

Margaret, Queen of Sicily, by Jacqueline Alio. New York: Trinacria Editions, 2016. Pp. xx+489; 15 b/w ill., 18 maps, 28 b/w photos, 4 genealogical tables, chronology, 10 appendices. ISBN: 9780991588657.

Following her *Women of Sicily: Saints, Queens, and Rebels* (2015) and preceding *Queens of Sicily 1061-1266* (2018), all from Trinacria, Jacqueline Alio devotes this volume to the life of Margaret of Navarre, who ruled Sicily as queen regent from 1166 to 1171. The book makes a worthy entry into the expanding literature on European queens and is the first full-length biography of Margaret in English, bringing well-deserved attention to this woman who was, Alio argues, “the most powerful woman in Europe and the Mediterranean” in her time (151).

The book also brings to life the vibrant, cosmopolitan world of Sicily, portraying a kingdom of great wealth and influence in which Jews, Christians, and Muslims lived and worked together. This multiculturalism is evident in a page taken from the Harley Psalter (ca. 1153), where the text is reproduced side-by-side in Latin, Greek, and Arabic. Alio draws heavily on the work of two contemporary chroniclers, Hugh Falcondus and Romauld of Salerno, but she also excavates charters and decrees, material artifacts, and several other chronicles and primary sources to sketch in the details of Margaret’s life.

The saga begins with a sweeping prehistory of northern Iberia and a nimble account of the loyalties and ambitions of Margaret’s family, including mention of her great-grandfather, the Spanish knight nicknamed El Cid. Margaret grew up in Pamplona, another cosmopolitan city home to Muslims, Jews, Christians, and Basques, and in 1149 left to marry William, son of Roger II, the first Norman king of Sicily. Her regency for her eldest surviving son puts her in an elect group of twelfth-century ruling women, one including Melisende of Jerusalem (d. 1161), Eleanor of Aquitaine, Urraca of Castile (Regent of Asturias), and the Empress Matilda (Maude). Alio argues that Margaret’s two million subjects and prosperous kingdom made her equal in political and economic power to the English king Henry II, Holy Roman Emperor Frederick Barbarossa, and Manuel Comnenus of Constantinople. While most of her short reign is a soapy melodrama of rebellions, coups, and court intrigues, Alio portrays Margaret as a resourceful politician, a pragmatic ruler dedicated to reform, and a careful steward of her country’s resources, “one of Sicily’s most beloved women” (320).

Alio is a popular historian in Sicily, and her training as a tour guide shows in her approach to this biography. Extensive photographs, maps, illustrations, and genealogical tables give readers a visual sense of the landscape, and Alio excels at the anecdotes and details that help distinguish the many colorful

characters of her narrative. A section on the monastery of Monreale is typical of the treatment throughout: the chapter focuses on the layout and structural details of the church, offering photographs and floor plans, but it leaves aside discussion of Margaret's purpose in founding the monastery or its relevance to her legacy or Sicilian life. While ambitious in its intentions to be meticulous, thorough, and the longest English biography of Margaret, the book is more a detailed chronological record than a study of a medieval life, queenship, or a crucial period in Sicilian history.

Alio's intent "to straddle two worlds, the popular and the scholarly" (7) may leave something to be desired on the part of both audiences. In striving to be vivid and appealing, the prose style frequently turns florid, and the chapter epigraphs, which quote Elizabeth I as easily as Princess Diana, Ayn Rand, and Maya Angelou, celebrate anachronistic themes of fortitude and individualism. The effort to keep the scholarship light and unintimidating for the non-medievalists—though Alio concedes to "perpetuate the moribund cult of the endnote" (417)—leads to a documentation style better called conversational than scholarly. At the same time apparati like the ten appendices—including some untranslated Latin, to please the scholars—are not likely to lure general readers to the book.

A potential lack for feminist medievalists and historians will be Alio's preference to avoid theoretical grounding. This stance is made clear in the introductory material, where she sums up medieval scholarship on women with the statement that "Europe's High Middle Ages were not a great era for women. They were benighted times that witnessed very few females groomed to lead nations or indeed anything more grandiose than a convent or kitchen" (xii). The intriguing nexus of women, queenship, and power is dispensed with the casual aphorism that "medieval queenhood was more grit than glitter" (xii). Equally disconcerting are concluding claims about Margaret's legacy that remove her from a twelfth-century context entirely, suggesting that her "enlightened reforms" are the seeds of democracy (322) or that "her story is our story" (327), a plea for relevance unnecessary for a life so manifestly interesting on its own.

Alio explicitly denies any "social or political 'agenda' rooted in feminism" or anything else (3). She dismisses the "latent sexism" of the period as a "tired topos" and "the thorny question of gender" as "the object of arcane debates" (xii-xiii). At the same time, she adopts a tone of casual feminism in her assessments, identifying Margaret's life as "to some degree defined dialectically by the entrenched patriarchy" (xii) and describing her as a powerful and successful ruler with terms like "alpha female" (241), "she wolf" (297), and "steel

butterfly” (324). Readers might wish that Alio, with her extensive grasp of her subject, had made use of the tools, approaches, and scholarship that decades of feminist medieval studies have produced and to which a study of Margaret would have been a welcome addition. Instead, the book’s frequently playful and authoritative tone—evidenced in a declared lack of “historiographical bias” (9), frequent visualizations of Margaret’s inner life, occasionally purple prose, and an over-reliance on cliché—suggests that Alio sees herself addressing an attentive tour group rather than an audience of learned equals.

These cavils aside, Margaret’s story is fascinating, twelfth-century Sicily is lively and interesting, and Alio succeeds in her effort to “shed some light on the experience of a woman too often considered little more than a footnote to history” (3). *Margaret, Queen of Sicily* should easily become the first point of reference for scholars of Margaret working in English and for general readers interested in Margaret and her world.

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