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Constance Brittain Bouchard, *Negotiation and Resistance: Peasant Agency in High Medieval France*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2022. xi + 169 pp. Map, notes, bibliography, and index. \$125.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781501766572; \$19.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9781501766589; \$12.99 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9781501766602.

Review by Erika Graham-Goering, Ghent University.

In his 1995 presidential address to the Medieval Academy of America on the subject of lordship, Thomas Bisson concluded that “Then and for long thereafter most people must have equated lordship with the exercise and sufferance of power. Most were not rebellious. It is time to hear them better.”[1] Constance Bouchard now flips this perspective on its head: “The powerful in the high Middle Ages fully recognized this [peasant] agency. It is time for more of us who study medieval people to do the same” (p. 158). Yet, modulating Bisson’s default alternative, it is not open rebellion that takes the spotlight in most of this concise book, as many specialists of the peasantry of the later medieval period in particular may tend to expect. Instead, the broader concept of agency, here defined as peasants’ individual and/or collective ability to “influence and modify both their society and their position in it” (p. 23), shows the limits of coercive seigneurial action and the plasticity of peasant experiences reflected in the proactive steps they took to modify them. Furthermore, we can access this agency via the records of the elite, who in documenting their own interests also made peasants visible in some surprising ways.

Following an introduction that discusses what is meant by the term “peasant” (broadly, country people of lower socio-economic status) and the role of “the poor” in the narrative sources on which traditional studies have tended to rely, Bouchard divides the book into five thematic chapters. The first considers the questions of peasant dependency and especially of servile status, arguing not only that the peasantry encompassed a diversity of roles, fortunes, and circumstances (as is only to be expected of what amounted to the vast majority of the population), but also that familiar and ostensibly clear-cut status categories such as those who work/those who fight, and even the fundamental difference between free and unfree, were both ambiguous and negotiable as peasants made choices about their own life paths. Chapter two turns to peasants as tenants: because peasants—and more importantly, their labor—were individually, not just collectively, valuable to their ecclesiastic and lay lords, they themselves could have a say in what they owed and what might become of their property. Chapter three complicates the other commonplace dichotomy, of those who work/those who pray, by demonstrating peasants’ investment in shaping their multifaceted relationships with the institutions of religion. Chapter four deals with collective action, demonstrating the initiative taken by peasants in the agricultural expansion often credited to lords, and the success of franchises and communal arrangements in satisfying

(or at least furthering) peasant interests. Finally, chapter five considers both the wins and the losses of peasants contesting the demands made on them, often in court, as evidence for their ability to play different lords against each other within a messy hierarchy, and the acceptance and even legitimacy accorded to their views by these powers. While Bouchard is careful not to paint an overly rosy picture of peasant life, she contends that we should not deny them the dignity of action.

Grounded in Bouchard's deep familiarity with the ecclesiastical cartularies and related archives of the Burgundy/Champagne region in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, this book proceeds more anecdotally than as a survey. If peasants are mentioned in twenty to thirty-five percent of the extant charters, the narratives they offer tend to be relatively brief, although Bouchard thoroughly unpacks these alongside a few extended examinations of more well-documented case studies including the Customs of Lorris, the so-called *capuciati* heresy, and a prolonged dispute between the abbey and commune of Vézelay. Rather than limiting the effectiveness of the conclusions reached, this case-by-case approach underscores one of the book's primary contentions, that the individuality of peasants was recognized by their more powerful contemporaries, and that these specific people may emerge from the records today. Moreover, the quantity and comparability of the episodes across the book convincingly support the representativity of these episodes: themes such as a marked preference for religious over secular lords, or insistent moves away from arbitrary towards "fair," stable demands give coherence to the patterns detectable across the granularity of individual lives.

There are still places where understanding agency in these documents is perhaps less straightforward than Bouchard suggests. It can be very difficult to unpick the actual ability to make a choice from the legal construct of consent (upon which great value was placed in this period): that is, did the monks need peasants to agree because they had no other means of enforcing their will, or because it granted legitimacy to the transaction? It is not always clear why one interpretation is preferred over another in any given instance here—though the basic fact of agency, whether actualized or merely recognized by their contemporaries, is not thereby cast in doubt. (I am similarly unsure whether the pragmatic specificity of identifying individual peasants in different transactions amounts to an affective relationship, as Bouchard suggests at times: it may have, or it may have not, but these texts cannot tell us.) Perhaps more importantly, the initiative underlying certain actions, such as a lord turning the judgement of minor infractions over to a village council, or monks granting compensation to those they were relocating, cannot confidently be assumed to be that of the peasants, as claimed here. Certainly it should not simply default back to those in power either, in light of the many clear instances where peasants *did* make such requests, but the complexity and ambiguity of the power relations could be acknowledged without building too far out upon the sand. Despite these specific caveats, the handling of the difficult documentary material remains one of the great strengths of this book as both a model for how we can extract far more information from these top-down sources than at first meets the eye, and a convincing call to do so.

Bouchard's conclusions remain highly sensitive to their context: given the variations even within her own period of study, she does not attempt to generalize from this material to the experience of peasants before and after. Indeed, she views the high Middle Ages as distinctive in the degree of opportunity available to peasants, proposing an alternative reading of the so-called "feudal revolution" that has hitherto concentrated on whether lords crushed peasants gradually or swiftly. Nevertheless, this book has much to offer historians studying the period after the

reassertion of seigneurial power from the thirteenth century, especially in thinking about what we might look for in the much more abundant records of the later Middle Ages and the ancien régime, and how the changes to peasant status might be reflected in their documentary positioning. Bouchard also contrasts the range of options for negotiation used by medieval peasants with a recurring emphasis on passive resistance to subjugation in modern contexts, suggesting that cross-chronological research on individual strategies to effect change could yield fruitful results.

Above all, as with many of Bouchard's previous works, this book will be invaluable in the undergraduate classroom as a powerful antidote to the all-too-frequent image of the generic peasant who operated as part of some medieval hive mind. Accessibly and engagingly written, this book effectively humanizes and concretizes people who often appear too distant to perceive clearly, while challenging some of the easy frameworks through which the Middle Ages are conventionally understood. As student interest in bottom-up history and its methods grows, it is especially important to be able to offer them new research from beyond England, where so much of the Anglophone historiography has been focused. This book thus represents a welcome invitation to scholars at all levels to revisit the negotiation, rather than just the imposition, of power. If lords then could not discount peasants, then neither should we.

NOTE

[1] Thomas N. Bisson, "Medieval Lordship," *Speculum* 70 (1995): 759.

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