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Erin L. Jordan, *Women, Power, and Religious Patronage in the Middle Ages*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. viii + 193 pp. Notes, family trees, bibliography, and index. \$65.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 1-4039-6656-7.

Review by Constance B. Bouchard, University of Akron.

Much narrower than the title suggests, this slim volume is a close study of two women, sisters, who between them ruled Flanders and Hainaut as countesses for most of the thirteenth century: Jeanne, who held office 1206-44, and Marguerite, 1244-80. It serves as a case study of the ways that women could and did wield considerable influence and power in both the secular and ecclesiastical spheres, even in an era which scholars, following Georges Duby, have tended to treat as one situation where women were powerless and marginalized. In the last six or eight years this assumption has increasingly come under attack, and Erin Jordan's book does much to demonstrate that noble women cannot be dismissed as "passive pawns manipulated by the men around them" (p. 2). It is intended to build especially on the recent work of Fredric Cheyette and of Theodore Evergates with his collaborators.[1]

In spite of their importance, these sisters have received little recent scholarly attention. In part this is due to other scholars' preference for the twelfth century rather than the thirteenth; Jordan, by focusing on a slightly later period than most social historians of high medieval France, is able to draw on a wide range of archival documents that have previously been little used. She identified and discussed some one thousand charters (most in manuscript) attesting to the countesses' generosity to religious houses, a number far exceeding that for any twelfth-century count or countess in the French kingdom. In addition, the previous scholarly neglect of Jeanne and Marguerite can in part be attributed to nineteenth-century studies of the sisters that treated them as helpless in the face of political events or else as cruel and manipulative, due to their unstable "feminine" nature. Several more balanced studies have had little influence outside of Belgium due to having been published in Flemish (p. 8). Jordan's study is thus welcome as a means to make more visible two powerful and well-documented medieval women.

Of course, even if women like these countesses wielded real authority, the overarching political and social assumption at the time was that men should take precedence. Thus, much of Jordan's purpose is to analyze how women's exercise of power was affected by contemporary gender expectations and in what areas women could function most effectively. Her conclusion is that elite women had the most influence in the realm of religious patronage, especially through their support for monasteries, both male and female. Such support was, she argues, a public and political act as well as a private and personal one, even though she quite rightly resists any suggestion that concern for one's salvation was no more than a facade, concealing more worldly motives. Overall, the arguments are well-nuanced--the countesses were still women, subject to what might be termed structural misogyny, even when wielding real power--although one could suggest that Jordan, by seeming to shape her work as a response specifically to Duby, may seem to reduce the real originality of her analysis.

One of Jordan's strengths is recognizing that the thirteenth-century narrative sources from which much of our information on the countesses is gleaned cannot be treated as transparent windows into events. Rather, the authors of these narratives had an agenda, and depending on the author, the assessment of Jeanne and Marguerite could range "from laudatory to derisive, condescending to dismissive" (p. 7). Jordan thus treats contemporary chroniclers' assessment of the countesses as part of the ongoing debate

about the relationship between gender and power. Indeed, my principal criticism of the work is that I wish she could have done much more in this area. Her study thus fits well into a recently-developed historiography, owing much to the work of Patrick Geary, which emphasizes the ways that medieval writers themselves conceptualized events and would have liked to have them remembered.^[2] However, Jordan somewhat undercuts her own position by treating charter sources as more reliable than chronicles because they are less susceptible to “gender bias” (p. 9). She thus doubles back around toward von Rankean positivism, in spite of beginning by wisely turning away from it, and does not take into account the forces that might—or might not—have allowed women to have charters drawn up in their names in the same way that men did.

This said, Jordan makes a number of excellent points about the position and available options of these countesses that should have applicability far beyond thirteenth-century Flanders. For example, she argues that primogeniture, although now generally treated as an aspect of patrilineage, could also work to the benefit of women; after all, a count’s oldest surviving daughter took precedence over male collateral relatives. The example of Marguerite, who acted as countess in her own right as a widow for thirty-six years even though she had sons, indicates that women could continue to rule even when male heirs were available, and that widowhood was often a real opportunity for well-connected women. Jordan also draws a very useful distinction between authority and power: even when women did not have official authority (such as holding a public office), they could have power in determining the distribution of resources. (Jeanne and Marguerite, of course, had both authority and power.) These countesses’ histories also indicate how important young women could be even while still minors; their marriages were a source of major interest and maneuvering by the French king. Jeanne and Marguerite emerge as anything but marginal and passive, and their example should help end the simplistic assumption that medieval noble women can be so characterized.

This book is clearly organized and well written. For the most part the definitions and categories make excellent sense, although “feudal practice,” “feudal custom,” and “the feudal system” make awkward (and unclear) appearances (e.g., pp. 5, 11, 19). The publisher’s decision to put the notes at the end, however, is to be deplored, because many of Jordan’s notes have interesting discussions in them as well as references to primary and secondary sources, but most readers will miss these discussions. The endnotes are hard to use unless one reads with a finger in the back of the book; there are not even the usual running heads to alert the reader to which pages the notes refer.

NOTES

[1] Fredric Cheyette, *Ermengard of Narbonne and the World of the Troubadours* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); Theodore Evergates, ed., *Aristocratic Women in Medieval France* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

[2] Patrick J. Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance: Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millennium* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

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