

Joan de Valence: The Life and Influence of a Thirteenth-Century Noblewoman, by Linda E. Mitchell. The New Middle Ages. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. Pp. xx+217, 7 b/w ill., 3 appendices (incl. 3 charts, 6 maps and 1 table). ISBN: 9780230392007; e-ISBN: 9780230392021.

AFTER THE DEATH OF William de Valence in 1296, his widow, Joan de Valence-Munchensy (ca. 1229/30–1307), sent a letter to St. Albans to request William's money, which was stored there. Unfortunately Joan's wax seal appended to the letter had melted and was unreadable, resulting in the monks' refusal to return the money (97). One might consider this episode a bad omen, demonstrating the limits of Joan's authority, but Linda Mitchell's compelling study shows that Joan was a capable ruler with a strong hold over family affairs, dynastic politics, and the administration of property. Joan "inherited one of the wealthiest and largest estates in England" (2), and her marriage was arranged by King Henry III who chose his youngest half-brother, William de Valence, as her husband. As a matter of fact, her seal testifies to her political position, not only because it was attached to official documents granting property, but also because she was styled as "S' Johanne dñe d' Penbroc uxor' W' d Valencia" (57 and fig. 1). This reveals Joan's impressive matrilineal descent from the Marshal Earls of Pembroke—via her grandmother Isabella de Clare, countess of Pembroke—and emphasizes her affiliation with another powerful dynasty through her marriage to William, son of Isabella of Angoulême and Hugh XI de Lusignan.

Mitchell's book consists of four chapters with well-chosen titles, which narrate Joan's life chronologically. Throughout, I was struck by the constant disputes over properties, which demonstrate the importance of landholdings to all parties involved, including women, as well as the significance of written documents to support or undermine claims. An overview of Joan's properties is given in appendix 2, and this is very useful in order to comprehend where they were located (England, Wales, and Ireland). The overall impression is that Joan was a busy and strong-willed woman who was not afraid to pursue her family's rights—including those of her children—at the expense of her coheirs. Mitchell further underscores the value of landed wealth and its accompanying strategic locations by discussing Goodrich Castle, located at Joan's borderlands. Its rebuilding has usually been attributed to either her husband, William, or their son, Aymer, but Mitchell convincingly argues for Joan's involvement and by doing so she adds to the discussion about women's patronage, agency, and power. Within this context it is surprising that Mitchell uses the word "influence" in her title without defining it in the introduction. While Joan's influence

is clearly connected to her legacies, addressed in the incisive conclusion, I am wondering if the term “power” would not have suited Joan better because she was able to effectuate her authority. Indeed, Mitchell describes the lady-countess as “powerful” (2), a characterization that also fits other elite women, as is evident from the introduction. In the conclusion Mitchell switches from sex to gender when she writes “[Joan’s] gender rendered her an uncomfortable subject [for male historians] heretofore.” (153). I would say that it was not Joan’s gender that made her an uncomfortable subject, but her sex which made it unthinkable for male historians that she could act like a man. In this respect a brief discussion on medieval and modern conceptions of women and gender in the introduction of the book would have been helpful.

Another running thread is the importance of family and connectedness to other dynasties. Mitchell makes clear that Joan’s and William’s proximity to the royal house had both advantages and disadvantages, the latter because of envious magnates who felt that they were being bypassed. However, conflicts with barons were bound to break out anyway, especially since Joan’s and William’s properties were vast. The bonds between Joan, her children, and extended family (also in Scotland and France) were close, and many episodes, including murder, show that Joan and William had every right to be concerned about their children. The family connections have been visualized by family trees in appendix 1. Admittedly, making intricate lineages accessible to the reader is far from easy, but it is unfortunate that these traditional family trees with single branches neither acknowledge the complexities families were facing, nor truly clarify them. The mapping of networks—including lineages, important allies, and constant opponents—by using overlapping circles would have been helpful here. This plays out especially in matters concerning property, which deal with intricate networks as is evident throughout Mitchell’s book.

The variety of primary sources included in this study is admirable. Apart from Joan’s presence in written records, the author’s analysis of Goodrich Castle and a number of seals demonstrates the ways in which the countess visibly and publicly communicated her status and authority and thus acted as a powerful woman. In this sense it is regrettable that there are no high-quality images. And a contextualization of Joan’s (and William’s) seals could have added to the argument concerning lineage, for example through a comparison with that of her grandmother Isabella de Clare. The household accounts (1295-1297) provide abundant information on other material aspects of Joan’s life: the food they consumed (herring seems to have been a favorite), the clothes they bought, and the payment for the repair of “an image of the Blessed Virgin Mary” (101).

The latter will be of particular interest to those working on the involvement of women in the (re)use and restoration of artworks in the Middle Ages. Further, the rolls inform us about the people Joan received, her itinerary (mapped in appendix 2), and the daily rhythms of her life, which were completely shaken by the death of William de Valence on 16 May 1296. From the records after this event we can conclude that as a widow Joan was even busier: the deaths of her daughters, the murder of her son-in-law John Comyn, and growing frictions during Edward I's reign were to keep her greatly occupied.

Power, money, schemes, murder, imprisonment, and strong-headed protagonists are the perfect ingredients for any captivating story. Yet Linda Mitchell's history is even more exciting and convincing because she has indeed managed to portray Joan as a "figure of substance, of importance, of significance to her age" (153).

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