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Sean L. Field. *Isabelle of France: Capetian Sanctity and Franciscan Identity in the Thirteenth Century.* Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006. xii + 288 pp. $35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-268-02880-0.

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Major Works in a Minor Key

Sean Field tells the story of family solidarity, female agency, and monarchical spirituality through the life of Isabelle of France (1225-1270), only daughter of Blanche of Castile and sister of Capetian saint Louis IX. Complementing a hagiographical biography of the princess with new archival discoveries and close readings of the documents, Field's contribution particularly expands our understanding of the Franciscan order in the thirteenth century and its relations with models of lay piety. The work sheds new light on the growth of Capetian dynastic power through the quiet but nonetheless extraordinary achievements of non-ruling members who supported the concept of a holy lineage, a *beata stirps*.

Isabelle emerges from this study as a strong-willed and occasionally manipulative individual who understood the value of compromise from an early age. Her insistence upon ascetical behavior and devout practices resulted in a conflict of wills with her mother the queen over eating, dressing, and preparing for marriage. Isabelle won the first and last of those battles, sharing her food with the poor and rejecting wedlock for perpetual virginity, but not relinquishing the fine clothing and furnishings appropriate to a princess's state. An avid reader in both Latin and the vernacular, she enjoyed chivalric tales as well as devotional literature, and no doubt took pleasure in the fact that her major model for ascetical behavior came from a book her own mother owned. Blanche would eventually have to acknowledge the independent choices of both her daughter and her son Louis, a recognition Field carefully reconstructs within a context of illness and healing.

Unlike other virginal nobles and royalty, Isabelle never became a nun or abbess, but retained her lay status for the rest of her life. Her public ascetical behavior not only complemented that of the king, but attracted the attention of major clergy of the day, particularly those of the Franciscan order. Locked in their own struggles over issues of poverty and relations with both the papacy and the secular clergy, the mendicants appreciated the support royal patronage could lend them, despite their distress over the role claimed by females of their own order. Thus, Isabelle's desire to found a Franciscan house for women appeared as a double-edged sword to the order, but the princess's skill at compromise would prove valuable once more.

Field presents a close study of both the original rule for the abbey of Longchamp, dating to 1259, and of the revised rule of 1263. For the original, Isabelle worked closely with top Franciscan scholars and administrators of the day, her Latin skills allowing her to take an active role in composition and honing of the text. Controversies of the day over the unsuitability of women for a life of poverty prevented her from gaining the title *sorores minores* for her sisters. This was achieved only in the revised text four years later, with the caveat that the nuns would be perpetually enclosed. Isabelle chose instead to stress the virtue of humility over that of poverty, a shift that was subtly critical of St. Francis's own behavior while being above criticism in and of itself. This shrewd move allowed her to win more substantial concessions such as increased power and independence for the abbess, and strong institutional ties to the Franciscans. Field provides much valuable analysis of the political context that fostered the changes of the revised rule, citing the papacy's desire for French aid against Hohenstaufen claims in southern Italy. Although Isabelle's role in shaping both rules was essentially ignored by the revision and hence by historical memory, she was responsible for creating a rule appealing to women across Europe, one so groundbreaking that the pope had to waive the Fourth Lateran Council's ban on new orders to accommodate it.

Even before her death and burial at Longchamp, Isabelle was credited with miracles of healing and restoration. Bibliophiles may be interested to know that prayers to her were especially efficacious in restoring lost and

damaged books, despite her current reputation on the Internet as a resource for the sick. Although her nuns and her family regarded her as a saint, and a biography composed by the house's third abbess and companion to the princess collected material with an eye to canonization, Isabelle never achieved formal recognition. Louis IX's own canonization in 1297, and other royal women's involvement with Longchamp, distracted from Isabelle's reputation and memory. Field restores the princess to her rightful place in the history of the Franciscans, lay piety, and women's empowerment in the central Middle Ages.

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