
Best known as the youngest daughter of William the Conqueror and the woman who allegedly told her husband to return to the crusades, Adela of Blois is no stranger to historians. Kimberley LoPrete’s immense book charts the life and political career of Adela placing it within the wider socio-political context of the day. There are two main overarching themes to the work. First, it reassesses of Adela herself both in terms of the extant sources and in terms of the space and roles accorded to her as a successful female lord. Second, it provides a positive reevaluation of the Thibaudian (Adela’s affinal kin) family’s roles in shaping the political relationships and dynamics in northern France during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, especially with regards to the Anglo-Norman and Capetian ruling dynasties.

The book follows a chronological approach to Adela’s life and times. It begins by establishing a new date of birth for Adela (ca. 1067) before focusing on the historical background of her marriage alliance to Stephen-Henry, Count of Blois, Chartres, and Meaux. This historical background provides a useful framework in which LoPrete can analyze Adela’s subsequent actions in terms of Thibaudian policy and political objectives. Chapter 2 focuses on Adela’s role as a wife, noting her active and public participation in the exercise of comital lordship, especially in terms of familial, economic, judicial, and political affairs. Adela’s actions while her husband is away on crusade are particularly significant for those interested in medieval women. LoPrete demonstrates that Adela’s actions had the broad political agenda of helping to consolidate comital authority over the widespread domains that Stephen-Henry inherited after the death of his father in 1089. She also raises a series of interesting issues in relation to the practice of female lordship as a powerful and recognized socio-political force of the time. Adela’s policies are characterized as having the dual aims of careful consolidation and innovative measures. This allowed Adela to strengthen both her own and her family’s power as well as diversify this power in new and interesting ways, for example through her use of seals (Fig. 1 & 3, App. 2).

Adela emerges as an exceedingly astute political player who should
be credited with negotiating a careful balancing act between the demands of her royal lords—the kings of France—and her obligations to her birth family. This is especially true in relation to the support she gave to her brother, Henry I, and his attempts to ensure that Normandy and England were under joint rulership. (See especially Chapter 4.) Such political networking and maneuvering, including the reconciliation of Henry with the estranged Archbishop Anselm, set important precedents and trends for the future as evidenced by the policy and actions of Adela’s children and extended marital kin group. In relation to Adela, this ability is best illustrated in Chapter 5 which focuses on a reassessment of her relationship with Ivo of Chartres. LoPrete suggests that Adela’s careful fostering of this relationship was a means by which she could gain support as a countess. This is in contrast to her male counterparts who, as trained warriors, gained such support in different ways thus suggesting that the ideologies and practices surrounding comital power were, in fact, gendered.

Chapters 6 and 7 detail Adela’s latter years by focusing on the hostilities which marked the years 1108-1120, especially those concerned with the unresolved issue of the status of Normandy. LoPrete successfully teases out Adela’s active diplomatic presence and in particular her skills as a negotiator involving the leading princes of northern France, the king of France, and the king of England. It is striking that throughout Adela was concerned to put Thibaudian interests first as can be seen by her attempts to stabilize the patrimonial frontiers of this kin-group during these years. Chapter 7 concludes with a discussion of Adela’s decision in 1120 to join the monastic community at Marcigny. However, her decision to take the veil did not remove her from the power politics of the time. Adela, for instance, continued to be active in matters that concerned the domains she had ruled as countess. For example, Adela ensured that her son Thibaud IV implemented reform at St Martin au Val and by doing so fulfilled one of her earlier intentions (p. 413).

The footnotes and appendices of this work also demand comment. The copious and detailed footnotes could almost “stand alone” from the main text. It is here, for instance, that the reader can discover what LoPrete really thinks about some of the assumptions promulgated by the secondary literature. (See, for example, her criticism of Duby, p. 52.)
86 n. 60, or Keats-Rohan, p. 187 n. 76.) Special mention must also be made of Appendix 1 which is a substantial work of scholarship in itself. It provides an itinerary and register of sources associated with Adela in chronological order. This will be extremely useful for future scholarly work on, for example, charters involving aristocratic women or Adela’s relationships with specific places (e.g. Marmoutier priory) or people (e.g. Ivo of Charters). Appendices 2 through 7 provide a wealth of information on a variety of subjects including Adela and Stephen-Henry’s seals (App. 2) and the revised date of Thibaud IV’s marriage (App. 6). In addition, there are a number of useful genealogical charts (pp. 576-585) and maps of Adela’s domains (pp. xxii-xxv).

Although the opportunities that Adela’s bloodline and social status afforded her are striking, LoPrete is sensitive to the fact that she is not a unique figure. The methodology that she advances throughout stresses the importance of the socio-political context in allowing the space and roles of aristocratic women to emerge, especially in relation to questions of female lordship. As such, this is not solely a book about Adela of Blois. Rather, it holds forth on a variety of themes, especially lordship, politics, and power during this period. Thus the author’s endorsement of a chronological rather than a thematic approach to the subject is both a strength and a weakness. The book does provide a chronological trajectory of Adela’s career in which her space and power can be assessed. Yet, it has numerous forward references, which at times can be distracting for the reader but also require a certain amount of repetition since it is necessary for LoPrete to provide a synopsis of later arguments. This is particularly noticeable in Chapters 3 and 4, perhaps because these two chapters are interlinked and cover the same period. Chapter 5, on Adela’s relations with Ivo of Charters, interrupts the overall chronological progression, a fact that is acknowledged by LoPrete herself (p. 19). Collectively and as a result this can give the impression that the author is, at times, aiming to fulfil the impossible task of providing a universal account of Adela of Blois. There are instances where the amount of information that LoPrete tries to convey is overwhelming and perhaps a stricter thematic approach would have been better suited to the author’s overall aims of assessing Adela’s life and times within the context of Thibaudian family interests and endeavors.
In spite of this, there is no doubt that the work is a very welcome and valuable addition to the study of medieval women and gender.

There are a number of editorial errors, including: there is no number for the chart referred to—I presume it is Chart 1? (p. 62); there is no page reference given for the note referred to (p. 38, n. 64); there is no number for the chart referred to—I presume it is Chart 5? (p. 145); there is a reference to Figure 000— I presume this is Figure 2 (p. 150).

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Noah Guynn’s Allegory and Sexual Ethics explores what we may call the dark side of allegory: its use as an ideological instrument and a “ruse of power” that “normalizes [the] hegemony” of elites, a rhetorical performance of force and persecution (26). Guynn takes Gordon Teskey’s thought-provoking Allegory and Violence (1996) as a springboard for new readings of three high-medieval works that function as vehicles for coercive sexual ethics: Le Roman d’Eneas, the De Planctu Naturae, and Le Roman de la Rose. In Allegory and Violence, Teskey observed that the composition of an allegory is a “violent” rhetorical action, one that enacts the Platonic and Aristotelian vision of how form comes to participate in matter. This is a gendered and generative process, in which “matter is made pregnant with form by assuming a ‘subject’ (sub-iectum ‘cast down’) position with respect to the male.” As Teskey asserts, allegory is also inherently violent and produces ethically and aesthetically charged hierarchies. By “forcing” union upon two disparate entities, allegory “elicits continual interpretation as its primary aesthetic effect, giving us the feeling that we are moving at once inward and upward toward the transcendental ‘other,’” (Teskey 4). Allegory’s ability to code this “other” as an irrefutable truth gives it its ideological utility.

As Guynn acknowledges, it may come as no surprise that allegory is an ideological tool, one that claims “to transcend particulars and discern essences” (3). Guynn is most innovative in his assertion, demonstrated