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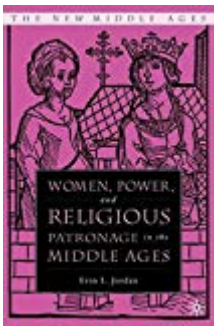
Erin L. Jordan. *Women, Power, and Religious Patronage in the Middle Ages.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. viii + 193 pp. $69.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4039-6656-8.



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Recent and upcoming elections in the Western world have put forth women as serious candidates to the leadership of their countries: Angela Merkle became the Chancellor of Germany, Ségolène Royal lost a hotly contested race for president of France, and Hilary Clinton has emerged as a frontrunner in the upcoming election for the U.S. president. While women holding positions of power and authority is not new, as the annals of history can attest, the recent surge of women candidates reflects a similar swell in studies on medieval women and power. In particular, medieval scholars seem especially interested in debating whether and when women lost access to power. Erin L. Jordan's slim volume ***Women, Power, and Religious Patronage in the Middle Ages*** makes a strong contribution to this literature, pushing the debate beyond the "whether" and "when" to ask "how" and "why" women could hold power in the thirteenth century.

Using the sisters Jeanne and Marguerite, successive countesses of Flanders and Hainaut, as her case studies, Jordan had ample excuse to argue against current modern understandings of medieval women and assert that medieval women were not subordinate to men but powerful rulers in their own right. Jordan resists this temptation, however, in favor of providing a more complex view of the experiences of northern French noblewomen in the thirteenth century. She seeks to understand the world in which society allowed a woman to inherit authority and wield power while at the same time both constraining and aiding in her exercise of that power on the basis of her biological sex (Jordan uses the term "gender"). More specifically, Jordan argues that a woman in power, such as these two countesses of Flanders, could act as lords in all matters except taking military command, in which case both Jeanne and Marguerite were forced to look elsewhere (either to the French king, in Jeanne's case, or his brother, in Marguerite's case) to help them quash enemies in their own realms. On the other hand, their very vulnerability in the need to ask the crown for help encouraged the French kings to support and maintain women as rulers because such a situation ensured that the crown need not worry about a rebellious vassal and could exact lucrative re-

turns for the aid offered when the countesses encountered sticky circumstances.

To begin her discussion of women and power, Jordan makes a careful distinction between "authority" and "power." The former denoted the legitimate right to rule, the latter indicated the actual practice of rule regardless of legitimacy. Chapter 1 explores how thirteenth-century women came to hold authority in a society that agreed on the primacy of men over women. Jordan finds the answer in the very practices that a sizable school of scholars have identified as the causes for preventing women from exercising power: primogeniture and patrilineage.[1] Jordan's conclusion that these two practices created a system that privileged daughters as extremely wealthy heiresses over inheritance by collateral male heirs is not new,[2] but Jordan takes it a step further by analyzing how medieval society reconciled the reality of heiresses with the belief in the primacy of men. Heiresses, Jordan concludes, would inherit the authority of their positions but were supposed to transmit that authority to the males around them (husbands, sons, or ruling councils) who would turn that authority into power. The early careers of Jeanne and Marguerite, which Jordan outlines in this chapter, conform to this medieval expectation.

As the two women matured, however, circumstances changed in such a way as to allow them each, in turn, to wield the power of the office of countess by herself. Chapter 2 traces the sisters' awakening to political power as they sought to distance themselves from dependence on the French crown. Unfortunately for them, noble unrest within their territories forced them to turn to the French king or his brother for support, thereby underlining their vulnerability as female rulers--able to wield power in all but the military field. In some ways, this dependence on the crown supports the historiography that asserts that as the power of the French kings increased, through centralization and bureaucratization, women's ability to exercise power waned. Jordan takes the opposite view, however, providing the innovative argument that centralization and bureaucratization actually encouraged the existence of powerful female lords. The king could guarantee control over a territory held by a woman who depended on him for military support.

While Jordan does not examine whether biological sex influenced whether women were more likely than men to use religious patronage as a way to exercise political power, in chapter 3 she does overturn the theory that spiritual donations, as private gifts, remained the only avenue open to women hoping to exercise public power. On the contrary, Jordan argues, religious patronage was anything but private, having political, economic, and social repercussions on the whole county. For example, the establishment of new monastic houses on the contested borders between Flanders and France served as a visible symbol of the countess's authority over that territory. Her approval of vassals' donations similarly acted as proclamations of authority over her barons. The religious foundations themselves provided many economic benefits to the land around them, encouraging the clearing of previously unarable lands, for example, and social assistance, in the form of support for the old and infirm in society. By establishing and promoting religious foundations, the countesses actively and publicly changed the political, economic, and social landscapes. Jordan thus challenges the modern construct of a public/private divide, in which men operated in the public sphere while women were forced to find ways to influence the public realm only through private endeavors.

The fourth and last chapter deviates from the rest of the book in discussing power only tangentially by looking at how Jeanne and Marguerite used their secular power as countesses to purchase spiritual power, which Jordan defines as salvation. This chapter diverges from the rest of the book, too, in seeking the personal preferences

and spiritual beliefs of Jeanne and Marguerite individually by examining which religious institutions garnered their support. Through an exhaustive search of over 1,000 charters issued to approximately 180 foundations, Jordan deduces that both countesses preferred to give to religious who followed the active (rather than contemplative) life and to foundations that housed women. This finding leads her to conclude that not all medieval people believed that prayers offered by men were more efficacious than those proffered by women. This chapter is less innovative in its conclusions than the previous sections of the book, but its foundation on such a great deal of documentary sources is welcome.

The supporting apparati to the book are both helpful and lacking. The endnotes are extensive and detailed, allowing the interested reader to delve further into questions of historiography and scholarly debates. The two-page genealogical chart would be more useful if the press had published it on facing pages rather than on a recto and verso. Lastly, a map of the countesses' domain and surrounds could help the reader, especially during the first two chapters when so much of their political history is detailed.

Even though the countesses' relations with the Holy Roman Empire was rarely touched upon, despite their status as the emperor's vassals due to their Hainaut possessions, the book will appeal to any scholar interested in the status of women in the thirteenth century. Jordan has admirably contributed to the current debate of women's access to authority and power, denounced the last vestiges of scholarship still clinging to the idea that study of the thirteenth century can profit from setting up a divide between public and private, and bridged the gap between spiritual and secular power.

Notes

[1]. Georges Duby, *Medieval Marriage: Two Models from Twelfth-Century France* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); Georges Duby, "Women and Power," in *Women of the Twelfth Century*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Jo Ann McNamara and Suzanne Wemple, "The Power of Women Through the Family in Medieval Europe, 500-1100," in *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, ed. Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), 83-101.

[2]. Jane Martindale, "Succession and Politics in the Romance-speaking World, c. 1000-1140," in *England and Her Neighbors, 1066-1453: Essays in Honour of Pierre Chaplais*, ed. Michael Jones and Malcolm Vale (London: Hambledon Press, 1989), 19-41; Pauline Stafford, "Women and the Norman Conquest," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 6th series, vol. 4 (1994): 221-249.

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