

Sean L. Field, *Isabelle of France: Capetian Sanctity and Franciscan Identity in the Thirteenth Century*.

Notre Dame, 2006. Pp. ii + 288.

The past few decades have witnessed a flowering of scholarship on the later Capetian kings of France, their power, and their legacy. For the reign of Louis IX (later Saint Louis), fundamental areas of interest have been his relationship to the mendicant orders, particularly the Franciscans, and his piety's contribution to the consolidation of Capetian power. Sean L. Field's engaging book takes on these distinct but intertwined issues of Capetian development and Franciscan history through a biographical study of Louis's sister, Isabelle of France.

The only surviving daughter of Blanche of Castile and Louis VIII, Isabelle could have been expected to make a brilliant marriage, cementing an important royal alliance or settling an outstanding dispute. Instead, she chose a life of virginity and religious devotion, eventually founding a female monastery at Longchamp and writing a rule for its inhabitants. Although Isabelle is now a largely forgotten figure, she was a serious

contender for sainthood (perhaps initially even more so than her brother), and her monastery and its rule had an important impact both on the royal cult and on the Franciscans. Longchamp survived as a key royal foundation in the later thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, becoming a site for some royal burials and for the veneration of French royal sanctity, a tradition that continued until the Revolution. Isabelle's rule, written at a contentious moment in Franciscan history, helped to reconcile the competing interests of would-be Franciscan women with those of male Franciscans reluctant to provide for their pastoral care. The rule gained papal approval and was adopted by as many as fifteen female houses across Europe, making it the predominant Franciscan rule for women until the fifteenth century.

Field's central contention is that Isabelle's accomplishments resulted from her ability to exercise agency throughout her life. Following a chronological plan, the book begins by outlining Isabelle's early life, drawing a picture of the sometimes discordant relationship between Isabelle and her formidable mother, Blanche of Castile. Field discusses various attempts to arrange Isabelle's marriage,

including one nearly successful effort to marry her to the Hohenstaufen heir. Field argues that Isabelle's will to maintain her virginity was the key element in avoiding marriage despite the considerable pressure brought to bear on her. Field goes on to demonstrate Isabelle's growing reputation for exemplary piety through her twenties and early thirties. The heart of the book concerns Isabelle's foundation of Longchamp and the composition of the rule for its inhabitants. Both literate and Latinate, Isabelle played a central authorial role in the composition of the rule's first redaction in 1259, and Field argues that she was responsible for many of the clauses that increased the abbess's autonomy and protected the community's privacy. After the community had been operating for a few years, this rule was found to be unsatisfactory in some areas, and Isabelle helped to draft its replacement. As Field argues, the new rule represented a more complete triumph for Isabelle than the effort of 1259 because she succeeded in acquiring the name *soeurs mineurs* for her nuns and making Franciscan friars responsible for their pastoral care. The last chapters of the book are devoted to Isabelle's later years as a pious and indeed miracle-working lay-resident of

Longchamp and the development of her cult after her death and her body's translation.

As is usually true of even the most highly placed of medieval women, Isabelle left behind relatively few sources for her life. Field draws mainly on a Life written by Agnes of Harcourt, a contemporary of Isabelle and eventually an abbess at Longchamp, but he has also collected a range of other evidence, including papal bulls and royal archival evidence, as well as inventories that demonstrate Isabelle's book ownership. Although this seems to be a fairly extensive source base, much of it is not directly devoted to Isabelle and given these documentary limitations, Field is forced to speculate on events in many parts of the book. This is not a problem, though, since he usually does this with reference to examples from parallel historical situations and relevant historiography, giving credence to his conjectures. As a result, a particular strength of this work is its contextualization of Isabelle's story. Field is a quite competent historian of political events and shows us how Isabelle's ability to exercise agency was affected by the interplay of much larger forces, such as the Capetians' ambitions in Sicily, their relations with the pope, and tensions between papacy

and Empire, and he convincingly demonstrates that the force of Isabelle's personality may have influenced these events in turn. Field also makes frequent reference to historiography on a wide range of subjects, ranging from Franciscan poverty to aristocratic women's marriage patterns.

Field's exploitation of the historiography is particularly satisfying with regard to gender history. As he points out, a key factor enabling Isabelle's agency was her ability to straddle court and convent, living as a laywoman but retiring to her foundation for a life of contemplation. Field argues that Isabelle's lay status allowed her to retain the power accorded to a princess, leaving her outside the hierarchical discipline of the Church and in a position to wield the considerable political resources of the Capetians in order to realize her vision of a Franciscan female community. The book might have been even more successful in this regard if there had been more discussion of gendered approaches to money and patronage. Isabelle seems to have made major donations, making me suspect that part of her power came from her access to and control of money. Especially given Field's interesting observation that Isabelle did not stress poverty, more attention to female

patronage as a form of power would have been welcome. It may be, though, that the sources' limitations did not allow for more exploration of this topic.

A wide range of scholars will benefit from this book, certainly including Capetian specialists and Franciscan scholars, but it will also be of considerable interest to those with an interest in the question of women's agency. The book also has strong teaching potential. Issued in paperback and available from Amazon, *Isabelle of France* would make a useful assignment for undergraduate classes on women and power or religion.

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**Carolyn Larrington, *King Arthur's Enchantresses: Morgan and her Sisters in Arthurian Tradition*. I. B. Tauris, 2006. Pp. 264 + 13 color plates.**

Considering that Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* appeared in 1981, it is surprising that there have been no book-length studies of Morgan le Fey until now. Although collections such