Although the framers of this volume do not highlight its significance as well as they might have, this is an important collection of essays for medievalists interested in questions of gender and political power and in female patronage. Miriam Shadis and Anneke Mulder-Bakker challenge us to rethink accepted paradigms and chronologies. Aline Hornaday and Kathleen Schowalter illuminate the resistance of particular queens to marginalization. Nolan, Schowalter, and Anne Stanton illustrate the important and innovative roles that aristocratic and royal women played as patronesses of the arts and manuscripts, and Nolan, Shadis, and William Chester Jordan, and Mulder-Bakker highlight the importance of queens, princesses, and aristocratic women as founders and patronesses of religious institutions, especially those for women.

For over a decade, historians interested in medieval women’s access to aristocratic and royal power have been heavily influenced by Jo Ann McNamara and Suzanne Wemple’s important essay, “The Power of Women Through the Family in Medieval Europe, 500-1100,” and by Marian Facinger’s even older study of Capetian queens.¹ The consensus that emerged from these studies was that the rise of administrative kingship in the early twelfth century led to the demise of “women’s power through the family.” Thus, as Lois Huneycutt has argued for England, Queen Margaret of Scotland (1080-1118) was the last English queen consort to govern the realm as regent during her husband’s absence, and, as Facinger (and Huneycutt in this volume) have argued, Adelaide of Maurienne, who reigned as queen to King Louis VI of France from 1115-1137, represented the apogee of the powers of Capetian queen consorts.

True enough, as far as the analysis goes. However, as the careers of Eleanor of Aquitanine (c. 1122-1204), Blanche of Castille (1188-1252), and Isabella of France (1292-1358) suggest, the early twelfth century hardly brought an end to powerful queens. Eleanor drew the political boundaries of France and England when, in 1152, her marriage with King Louis VII of France was annulled and she married the future Henry II of England, taking her huge landed inheritance with her. Later, she backed her sons’ rebellion against their father and served as regent during her son, King Richard I’s, participation in the third crusade. Blanche (the subject of three essays in this volume, most notably, regarding her political power, that by Shadis) served for eleven years as co-ruler with her son Louis IX of France, and governed alone as regent of France during Louis’ first crusade. Isabella, a Capetian daughter whose political career serves as a backdrop, in this volume, for Stanton’s enlightening discussion of her manuscripts, launched a successful rebellion against her husband, King Edward II of England. Then, after the king was murdered in 1326, she ruled along until her son, King Edward III, took control of the realm in 1330.

In this volume, Shadis develops a useful framework for understanding the power of Capetian queen mothers, such as Blanche of Castile, and for rethinking Facinger’s arguments about the apparent demise of queenly power. It is important, first, to understand that in France powerful mother queens ruled or co-ruled their realms from the early Middle Ages until well into the early modern period. And, as Shadis argues, for the Capetians, the power of such women drew on an “ancient Capetian tradition of co-rule between generations.” Thus, Blanche of Castile’s co-rule with her son extended well beyond the time when he had reached the age of majority. Facinger’s paradigm, Shadis suggests, was too wedded to a clear delineation between the public and private realms; thus she failed to see the public side of a queen’s reproductive and maternal role and the importance of a queen’s ritual functions. Indeed, Shadis

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suggests, the rigid distinction between the public and private realms has misled historians of women into over-privileging “official” documents and thus failing to see evidence for women’s power in other places. The “official” documentary evidence may suggest that Blanche of Castile exercised very little power before her husband’s death, but such could hardly have been the case, given the confidence with which she wielded power once her husband had died.

In a concluding essay to the volume, Kimberly LoPrete suggests that in England, unlike France, the “office” of co-ruling queen mother never really took hold. However, it seems to me that Shadis’ discussion of the maternal avenue to power provides a useful framework for interpreting aspects of Eleanor of Aquitaine’s and Isabella of France’s careers as English queens, and perhaps even the ultimate triumph of Empress Matilda, who failed to gain control of the English throne, but managed, nevertheless, to assure that her son would eventually hold that throne as King Henry II.

Mulder-Bakker’s insightful essay focuses on the career of Jeanne of Valois (c. 1297-1353), sister of the first Valois king of France, and Countess, through marriage, of Holland, Zeeland, and Hainaut. Mulder-Bakker demonstrates that like queens, countesses continued to wield enormous power and influence in the later Middle Ages. Jeanne co-ruled with her husband, collected taxes, and as official hostess for her household and that of her husband (when they were together), carried out important diplomatic functions. In her widowhood, her role as mediator in disputes extended not only to strife-torn towns in her various counties, but also even to the highest level of international politics: bringing together representatives of France, England, and Brabant, she negotiated an important truce in the Hundred Years’ War. Much as Shadis does for the career of Blanche of Castile, Mulder-Bakker uses Jeanne’s career, which barely appears in the “official” documents, to critique our reliance on such sources. She then goes on to discuss the importance of consultative bodies in medieval politics, the oral nature of these
bodies, and the importance of women’s persuasion for such bodies.

Most of the essays on art patronage in this volume argue that the women themselves played a major role in influencing the outcome of the works. Kathleen Nolan argues that Adelaide of Maurienne’s tomb at the female abbey of Montmartre, which she founded, was the earliest European example of a sculptured tomb slab for either a king or queen, and that it represents Adelaide’s bold self-representation and her desire (echoed by other Capetian queens) to develop a center of queenly remembrance that paralleled the kings’ center of remembrance at St. Denis. Schowalter argues that the Psalter of Queen Ingegorg, whom King Philip Augustus had repudiated the day after their marriage, drew on the Psalter of Queen Melisende of Jerusalem in order to enhance Ingeborg’s claim to the title of Queen of France.

Given the right push by its editor, this volume could have developed an important discussion of the ways in which social status exempted queens from the usual limitations of their gender. Thus, for instance, while Jordan provides an enlightening discussion of the career of Isabelle of France, the saintly sister of the saintly king Louis IX, he never asks why church leaders, who criticized the semi-religious lives of beguines, supported Isabelle’s choice to lead such a life. And while I was fascinated by Tracy Chapman Hamilton’s argument that the Old French version of the Bible Moralisée (Vienna ÖNB 2554) drew parallels between Blanche of Castile, Holy Church, and the Virgin Mary (and by similar arguments in Schowalter’s article on Ingeborg’s Psalter), I wanted to see some discussion of why a woman was thus allowed to appropriate clerical roles, and, indeed, why members of the royal family were allowed to read vernacular Bibles and paraphrases of the Bible, when, again, church leaders were criticizing the beguines for doing the same.

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End Note