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*H-France Review* Vol. 16 (June 2016), No. 78

William Chester Jordan, *From England to France: Felony and Exile in the High Middle Ages*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2015. x + 223 pp. Notes, bibliography and index. \$39.50 U.S. (cl). ISBN 977-0-691-16495-3.

Review by Sharon Farmer, University of California, Santa Barbara.

Drawing on a wide range of court cases, as well as legal, administrative, and fiscal sources from England and France, William Chester Jordan has written an enlightening account of one of the most marginalized groups in medieval society: felons who avoided execution by abjuring the English realm. During the long thirteenth century, Jordan estimates, at least 75,000 English men and women (or 500 per year) abjured the realm; most of them crossed the English Channel into France. The vast majority of these sojourners had modest means to begin with and no familiarity with the languages that they would encounter on the continent. For those reasons, their exile, and the judicial confiscation of property that accompanied it, subjected both the abjurors and their spouses and children to serious impoverishment. The practice of abjuration was hardly unique to England. As Jordan points out, nearly all medieval jurisdictions exercised this form of “merciful” jurisprudence. Nevertheless, English abjurors had to travel greater distances, with little chance of ever re-crossing the channel, and they faced greater linguistic obstacles in their new places of residence.

Previous scholars have largely ignored abjuration’s central role in medieval legal systems, its place in the cultural construction of rulership, and the plight of the exiles themselves. Jordan’s monograph thus makes a substantial contribution to our understanding of medieval law, the symbolic expressions of medieval kingship and statecraft, and medieval criminality. It also adds to our understanding of marginalization, social and political causes and consequences of poverty, and the constitution of immigrant communities on the continent.

Abjuration, Jordan explains, usually followed upon one of two scenarios: the successful completion, on the part of the criminal, of a trial by ordeal, or the successful flight of a felon to a place of sanctuary, such as a parish church. In 1215 the Fourth Lateran Council prohibited priests from participating in trials by ordeal. Hence, most of the abjurors in this study were felons who had attained sanctuary, confessed their crimes, and abjured the realm. Some abjurors, moreover, were “approvers,” confessed members of criminal gangs who had turned in the names of their accomplices.

Drawing on a rich database of some 2,000 criminal cases, Jordan follows these abjurors (in chapters one through three) from the commission (or perceived commission) of the felonies themselves, through their experiences of either “approval” or sanctuary and confession, and on to their overland journey to their place of embarkation, which was usually Dover. In Dover the direct evidence concerning these exiles grows cold. Jordan nevertheless draws on local institutional evidence to paint a plausible picture of the exiles’ experiences of the English port from which they embarked and of the French port of Wissant, where they disembarked. In chapter four, he then attempts to paint a plausible picture of their experience of survival in France, but here, again, direct evidence for abjurors who sojourned in France is scant. Many of the felons were already habitual thieves, and it thus makes sense, as Jordan contends,

that they took up similar livelihoods in France. Indeed, continental criminal records suggest that gangs of thieves who were primarily of English origin were active in France at this time. Other abjurers, he suggests, may have found work as seasonal agricultural laborers or as prostitutes. In chapter five, moreover, he speculates that some of the abjurers may have found employment in the Paris book trades, which employed a number of people of English origin. Given the linguistic challenges and a widespread mistrust of immigrants, however, Jordan is convinced that the prospects for steady legitimate employment were low.

In chapter five, Jordan returns to English criminal records and those of royal pardons in order to describe the circumstances under which a very small minority of abjurers either returned to the realm illegally (where they faced execution if caught) or repatriated legally after gaining pardons for their crimes. In chapter six, he explains the decline of the practice of abjuration, brought about in large part by the Hundred Years' War, and he points to its continued influence, in transmuted form, in the institution of early modern and modern penal colonies.

No summary of the argument itself can do justice to this book. The pleasure and emotional intensity of reading it rest primarily in the evocative details of the individual cases: a priest who chose to confess to a theft that he did not commit so that he could abjure, thereby avoiding the wrath of a man whom he had cuckolded; a woman who was rescued from execution by a group of neighbors who apparently believed that she was justified in murdering her husband; an impoverished woman who, believing her husband had abandoned her, went to court to reclaim her dowry, only to learn that it was no longer hers since the missing husband was an abjurer rather than a simple deserter; a mentally challenged man who abjured the realm, believing he had committed murder, only to learn later that he had received a pardon because his presumed victim was alive and well and had gone into hiding in order to avoid debt collectors.

My only problem with the book is Jordan's overly pessimistic portrayal, in chapter four, of the general experience of immigrants and "strangers" in high medieval Western Europe. To be sure, "strangers" in any jurisdiction were subject, as Jordan points out, to the lord's confiscation of their property if they died without having established residency. But northern French sources (most especially the Parisian tax and guild records of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries) suggest that a very large number of immigrants from England, Germany, the Low Countries, Spain, and Italy, managed to establish residency in France, enter into craft and trade guilds, and even gain positions of leadership in those guilds. In Paris, a significant number of individuals whose surnames point to English origins worked in the leather, hospitality, sword makers, and baking trades, and there were a significant number of goldsmiths as well. Sources for the miracles of Saint Louis (which are based on actual inquests) indicate, moreover, that Englishmen who ended up in Saint-Denis, just north of Paris, married French women, found employment, and raised families in France.

Jordan and I approach the experiences of medieval immigrants through different sources, and the nature of those sources helps to explain our different perspectives. Moreover, given his longstanding interest in the history of medieval French Jews, he has good reason to take a pessimistic view of medieval attitudes towards difference. With this book, he has made a wonderful contribution both to the problem of marginalization and difference in the Middle Ages, and to our understanding of the causes and consequences of medieval mobility.

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ISSN 1553-9172