for avoiding interactives in the rooms is understandable, as certain groups of visitors perceive castles as unauthentic when spaces are overloaded with ill-fitting interpretative media (e.g., Żemła and Siwek, 2020; Murzyn-Kupisz, 2019; Thomsen and Vester, 2016). However, in certain rooms, for example, in the Salon, the spaciousness remains underutilised. The very brief, mainly descriptive texts significantly influence the way women's stories are conveyed. Additionally, the leaflet also allows more room to complement the cinematic experience offered at the beginning of the visit and to diminish the strong discrepancy between the self-guided and audioguided tours.



Figure 10. Large areas remain unexploited; however, there is enough space to accommodate different interpretative service types.

Furthermore, the spaces could allow more room for incorporating the stories of lower social classes; nevertheless, the narrative fails to integrate them. The audio explanation of the Servants' Quarters and Servants' Corridor is reduced to a depiction of the architectural characteristics of the spaces, without any initiative to add servants' perspectives, neither those who lived in the medieval period nor those from the 20th century. In the booklet, visitors receive a rather informative exposition about how more than 40 staff members were responsible for the running of Leeds Castle in the 1930s. It also mentions how, during the interwar period, skilled craftsmen, either locally based or arriving from France and Italy, were in demand, which helped reduce the significant unemployment characteristic of the era (Leeds Castle, n.d.). However, their contributions and responsibilities are not further developed, and there is no mention of those women who worked in the castle.

Depicting luxurious historical houses as venues that provided employment for a large number of people could serve as an interesting starting point to expand the elite-centered focus. Exploring the working conditions and the impact on local employment could offer significant potential to diversify the narrative. Moreover, through gendered interpretations, it could be revealed how women were specifically affected by these dynamics.

4.2.1. Narratives

The narrative builds upon the stories of powerful women and how they each carried a torch in shaping Leeds Castle into a place that attracts visitors today and enchants contemporary audiences. The exhibition strikes a strong balance between portraying these female figures' influential roles in the castle's development and delving deeper into female-defined experiences, highlighting themes such as childbirth, mother-child relationships, and the vulnerability of women, explaining how easily they could be accused of witchcraft, often for political or other ulterior motives, and the consequences of such accusations. Although these figures are, to some extent, framed within a masculine notion of significance, being portrayed as powerful women with major political roles and national leaders, the exhibition does not reduce their identities to political power or rulership alone.

Telling the story of Queen Isabelle, who herself besieged the castle or Queen Katherine of Aragon's contribution to the defence of the country, leading the army against Scottish attacks while her husband, Henry VIII, was fighting in France, is effectively counterbalanced by stories of love affairs, rumours and touching depiction of recovery from the loss of a child. Through the presentation of their diverse activities and political influence, a complex portrayal emerges, placing women in active roles marked by their own values.

A great example is the narrative used to integrate Katherine of Aragon's contributions in the multimedia tour, which aims to "challenge the prevailing image of Katherine of Aragon as little more than the discarded first wife of Henry VIII, who failed to give him a son" (Leeds Castle, 2022). The intentional expansion of her portrayal shifts the image to a charismatic woman with lasting influence; for example, it is mentioned that the pomegranates decorating the walls were brought from Spain by her. It is also suggested that her efforts in ruling the country were equal to the king's. Nevertheless, despite her powerful position, she was abandoned and lost everything simply because the king fell in love with a younger woman, a situation not so rare in real life.

Through this word choice, visitors are encouraged not only to critically evaluate former power structures, the abuse of power by monarchs and the controversies of patriarchal states, but also to draw parallels between these historical situations and contemporary marriages. As Slack (2021) states, the value of heritage interpretation lies in creating connections between heritage and visitors by engaging, provoking and encouraging them to explore, while also emotionally involving and surprising them. Therefore, replacing the big picture master narrative, as Cramer and Witcomb (2018) formulate, with a focus on personal experiences may foster critical thinking and inspire visitors to reflect on both the past and gendered experiences.

This intention is also detectable during the cinematic experience *Queens with Means*, which aligns with what Bedford (2001) describes as museum exhibitions' frequent new orientation from factual, descriptive narratives towards storytelling, an approach especially beneficial for individual interpretation and meaning making. Instead of illustrating the lives, historical roles, or significance of the featured figures in an explanatory or didactic manner, only fragments of their activities are presented. Through first-person narration, the aim is to humanise these figures (Leeds Castle, 2022). The video seeks to engage visitors emotionally while also offering new perspectives on how to interpret the experiences and actions of royal women, with an aim of including previously marginalised aspects of the past and provoking strong emotions and reflections (Black, 2012). By including themes such as romance, abandonment, the fear and relief following childbirth, political conflicts with family members, and the act of decorating their homes, the distinct focal points of each character provide diverse ways of engaging with their histories and offer a rich, complex thematic focus.



Figure 11. The cinematic experience *Queens with Means*.

The cinematic experience skillfully employs humor and sarcasm, which can be an effective way to encourage visitors to critically evaluate both historical and contemporary gender roles. Feminist museology often uses irony to highlight patriarchal societal values, just to take the US-based anonymous collective of women artists, the Guerrilla Girls as an example and their reliance on sarcasm in raising awareness about the lack of female representation in museums and the art world during the latter half of the 20th century (Leng, 2020; Callihan & Feldman, 2018).

Capitalising on the intangibility of humor and emotion, and inviting visitors to laugh at or be shocked by past female experiences can serve as a valuable tool for questioning gender structures (Bartlett and Henderson, 2013). For instance, when Queen Katherine of Aragon firmly rejects being called the first wife of Henry VIII, humorously insisting that she is the only true wife, the scene both entertains and challenges traditional historical narratives. The cinematic experience smartly follows Tilden's (1977) interpretation guidelines, and the narratives and structure of the interpretative media significantly contribute to provoking visitor reflection. As DiBlasio and DiBlasio (1983) emphasise, balancing entertainment and factual soundness is the foundation of effective storytelling within museums. Therefore, *Queens with Means* serves as a strong example of how to widen historical knowledge by offering engaging stories capable of forging emotional connections with visitors.

However, despite the delicate storytelling strategy, the repetition of the same fragments (the multimedia guide focuses on similar or the same segments of the queens' lives) to some degree reduces the ability to showcase the complexity of these figures' experiences and the historical period they lived in. Furthermore, the cinematic experience is another example of the importance of studying the practical aspects of interpretation. Due to the soft audio and the echoing acoustics of the room, the queen's speeches were sometimes difficult to understand.

4.3. Stirling Castle

As a castle with a predominantly military function, this characteristic plays a pivotal role in the narratives presented throughout the site. However, thanks to smart and exhaustive curatorial strategies, female perspectives are given significant attention in the castle's interpretation, extending beyond representations of royal women. This is achieved by establishing a master narrative that depicts Stirling Castle as a "royal stronghold, palace of courtly pleasures and military fort" (Historic Environment Scotland, n.d.), which determines

the castle’s role as a space of human behaviour and interaction rather than merely a stronghold with military function (Speight, 2005).

Despite the strong emphasis on presenting a brief Scottish history, highlighting Stirling’s significance during wars and various well-known historical figures’ connection to the castle, the integration of female perspectives is in harmony with Historic Scotland’s agenda to enhance inclusivity (Historic Environment Scotland, 2024a). This results in an excellent balance in illustrating the castle’s architectural and functional features, while also interweaving personal stories and employing human-focused storytelling methods that also address gender relations (Wyeth, 2023; Nevell and Nevell, 2020).

Main interpretative tools (Stirling Castle)		
Textual guidance	Text panels Labels Information boards	Texts of varying lengths, focusing on diverse topics, incorporating stories and quotes. Depicting the architectural and military functions of the spaces, while also foregrounding human-centred storylines.
Audioguide <i>Stirling Castle Downloadable Mobile Audio Guide</i>	The audioguide is available through the visitor’s own device and requires an Internet connection. While the ticket price does not include the audioguide, Historic Scotland members receive free access.	Both third- and first-person narratives and a wide range of storytelling techniques are used. Besides the two narrators’ (female and male) descriptions, James V, Mary of Guise, and the king’s chief herald are given a voice
Interactives	Interactives range from sensory displays and video footage to soundtracks, tactile experiences, child-friendly interpretative tools, games, and interactive boards.	They encourage visitor engagement and blend education with entertainment, offering poetry, stories, rumours, and opportunities for visitors to try strategies to siege the castle, etc., while playing an important role in raising awareness of issues related to women.
Costumed interpreters	in the Royal Palace	Costumed interpreters help visitors become familiar with the lives of people from the past.
Decorative elements	Wall decorations Quotes Reconstructions	They support the narratives, depict historical events, and highlight the significance of Stirling Castle in Scottish history.

Figure 12: Main interpretative tools (Stirling Castle)

4.3.1. Use of space

Stirling Castle makes excellent use of its spatial capacity. This is reflected in the use of the Casemates to present the castle's history in the Castle Exhibition or to develop the Palace Vaults, mostly for engaging children, offering an Access Gallery and focusing on diverse topics like music, fashion, colours and celebrations. The ample spaces enable the employment of a wide variety of interpretative media, which are also effectively utilised to enhance female representation. The interactive devices provide a more nuanced interpretation of the experiences of women. Moreover, the smart usage of the space positively influences more traditional interpretative methods and allows the placement of a large number of explanatory text panels, which helps better incorporate female agency.

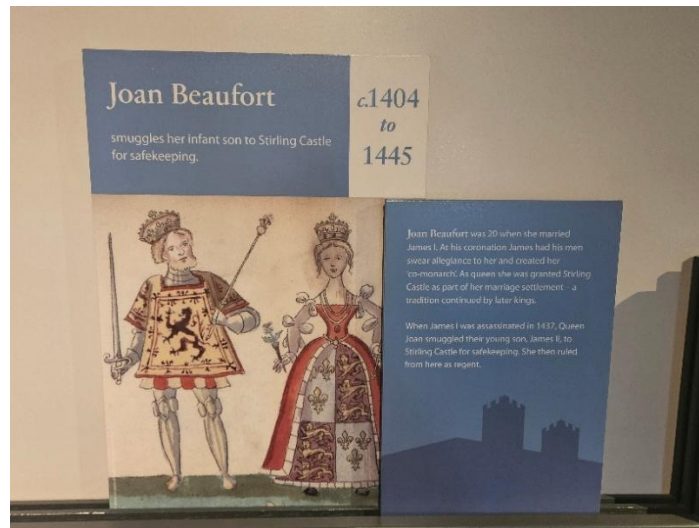


Figure 13. The large space within the Casemates makes it possible to present Scottish history in depth.

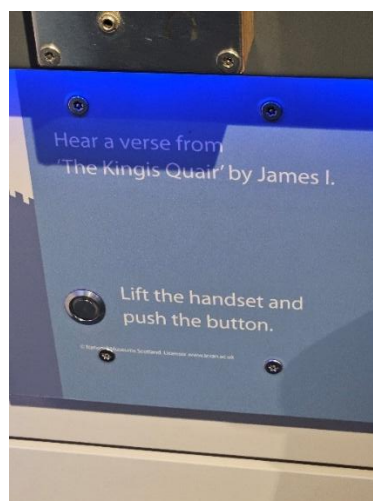


Figure 14. Interactives support the presentation of the castle's history.

However, this smart space usage results in a slight inconsistency, as the Royal Palace becomes a relatively under-curated part of the castle complex on the self-guided tour. In this area, living history and costumed interpreters, or the audioguide, help bring the experiences of people from the past closer to visitors.

Although the positive impact of costumed interpreters on the visual of the site and the enhancement of realism is often highlighted, their effectiveness in supporting the learning experience has not yet been proven due to a lack of research (Malcolm-Davies, 2004), which leads to a direction in heritage research that questions the educational value of costumed interpretation (e.g., Van Dijk *et al*, 2012; Hunt, 2004; Malcolm-Davies, 2004).

At Stirling Castle, the first-person narratives are valuable to provide complex, personal stories that portray the lives of maids and integrate female perspectives; however, some practical concerns jeopardise their effectiveness in interpretation. First of all, visitors entering the room rarely join conversations already in progress, meaning that only a limited number of people engage with this form of interpretation. Furthermore, as Tivers (2002) notes, idealised historical gender roles are rarely challenged in living history. As a result, the overprioritisation of costumed interpreters over other interpretative tools may not be the most conducive to promoting female agency (Hunt, 2004). Therefore, employing a wider variety of interpretative strategies in the Royal Palace could be beneficial.



Figure 15. The Royal Palace at Stirling Castle.



Figure 16. In contrast to the meaningful explanatory texts in the Casemates (right), the Royal Palace (left) offers rather short and descriptive texts.

Conversely, the audioguide provides a thorough portrayal of the history of the Royal Palace by drawing on a wide mix of storytelling techniques. The depiction of the rooms is perfectly complemented by first-person narratives, and visitors are presented with both political-historical events and human-focused storylines. The dialogues between the chief harald of James V and Mary of Guise are foregrounded in the audioguide, taking away the focus from the functional aspects of the rooms, which are more prominently featured in the explanatory texts within the spaces.

Mary of Guise's political career is skillfully counterbalanced by the incorporation of several female-defined experiences, underscored by a coherent audioguide narrative in which the texts complement one another and support the master narrative. A dialogue between the queen and king in the audioguide reveals their excitement about expecting their second child, while later, the notion of the tragic loss of their two sons is set to raise visitors' empathy. Turning to what are possibly the most dramatic events in Mary of Guise's life, when the queen becomes a widow, shortly after giving birth to her daughter, the future Mary, Queen of Scots, the great balance of illustrating both the personal and political dimension of these historical occurrences depicts the queen as active agent without solely focusing on her political significance. This meaningful combination of raising relatedness and empathy by reflecting on her personal experiences, alongside her significant political role in an extremely tense political-military situation after the death of James V, enables a very complex and well-curated portrayal of the queen's activities, while also emotionally addressing visitors.

Although the dialogues are carefully constructed, with attention to tiny details, such as letting Mary speak with a French accent and by giving her a voice to express her own perspective, the male narrator's (chief harald) repetitive attempts to persuade visitors of the queen's intelligence, strategic magnitude and maternal devotion, slightly takes away the voice from the queen. While the chief harald dramatically stresses the difficulty of sending her daughter to France for protection, visitors do not hear this experience from the queen herself. As a result, the audioguide relies on a male narrator to interpret a deeply female-defined experience.

Besides focusing on the experiences of royal women, and in comparison to the other two venues, Stirling Castle makes the most deliberate effort to reflect the collective experience of women, expanding the narrative beyond elite figures to include household members who served in the castle. Furthermore, the intentional integration of women's perspectives is evident in several parts of the exhibition, aligning with the minimal influence of space on the narratives concerning female representation.

For instance, in the Royal Residences, the presentation of the queen's side begins with a descriptive illustration of the room's functions and adopts the perspective of James V, foregrounding his sudden death. In contrast, the King's Bedchamber shifts focus to Mary of Guise and her solitary struggle to protect both the country and her daughter when internal and external enemies threatened their power and lives. The Queen's Bedchamber is described as a space where the queen "would have worked, prayed, washed, dressed, and eaten private meals" (Historic Environment Scotland, n. d.), but suddenly, the queen's role is reframed as the leader of the country and a mother, at war with English troops while simultaneously protecting her daughter.



Figure 17. The Queen's Bedchamber.

4.3.2. Finding Hidden Connections

In the case of the Royal Apartments, Stirling Castle had a relatively straightforward job integrating female experiences due to the place's strong association with the queen. However, the curatorial choices and the use of space in other parts of the castle provide a great example of how to dig deeper to find the less visible stories and contributions of women, something present in the majority of historic houses, according to Huyck (2020). The vast spaces in the Casamates are smartly utilised to offer traces of gendered interpretations, sharing researchers' assumptions about skeletons found entombed beneath an ancient chapel at the castle, pointing out differences between male and female remains, and suggesting that the strong build and injuries of the skeletons may indicate that the women were involved in fighting. Additionally, emphasis is also placed on a former inhabitant, Jane Ferrier, and her contributions.

Deriving from the narrative that many women have been central to the story of Stirling Castle, but only a few are well recorded, Ferrier's sketches are described as important historical records, highlighting that her contributions helped raise interest in Stirling Castle as a significant historic attraction. Jane Ferrier moved to the castle after marrying the deputy governor of Stirling Castle and made great efforts to find and sketch as many of the Stirling Heads as possible, which had been dispersed throughout the country after part of the ceiling in the King's Inner Hall collapsed in 1777. Her sketches were published in 1817, drawing attention to the significance of the Heads, which are now an important part of the castle's exhibition. By stressing her artistic talent and significant contribution to making the castle a popular heritage venue, Stirling Castle not only demonstrates how to incorporate marginalised aspects of a heritage site's past but also offers an alternative approach to integrating the voices of non-royal women, whose importance is less well preserved in historical records.

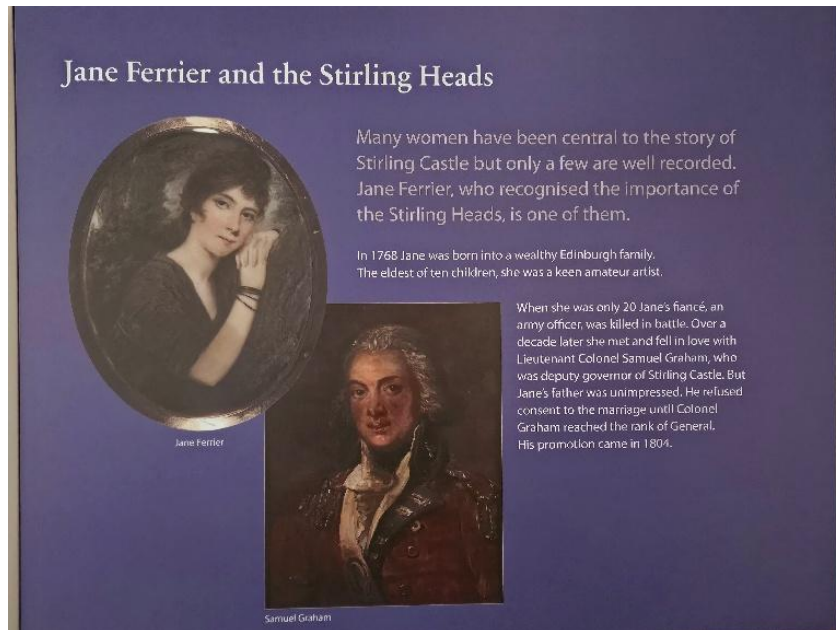


Figure 18. Explanatory texts portray Jane Ferrier's artistic talent and contributions.

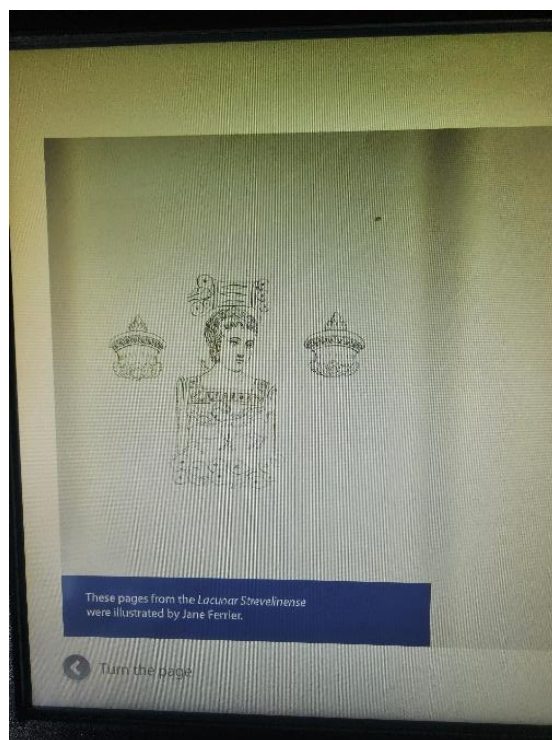


Figure 19. The interactives present her sketches.

This is especially beneficial for diversifying the focal points of the exhibition. Stirling Castle's initiative to integrate the experiences of the royal household and those of the servants, whose stories also belong to the history of the place, aligns with current trends in shifting elite-centered narratives. At the same time, a stronger focus on gendered interpretations could have further improved the exhibitions, considering that the roles of male figures (e.g., heralds, master of the household) are described more precisely than the

Scots' global prominence; still, the self-guided and audioguided narratives present her life only modestly.

The online promotion and some narratives align, to a certain degree, with the masculinisation of Stirling's heritage influenced by the film industry (Aitchison, 1999), as described earlier in the Literature Review chapter. While Stirling Castle has the legitimacy to broaden its narratives around being the royal home of the queens of Scotland, beginning with James I granting Stirling Castle to his queen, Joan Beaufort, after their marriage, a tradition continued by several of his successors (Historic Environment Scotland, 2024b), this potential to emphasise queenship is largely overlooked. Instead, the focus is placed on military events, supported by extremely detailed explanations and the overload of interpretative media centred on battles, sieges and military conflicts.

The time allocated to different topics in the audioguide underscores this observation, with approximately six minutes devoted to the queen's two rooms in the Royal Palace, while longer sections address various military events (Battle of Stirling: 5 minutes; Cornwall's attack: 2:15; Jacobite uprising: 3:07; Robert the Bruce in three different sections: 2:01, 1:03, 2:46). During the depiction of these military events, the gendered aspects of war memory and heritage are neglected, with no portrayal of how women experienced these conflicts or critical reflection on military violence (Wendt, 2023). This omission contradicts feminist history's commitment to including women's voices in areas that have traditionally failed to acknowledge them, including war history (Cramer and Witcomb, 2018).

4.4. Wilanów Palace

Compared to the other two castles, Wilanów Palace offers less diversity in its interpretative media and strongly prioritises traditional interpretative strategies, such as explanatory texts and the audioguide, over interactive tools. However, these are smartly utilised to tell stories, address a wide range of themes, provide a deep and balanced interpretation of the site's history, and incorporate the stories of women who had a significant impact on the castle.

Main interpretative tools (Wilanów Palace)	
Explanatory panels, labels	The longer, mainly descriptive texts introduce the people connected to the palace, social phenomena, architectural features, the role of each room, and the conservation processes within the palace.
Audio-guide	Not included in the ticket price Four audioguide paths: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>Interiors and the Collection</i> (main path) – about the most important exhibits, history and symbolism of the palace interiors. ➤ <i>Women in Wilanów</i>- a story about exceptional women whose actions went down in the history of the Wilanów residence. ➤ <i>Secrets of Conservation</i>- reports on restoration works that combine new technologies with old artistic and handicraft methods. ➤ <i>A visit to the King</i> (path for children aged 6+) – interesting facts about the owners of the Palace, their everyday life and objects with which they surrounded.
Interactives	A tactile experience focusing on paintings and sculptures Interactive boards illustrating conservation works

Figure 21. Main interpretative tools (Wilanów Palace).

The narratives employed at Wilanów Palace, both written and in the audioguide, allow for looser storytelling, with less coherence in text and topic coverage. This takes the focus away from a single master narrative and instead provides a platform for exploring a wide variety of themes (Moser, 2010). This approach not only enhances multivocality but also results in an exhaustively diverse set of focal points in telling women's stories. Furthermore, it appears to contribute to the relatively equal representation of the women featured throughout the exhibition; no single female figure is prioritised over another, not even Queen Marie Casimire, whose royal status does not result in more attention than that given to the other women.

Although the narratives mainly foreground the description of the spaces, paintings and other artworks displayed in the rooms, they also employ storytelling, weaving individual stories into national memory, introducing mysteries and building links between the decoration and historical phenomena. As a result, the residential character of the venue and the lives of its owners are effectively stressed. This is further supported by a separate audioguide focusing

on the women who lived in the palace. Among the three examined sites, Wilanów Palace offers the most consistent tone between its self-guided and audioguided narratives. A slight imbalance in the descriptive nature of the written texts, with a particular focus on paintings, architecture and room arrangements, only modestly affects the way women's stories are told. The separate audioguide effectively complements the more informative textual guidance with human-focused elements, revealing various layers of individual women's experiences. Although none of the historical figures, male or female, speak in the first person, as third-person interpreters are utilised throughout the exhibition, their stories are presented through multiple viewpoints.



Figure 22. The four audioguide paths at Wilanów Palace.

Moreover, the use of space also enables the integration of female agency throughout the exhibition and the function of the rooms only slightly influences the stories told. In rooms strongly associated with a female figure (e.g., Queen's Antechamber; Princess Marshal Lubomirska's Anteroom and Parlour), their stories receive priority, while in other parts of the castle, their contributions are not always, but frequently, integrated. For instance, the library is described as a place where Marie Casimire indulged her passion for music.

The narrative presents powerful, noble and intelligent women, emphasising their contributions to the development of the palace and how their activities influenced its architecture and room arrangement (e.g., Potowcka's devotion to building a chapel where King Sobieski allegedly died, Lubomirska's artistic initiatives, including the bathing pavilion, two buildings at the courtyard and the modernisation of the palace gardens). Moreover, since a wide variety of their activities is described in detail, ranging from

Potocka's role in developing modern agricultural methods, managing the palace for 25 years and financing a book about Wilanów's residents, these portrayals expand the domestic or political roles of women by revealing that these women were engaged in far more than simply residing in their homes, offering a fuller picture of their activities (Porter, 1988).

This is important because the exhibition achieves the illustration of women's contributions across various fields, including academia, art patronage, charity, and community care, without forcing them into a masculine framework of significance and overshadowing their other activities with their political roles. Their impact on the historic environment is clearly highlighted, supporting a multifaceted interpretation (English Heritage, online b).

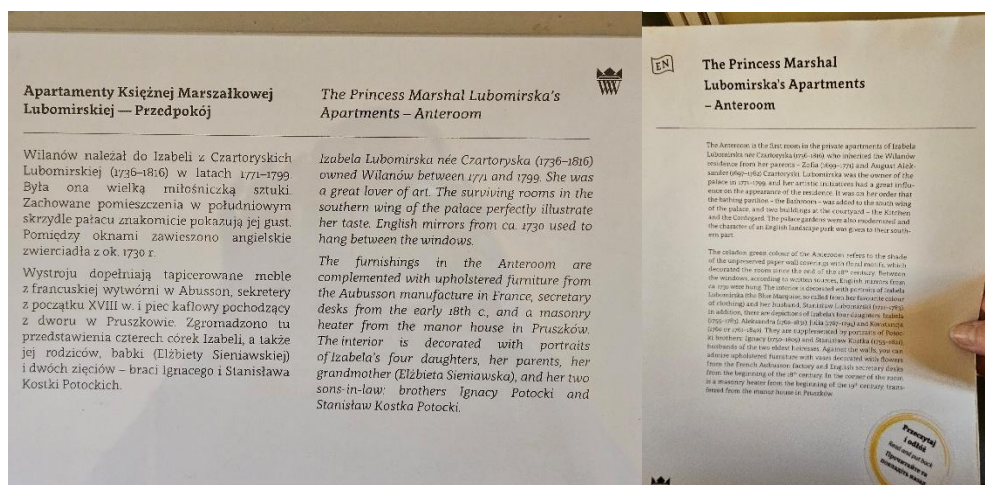


Figure 23. The rather long and simply designed explanatory texts reveal various layers of women's activities being presented.

The word choice creates an image of noble women engaged in a variety of activities, with both their contributions and personal interests equally emphasised. Individual stories are prioritised, as there is no attempt to include collective experiences. However, by focusing on specific female figures, the narrative implies that other women of the era could have pursued similar activities, resulting in a thorough illustration of the given historical period (Wyeth, 2023; Nevell and Nevell, 2020). For example, when it is revealed that Alexandra August Potocka wore only black dresses as an expression of patriotism, this suggests the phenomenon may have extended to other women. In the 19th-century partitioned Poland, the refusal to wear colorful clothing was a symbolic act of resistance following the uprisings against Tsarist Russia (Lukowski and Zawadzki, 2019). By focusing on Potocka's individual decision, a broader social phenomenon is revealed, encouraging visitors to reconsider women's roles and perspectives in national events.

Although the narrative places strong emphasis on integrating the stories of the women featured, it sometimes lacks a critical engagement with traditional gender roles. As Arciszewska (2006) argues, the architectural features of the palace reflect the gender divisions of the historical period, and the exhibition depicts the activities of certain women by deriving the narrative from these architectural characteristics. For instance, Queen Marie Casimire and her marriage to Jan III are illustrated as a blend of romantic love, dynastic-strategic union, and a marital partnership, an interpretation that aligns with the themes of marital obedience and fertility expressed in the decoration of the Queen's private rooms.



Figure 24. Marie Casimire and her children. The queen's portrayal represents former gender structures.

Aligning with central directions of queenship studies, Queen Marie Casimire is depicted as an artistic, religious, educational, and architectural patron, as well as a partner to the king (Woodacre & Rodrigues, 2024; Earenfight, 2013). She is portrayed as a respected royal woman, described by her contemporaries as “ambitious, decisive, capable” (Wilanów Palace, n.d.). The exhibition narratives omit the more controversial aspects of her legacy, which are acknowledged on the palace's website, namely, the 17th-century criticism of her personality, including accusations of infidelity and favouritism toward her family (Czarniecka, 2015). Reflecting on these elements could open the possibility of challenging

traditional gender relations. Visitors may reconsider the extent to which the queen's extensive political involvement contributed to these criticisms, what it reveals about gender norms that she was repeatedly labeled an unfaithful wife and bad mother due to her political activity, or alternatively, reexamine the controversies surrounding royal figures.

This absence in the narratives may be linked to the exhibition's prioritisation of themes that support national identity and reflect on the brighter aspects of Polish history, while downplaying topics such as the partition of Poland, national grief and its gendered dimensions, and how people in general, and women in particular, experienced the turbulent seventeenth to nineteenth centuries of the country. As Whelan (2018) highlights, Polish aristocratic women often played a pivotal role in managing estates, supporting their families and communities, and actively shaping their surroundings in the wake of the tragic loss of men in the wars of the late 17th century. However, the exhibition at Wilanów Palace does not draw attention to these aspects of the women's activities.

Furthermore, from a feminist perspective, greater reliance on personal testimonials could benefit the exhibition. Compared to the other two castles, Wilanów Palace's history begins in the 17th century, which offers an advantage in terms of finding reliable direct accounts and connecting the experiences of people of the past to contemporary emotions. For instance, the extensive correspondence of Marie Casimire or the writings of Izabela Lubomirska could be used to give these women a voice. In addition, as Dempsey (2021b) proposes, fronting women's friendships holds great potential; thus, focusing on the correspondence between Maria Casimire and Elżbieta Sieniawska, two prominent inhabitants of the palace, could provide valuable insights into their interactions and experiences.

Similarly, although Izabela Lubomirska is described in the palace narratives as a cosmopolitan, educated aristocratic woman, her work as a museum curator and her publications on landscape gardening, prayer books, textbooks, as well as her unpublished catalogues of museum collections, essays, biographies of historical figures and travel diaries from her European journeys are not directly illustrated or quoted (Whelan, 2018). Presenting her writing style and focusing on her diverse activities could further expand the representation of the women associated with the palace.

5. Conclusion

By applying a series of methodological frameworks, this study investigated three heritage sites, Leeds Castle, Stirling Castle, and Wilanów Palace, within the case study methodology. The aim was to illuminate how different interpretative media were used to integrate female perspectives, how the narratives portrayed women, and how space influenced their representation. Through an examination of various exhibition elements, including language, decoration, interpretative strategies and displayed objects, the study sought to conduct a deep analysis, emphasise seemingly effective practices, match exhibition narratives and current practices with the recommendations of feminist scholars and other research on interpretation and heritage, while shedding light on inconsistencies, concerns and areas for future development. The heritage sites were carefully selected based on several criteria, principally their strong association with various female figures and the emphasis on this connection.

Exploring the permanent exhibitions of Leeds Castle, Stirling Castle, and Wilanów Palace confirmed my prior assumption that several European castles and palaces have the potential to incorporate more female perspectives, and they can positively influence both the narratives and the educational aims of each venue. However, studying current practices from a wide variety of perspectives remains essential, as both theoretical and practical recommendations are needed to decrease the absence of women's voices and provide narratives that offer a comprehensive picture of female experiences.

My analysis suggests a purposeful integration of female-focused narratives; however, among the three examined sites, only Stirling Castle has considerably raised awareness of the stories of lower social classes, servants, or household members. This indicates that the focus on women is often limited to royal or noble women. A general prioritisation of individual stories over collective experiences was also characteristic across the sites.

In line with the recommendations of feminist scholars, the narratives in the selected museums portrayed women as active agents. This was reflected through empowering word choice, the expansion of women's roles beyond being daughters or wives of male historical figures, and the illustration of their diverse activities and contributions, not solely their domestic or political roles. The narratives follow a growing trend toward human-focused storytelling, which supplements the informative description of rooms, architecture and

spatial functions with personal experiences, stories, rumours and mysteries. In doing so, they widen historical understandings by focusing on fragments of women's lives.

The findings of this study suggest that both traditional interpretative approaches (e.g., text panels, leaflets, labels), and interactive media (e.g., video footage, interactive boards) have the potential to emphasise women's contributions, provided the narratives are well developed. At Stirling Castle, extremely diverse interpretative approaches were used; at Leeds Castle, a cinematic experience complemented more traditional strategies; while at Wilanów Palace, longer texts were the primary means of educating visitors. In all three venues, the audioguide served as a central segment of the interpretative strategies. As a result, castles and palaces with more or less financial resources can select the most suitable approach for their context, as both written texts and interactive media offer broad potential for introducing female-focused narratives.

Storytelling and building narratives around women's contributions were the most typical strategies at the three examined venues. In contrast, objects were less frequently the focus of interpretation and efforts to gender materiality were largely absent. Female experiences were rarely derived from simple objects; however, decorative elements, portraits of women, furniture, games, or other items were effectively incorporated into the narratives.

Moreover, my findings suggest that both coherent and fragmented texts can successfully represent female agency. While at Stirling Castle, a continuous storyline helped construct a layered narrative that revealed multiple aspects of female experiences, Leeds Castle and Wilanów Palace focused on selected fragments of featured women's lives, which also seemed to be effective in showcasing the diversity of their activities and offered a well-balanced illustration of their distinct practices.

Furthermore, the three examined sites share a common approach in attributing minimal influence to space in shaping female representation and narrative modes. Women's stories were presented throughout the venues, not only in rooms traditionally associated with female figures. Although spaces with strong connections to historical women, for instance, the Queen's Apartments or Queen's Antechamber, prioritised telling the stories of those who once inhabited them, the narratives did not exclusively focus on them in these rooms. Furthermore, female agency was not limited to these areas; instead, women's stories were also integrated into rooms typically associated with male figures.

The investigation of the three sites highlighted the importance of closely examining the practical aspects of interpretative strategies and narratives, particularly in relation to their impact on the representation of women. Differences between self-guided and audioguided interpretation, especially in the extent and style of narration, may significantly impact visitors' learning experience. This is particularly relevant given that the audioguide was included in the ticket price only at Leeds Castle. Other practical issues, like echoing rooms that interfered with actors' recorded voices, a lack of spaces for listening to longer audioguide sections, and repetitive content within the narratives, also need to be addressed to support further progress in inclusive interpretation.

The findings of this study indicate that castles and palaces have more potential to reveal female experiences than is often assumed. For example, Stirling Castle's commitment to include Jane Ferrier and her sketches demonstrates how, in some cases, women's association with a place can be overlooked; therefore, actively searching for these connections is essential to enhancing female representation in castle and palace narratives.

Thus, heritage sites hold further potential in several areas, including

- gendering material culture
- depicting castles and palaces as sources of employment, with a particular focus on women, and showing how historic houses provided work
- emphasising the gendered dimensions of war memory
- incorporating more personal testimonies
- focusing on women's education, knowledge, and interests
- employing sarcasm and humor

Moreover, despite proposals from feminist scholars (e.g., Dempsey, 2021a; Huyck, 2020; Cramer and Witcomb, 2018), the three examined sites did not link women's domestic life and everyday activities to specific spaces. Placing greater emphasis on women's personal experiences within particular rooms could further expand the narratives.

To encourage further discussions on the topic, additional castles and palaces with strong associations to female historical figures could be examined to identify broader patterns, alternative strategies, and challenges. One of the main limitations of this study is its focus on only three cases, which is insufficient for illuminating trends. Expanding the research to include other heritage sites with notable connections to women may help reveal additional common practices and interpretative approaches.

At the same time, equally important is the examination of heritage sites that fail to integrate women's voices. Studying these cases can provide insight into missed opportunities for representing female agency and highlight marginalised storylines that deserve greater attention.

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