
H-France Review Vol. 20 (August 2020), No. 153

Sean L. Field, *Courting Sanctity: Holy Women and the Capetians*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019. xiii + 266 pp. Maps, notes, bibliography, and index. \$39.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781501736193.

Review by Miriam Shadis, Ohio University.

Primarily through the lens of gender, the study of monarchy in the recent past has had a makeover; this is particularly true for medieval Iberia.[1] In *Courting Sanctity*, Sean Field turns to the medieval Capetians, who ruled France for more than four hundred years, and offers an almost radical revision of one way in which the later Capetians grew in power: through their fraught relationship with holy women. *Courting Sanctity* brilliantly analyzes the individual careers of six women in the context of the reigns of Louis IX, Philip III, and Philip IV. Field's narrative creates an important picture the whole of which is greater than the sum of the parts, as he demonstrates how the Capetians, over time, both sought and feared the recognition of so-called "holy women."

The book is divided into three sections, organized more or less chronologically. Each section begins with a prologue helpfully contextualizing the key concerns of each reign when it came to politics, sanctity, and legitimacy. The book is fluently written and well organized, with a substantial epilogue. This review cannot do justice to Field's creative, sensitive, and original reading of a variety of sources, some previously unexamined.

The study begins with an examination of the court of Louis IX, the influence of Blanche of Castile, and Louis's commitment to crusade, providing the familial and religious context for the princess Isabelle. Chapter one, "Isabelle of France: A Holy Woman at the Heart of the Capetian Court," explains Isabelle's increasing commitment to virginity as well her status as a laywoman. With her brother Louis, Isabelle built the monastery of Longchamp, and fought to secure its place within the Franciscan Order.[2] Isabelle anchored Capetian holiness (at first, even more than Louis); simultaneously, she resisted pressures to take holy orders herself, with the same determination that she resisted marriage, becoming "an essential, yet problematic figure in the creation of Capetian sanctity" (p. 24). Isabelle's reputation as a holy person "burst forth" in the 1250s (p. 26). A series of texts completed or initiated in this period all pointed to Isabelle's notorious virginity and a hope that she would conform to monastic life, taking vows of poverty, chastity, and—above all—obedience. For example, Thomas of Cantimpré thought she might frame her holy life as a beguine, whereas Innocent IV repeatedly grappled with Isabelle's commitment to uncloistered virginity. Isabelle could be unconventional because she was the king's sister and extraordinarily wealthy. Her resistance to convention, however, cost her: towards the end of her

life the papacy, as well as the Franciscan Order, seems to have washed their hands of this difficult character.

Chapter two, “Douceline of Digne, Co-mother to the Capetians,” tells the story of a woman whose life paralleled Isabelle’s, primarily by offering “living proof of the divine approval enjoyed by the Capetians” (pp. 72-73). Douceline of Digne became associated with the Capetians through Isabelle and Louis’s brother Charles of Anjou, who aggressively sought to elevate the Capetian connection to the holy. Douceline, the sister of the Franciscan Hugh of Digne, vowed virginity in a semi-formal way and introduced the beguines to Provence, founding two beguinages by 1250. Her story is told in a *Life* written by Felipa of Porcelet, soon after Douceline’s death in 1274. Felipa’s *Life* explains how Charles’s wife Beatrice of Provence, very pregnant, dreamed of a holy woman who would help her deliver—this was Douceline. The only Angevin source confirming Douceline’s relationship to Charles of Anjou is an abstract of a now-lost letter, holding a precious clue: the use of the word *commater* (“co-mother”) to describe Douceline. Field suggests she became the god-mother of Charles’s and Beatrice’s youngest daughter, the aptly named Isabelle. Thus Douceline was incorporated, through baptism, into the family.

But first, her *vita* relates, Douceline was tested, in fact tortured, to ascertain her veracity as a mystic. This disturbing episode proved an early example of repeated physical tests to which holy women were subjected. Once Douceline passed the ordeal of having molten lead poured on her feet, though, she earned a great deal of power at Charles’s court, becoming a respected and even demanding advisor. As her brother Hugh had warned Louis IX, she also warned Charles against the arrogance of power, seemingly prophesying his eventual eviction from Sicily in 1284. Like Isabelle, over time Douceline lost status at court, but maintained a correspondence, her warnings to the king increasingly “grim” (p. 70).

The second section of *Courting Sanctity* describes the processes by which holy women were examined by authorities and how late thirteenth-century authors sought to frame and control their stories, integrating them into the sanctioned narrative of Capetian history. This period was marked by crisis in the years 1276-78, when the widowed and remarried Philip III faced the deaths of two of his sons by his first marriage to Isabelle of Aragon and his second wife, Marie of Brabant, was accused of having poisoned one of them. Military failure, a factionalized court, and the reputed prophecy of Elizabeth of Spalbeek threatened the future of the Capetian dynasty.

Chapter three, “A Prince’s Death, a Queen’s Crime, and a King’s Son,” tells the story of Elizabeth of Spalbeek, a “holy woman [widely renowned for] a gift for prophecy” (p. 83). Elite and well-connected, Elizabeth was famous for her devotions and mystical experiences, including the stigmata. In the late 1270s, claims emerged that she had prophesied that the king would lose his children (and throne) on account of his sins (“against nature”). Meanwhile, a rumor circulated that the queen had poisoned the prince Louis, wishing to place her own child on the throne. Capetian anxieties about dynasty and reputation were caught in a swirl of rumors of varying and competing origins, reflecting tensions at court between the queen, and the king’s favorite, Pierre de la Broce, and the cardinal legate (and future pope), Simon of Brie. Field carefully explains this complex web of political relationships into which Elizabeth was pulled and focuses on the surprisingly persistent process by which she was repeatedly interviewed (four separate inquiries). In the end, she denied ever having said anything about the king or the queen. “Thus it was ultimately Elizabeth’s silence, not her prophetic power, that was necessary for the Capetian court’s continuing claims to act as God’s favored ruler in France” (p. 114). Elizabeth eventually

faded from the scene, silencing herself as an act of self-preservation (p. 113). Elizabeth's case demonstrates how deeply the court could be invested in holy women's potent voices.

Chapter four, "Writing Holy Women, 1282-85," examines late thirteenth-century efforts to reinforce Capetian claims to sanctity in the wake of the scandals of 1276-78 and the Sicilian Vespers in 1284. Although "the 1270s witnessed a flurry of writing about the Capetians" (p. 118), notably by Primat, Geoffrey of Beaulieu, and William of Chartres, these works rarely referred to female holiness. Later writings restored holy women to the narrative, but in a tightly controlled manner. The *Life* of Isabelle, written under the patronage of Charles of Anjou by the remarkable Agnes of Harcourt, abbess of Longchamp, tamed Isabelle's story, eliding some of the more problematic aspects of the princess's idiosyncratic career. Similarly, we see Elizabeth of Spalbeek reframed by William of Nangis, distanced from the court and discredited as a voice. Finally, Salimbene de Adam lauded Douceline's sanctity and linked her to the Angevin court as a holy seer. Crucially, these revisions happened in the context of the canonization process of Louis IX, and, significantly, as part of Charles of Anjou's efforts to claim a *beata stirps*, or blessed lineage.

Section three, "Destruction," exposes the radically changed relationship between holy women and the court during the fraught reign of Philip IV, when holy women posed an unacceptable threat to the authority and divine favor of the Capetians. In Chapter five, "Paupertas of Metz: Peacemaker, Prophet, or Poisoner?" Field offers a sharp analysis of the so-called Continuation of 1308, a recently discovered lengthy and early record of a holy woman who had previously merited only a few lines from William of Nangis. In 1297 a woman with a reputation for holy living seems to have left Metz and gone to Lille to join the beguinage of St. Elizabeth there, just in time for the war between Philip IV and the count of Flanders. This was probably the mysterious "Paupertas." Paupertas, perhaps inspired by Franciscanism, identified with poverty and with peacemaking, and was accepted by both camps as a mediator. Eventually, however, she was accused of attempting to poison the king's brother Charles of Valois as well as frustrating Philip IV's military successes. She was arrested, tortured, and nearly executed by Charles. Paupertas represents an essential dilemma for the Capetians in their quest for legitimacy and authority—the degree to which she was taken seriously provoked a parallel urgency that she be discredited.

In the final chapter, "Marguerite Porete and Margueronne of Bellevillette: The Beguine and the Sorceress," two holy women caught up in the vicious politics of the last generation of the Capetian dynasty highlight the crucial role of women in the affirmation of Capetian royal authority. Marguerite Porete, much better known, was a learned author whose heresy was uncertain but whose resistance was clear: for her refusal to accept the condemnation of her book, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, she was burned at the stake in 1310. Marguerite, an "imperfect heretic," had nothing to do with the Capetians, but her defiance of authority "was portrayed as recalcitrant heresy rather than determined sanctity" (p. 213). Margueronne of Bellevillette was an un-free, illiterate woman implicated in the trials of Bishop Guichard of Troyes, himself dogged by repeated accusations of attempting to poison members of the royal family. Margueronne was identified as a *divinatrix* and *sortilega* who conspired with Guichard (p. 191). Sorcery was a new concern (articulated, for example, as a justification for the destruction of the Templars) but Margueronne's claims to holy power seemed primarily to extend to her ability to find lost animals. In the end, Guichard was proved irrelevant at the Council of Vienne (1311-1312) and Margueronne was released from prison where she had languished for eleven years. Margueronne's case demonstrates the shift in thinking about "holy women" and their importance to the Capetians: although Margueronne was "not portrayed as holy, her accusers insisted that

she was indeed a woman in touch with supernatural knowledge [like Douceline, Elizabeth, and Paupertas]" (p. 190).

Courting Sanctity demonstrates unequivocally that monarchy can be better understood not only when the entire family is examined and when sibling, noble, and courtier networks are considered, but when the spiritual goals of the family are accounted for. Furthermore, any understanding of the royal power must take into account the role of gender. Gender—specifically, the female gender—was a crucial element of the Capetian approach to validating sanctity. Having cultivated an aura of sanctity and having at every stage managed its particular relationship to women's association with first holiness, and ultimately, the occult, by the 1320s the Capetian dynasty was at an end. Moreover, the political role of holy women had become more than ever fraught with danger, exemplified one hundred years later by the life and death of Joan of Arc.

NOTES

[1] See most recently Lucy K. Pick, *Her Father's Daughter: Gender, Power, and Religion in the Early Spanish Kingdoms* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017).

[2] This was the subject of Field's first book: *Isabelle of France: Capetian Sanctity and Franciscan Identity in the Thirteenth Century* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).

Miriam Shadis
Ohio University
shadis@ohio.edu

Copyright © 2020 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172