and critique one another. This becomes increasingly unsettling in that one cannot help but notice that these coalitions form among mostly-privileged, exclusively white women, most of them Anglophones; by my count, an overwhelming fifty-nine out of the seventy-three women included are from either the United States or the British Isles. As a point of contrast, the entire land mass of Latin America is represented by only one person, María Rosa Lida de Malkiel (1910-1962), from Argentina (not Spain, as Chance unfortunately states in her introduction). Chance does admit that “women from non-English-speaking countries are indeed a minority in this volume,” yet she does not explain that editorial choice (xxxiv). To faithfully portray the impact of women upon the foundation of the academy and correct that male-dominated history, we surely have to broaden our outlook. As this wonderful collection underscores the many difficult professional and personal choices women have had, and still have, to make if we want to survive and thrive in academia, it also serves to remind us how few of our stories have been told.


Erin Jordan’s slim volume (a revision of her 2000 Univ. of Iowa dissertation) bears an ambitious title, one that implies a broad study of the imbrications of medieval gender, power and religious patronage. In fact, although the study does consider important aspects of the relationships between those terms, it does so within a very specific context: that of the reigns of Jeanne and Marguerite, countesses of Flanders in the thirteenth century. The book would have been better served with a title that limited its scope to that century, and to those two sisters.

The volume is divided into four chapters and an introduction, plus two appendices (a list of the monastic and religious foundations in Flanders and Hainaut in the thirteenth century and a genealogy of the counts of Flanders), the bibliography, and index. The chapters fall neatly into two halves: the first two discuss, in mostly chronological order, the political trajectories of the two countesses. Chapter
1, “Accessing Authority: 1206-1214” examines the early days of Jeanne’s reign, from her minority and wardship under Philip Augustus until the aftermath of the battle of Bouvines when she effectively became the sole ruler of Flanders. Chapter 2, “Wielding Power: 1214-1280” concentrates on Jeanne’s and Marguerite’s negotiation of the difficult moments of their respective reigns, including the episode of the false Baldwin and the quarrel of the Dampierres and Avesnes. The second half concentrates on the religious patronage of the two countesses. Chapter 3, “Securing Power through Religious Patronage” considers the political implications of the sisters’ religious patronage, arguing that they used that patronage in order to consolidate their political position. Chapter 4, “Translating Secular Power into Spiritual Gains” examines the obverse of the coin, how the sisters’ political position allowed them to reap spiritual benefits.

Jordan states in her introduction that her study “seeks to situate [...] women more firmly within the wider political context of thirteenth-century France and to identify the social conditions that conferred authority and power on individuals” (5). In this she mostly succeeds, although again within the context of the reigns of Jeanne and Marguerite, demonstrating how the two countesses used the tools at their disposal, particularly but not exclusively, religious patronage, to rule as countesses of Flanders in their own right despite the constraints on female lordship imposed by patriarchal feudal society. As the introduction and title make clear (although one suspects the title was imposed by the publisher), Jordan seeks to draw larger conclusions about female lordship from her study of these two countesses. In order to do so, she begins with an interesting and useful discussion of the differences between power and authority; the countesses’ status as heiresses provided them with authority but actual power to rule only came as a result of their actions. She also discusses the ways in which primogeniture could prove advantageous to women, as well as disenfranchising; noting in a pithy and well-turned phrase that for the sisters “status ultimately trumped gender” (11). Throughout this part of her study, Jordan argues persuasively that women occupying positions of power during the Middle Ages “can neither be dismissed as anomalous nor accepted without reservation as having as much agency as men” (24), and this nuanced approach is one of the strong points of her book. However, where Jordan’s
discussion of power and authority is insightful and potentially useful, the consideration of the roles of women in medieval society that follows it (in Chapter 1) suffers from an over dependence on Georges Duby. Not that she agrees with Duby, far from it; rather her analysis is so focused on refuting Duby’s positions that her own argument loses cogency and impact. This is a pity because a stronger analysis of women’s position(s) would have added considerably to her argument.

The meat of Jordan’s original research clearly resides in her examination of the charters recording Jeanne’s and Marguerite’s relationships with the religious houses of Flanders. While all of Chapter 3 contains fascinating material pertaining to the sisters’ patronage, the key section comes not at the end of the chapter where one might expect it, but rather in the middle, where Jordan aptly demonstrates how many aspects of religious patronage—from settling disputes between monasteries to interceding on behalf of new communities that encountered resistance from existing orders or houses—allowed both Jeanne and Marguerite to demonstrate their authority through their successful interventions. Chapter 4 looks in more detail at what kinds of religious houses received the countesses’ patronage, whereas Chapter 3 focuses on the types of interactions they had. Here Jordan uncovers some extremely interesting patterns in the sisters’ patronage, noting for example that they had a predilection for houses and orders that followed the vita apostolica, whether Cistercians or later, after their development in the Low Countries, mendicants. Of potentially even more interest is the assertion of the countesses’ preference for female religious institutions, “Jeanne and Marguerite seem to have favored communities of women generally with similar intensity [as their preference for communities following the vita apostolica], exhibiting a particular propensity to orchestrate the foundation of Cistercian convents” (91). I would have liked to have seen some statistics about the sisters’ patronage; as it stands, the chapter demonstrates that the sisters gave generously to female religious institutions—female Cistercian monasteries and beguinages in particular—but does not provide the data necessary to support any further claims. As in several other places, the brevity of the study does the argument a real disservice.

Overall, Jordan provides an interesting, very readable, glimpse of the political and religious lives of Jeanne and Marguerite.
of Flanders. There are moments of real insight, as well as arguments that have significant potential for our examinations of other medieval female rulers and our analysis of the larger role of women in positions of authority in the Middle Ages. It is only unfortunate that there is not more — more pages, more statistics, more of Jordan's own analysis, more of the countesses' lives — for the brevity of the study keeps it from attaining the depth and breadth announced in the title and clearly aimed at by the author.

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