
H-France Review Vol. 2 (February, 2002), No. 14

Fredric L. Cheyette, *Ermengard of Narbonne and the World of the Troubadours*. Ithaca, N.Y. and London: Cornell University Press, 2001. xiii+474pp. Maps, genealogies, abbreviations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$35.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-8014-3952-3.

Review by Carol J. Williams, Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, Monash University.

The genesis of this work is very generously explained in the preface, and I would advise a careful examination of this as it is significant in determining how the work is read. The original idea was developed almost twenty years ago in the process of assembling materials for a summer course on Teaching Medieval Civilization with particular attention paid to illuminating the lives of twelfth-century Occitan women. Ermengard emerged from these women as a subject in her own right. The book therefore was begun as a collection of documents for use in college classes, prepared for teachers in a variety of academic disciplines. This is an area where Cheyette has more experience than many, as he has been involved editorially with works such as the 1983 *NEH Institute Resource Book for the Teaching of Medieval Civilization* and has been author of chapters in the same, including "A Case in Point: Galbert of Bruges," "The History of Medieval Europe: A Guide to Bibliographies," "Selections from Maria of Montpellier: A Life" (this last most clearly formed part of the same research exercise that led to the "discovery" of Ermengard of Narbonne).^[1] He has also written chapters such as "Women, Poets, and Politics in Occitania" in *Aristocratic Women in Medieval France*, which can now be seen as exploratory and preparing the ground for the current distinguished book, as can the fistful of scholarly reviews which roam further into the contextual fringes.^[2]

Even so, this is a surprising book and is not the culturally contextualised biography one might expect from the title. While the streets and fields of Narbonne and environs are brought into clear focus, and the various dynastic power plays and maneuvers are imaginatively interpreted, Ermengard herself remains a shadowy figure fidgeting in the background. Part of the reason for this is that Cheyette has rigidly resisted the temptation to speculate on matters biographic where there is no documentary trace. Thus of Ermengard's childhood in a family with two older brothers, we know nothing. What of her relationship with her mother, also named Ermengard, and perhaps even more revealingly what of her relationship with her father, Aymeri II, whose two sons, Aymeri and another un-named, died early, leaving a too young daughter as heiress to the viscounty of Narbonne?

Cheyette admits that the common expectation of a biography is one that presents us "with an individual we might imagine knowing personally. We expect to be told not only how she looked but also the shape of her character, the inner springs of her actions. We expect a portrait of the subject in the intimacy of her private world" (p.12). Nonetheless the author questions the nature of the private world for public figures of the twelfth century and conjectures that Ermengard lived her private life on the public stage. Since it is that public life that the sixty-four surviving documents trace, "that is the life this book seeks to reconstruct" (p.12). Cheyette constructs a convincing case for the defense, and, in the process outlines the long list of threats to the survival of historical documents in the following rather indulgent quotation: "But even had most of them [documents] not disappeared, not been scraped clean for reuse by later scribes, not been eaten by rats, not gone up in flames during the French Revolution, and most of what remained not been stolen by souvenir hunters, lovers of antiquities, or self-styled scholars, to

end up eventually as lamp shades or book bindings, or tossed out with old papers and tattered furniture, or still today be hidden away unrecorded, unannounced, in some private library, even had all those documents survived we would not be any closer to what usually interests a modern reader of biographies: the subject's character, her passions especially her sexual passions, her secret dreams and demons, the anecdotes of daily life that would help us imagine her as a figure in a novel or a movie. Ermengard will resolutely not stand before us" (p.6).

Though this would have been quite a different exercise, Ermengard may have been able to come forward from the shadows a little more had the various comparative historical approaches developed in such comparable biographies as Alison Weir's *Eleanor of Aquitaine : by the wrath of God, Queen of England* or Marina Warner's *Joan of Arc : the image of female heroism* been exercised. In both these essays in biography, the authors aim to make their subjects "real." Warner proposes a methodology which "by decoding the context in which she (Joan of Arc) flourished...I want to make her real again." [3] Weir recognizes the difficulty of this task: "It was put to me that it would be impossible for a biographer to do justice to a woman (Eleanor of Aquitaine) who lived eight centuries ago:...that I would never be able to bring her to life as a real person..." [4] Both of these authors achieve their aim by using the comparative method of speculation on the specific from the base of a thorough understanding of the general context. Thus though we may know nothing specifically of Joan's childhood, we know enough of the conditions for children in early fifteenth-century Champagne to be able to make some speculations and possibly even some fairly secure deductions for the specific case. Weir expresses a similar approach for Eleanor: "...and while she sometimes remains tantalizingly elusive, due to gaps in evidence, we know enough of the events surrounding her, and of what her contemporaries thought about her to draw some conclusions." [5]

In any terms this is a very big book with 362 pages of text, seventy-five pages of fine print notes as well as twenty pages of bibliographic matter in even finer print. The index is thorough and evenly detailed, and there are various maps and genealogies as well as a very useful note on money, weights, and measures. The family trees, charts, and maps, however, are rather intimidating in that they are provided without much discussion, almost as if these complex documents have self-evident meaning, perhaps like tutorial material which might be thrown to a class to see what questions they might provoke. The nineteen chapters are distributed amongst the four parts, which are titled "Ermengard's City," "The Sinews of Power: Lordship and Serfdom," "The Sinews of Power: The Culture of Fidelity," and "Dynastic Politics: 1162-1196" as well as an introduction and epilogue.

Though this book has all the trappings of a deeply scholarly excursus, it is ultimately directed to the general reader and reaches that mark successfully I believe. Cheyette expresses concern that "despite the enormous progress medieval scholarship has made in the twentieth century" the public at large deals with it as though it were only "suitable for children's stories and fantasy novels." His explanation of the principal cause of this situation is that for too long medieval historians have addressed their writing only to each other and have left the general reader out of the loop. The aim here has been to make the period accessible, interesting, and enjoyable to a larger public than might otherwise be the case. The achievement of this aim is, of course, something that this review cannot evaluate, though the steps that Cheyette has taken in progressing toward this aim are clearly demonstrated. Specialist language (and there is plenty of that in medieval studies) is studiously avoided and, where unavoidable, is incorporated into the sentence such that its meaning is evident. Chapters are succinctly titled to give a clear feel for the material to be encountered and are not overlong, being parceled into sections, either titled or not, which clearly signal the author's changes of direction. The scholarly apparatus is carefully submerged, and though I found constantly having to flick to the back of this large book at least once per page of text particularly annoying (this is not a bedside book), the general reader may not feel so compelled. This is not the sort of book that can be gobbled up in one sitting, while it is definitely one to be read rather than consulted or dipped into.

For me, the real value of this book lies in a number of sideline revelations enabling the reader to re-orient familiar material. For example, with regard to the “I” of the lyric verse of the troubadours, Cheyette explains that it is a modern predilection to interpret this “I” as the broken hearted poet himself (p.9). Identifying the voice in the poem with the poet’s own voice appeals to our post-Romantic sensibilities such that in the popular song we hear today, it is the performer we assume bears the scars that produced the song. Similarly we assume that in *Tristan und Isolde* it is Wagner that has experienced the burning of love himself in order to interpret Gottfried von Strassburg’s *Tristan*, just as Gottfried must have, in order to document the tale. Once we disconnect the authorial voice from that of the principal protagonist in the troubadour lyric, further and richer interpretations become possible. It is, however, the connection between these two that provided the material used in the construction of the *vidas* or biographies of the troubadours and *razos*, the “explanations” of their songs. Cheyette explains that if it is the real authorial voice we hear, it is but a small step to say that the world conjured in the troubadour lyric, that world of amorous dalliance, of virtuous knights and obdurate ladies, was the real world in which they lived. Certainly the late thirteenth century writers of *vidas* and *razos* wanted the songs to be heard in this way.

Another insight provides the ground for reconsidering the vexed relationship between worldly and otherworldly possessions of the Church at this time and explains why it behaved like the most avaricious of the great land barons. While for major ideologues of Church Reform, such as Cardinal Humbert and Pope Gregory VII, it was important to separate the consecrated and sanctified from the unconsecrated and unsanctified, it also was essential that those who had been called to serve the saints and perform the magic of the holy sacraments be given due recognition. Thus not only the future of the souls of men depended on these magic ceremonies, but the affairs of everyday life were rooted in the predictability of the regular repetition of the holy rituals. This only remained stable if the property of the saints was assured and its continuity guaranteed from generation to generation: “In practical terms, this meant that every bishop and every abbothad to guard the rights and properties of his office with the same imperious sense of dynastic continuity as aristocratic families had for their lands, rights and titles” (p.116).

In contrast to the royal courts of northern Europe, the great lordly courts of Occitania were exclusively lay courts. It was this that made them the rich soil out of which would grow the first truly secular culture of the European Middle Ages (p.123). It was this culture the troubadours set to rhyme and music. Though she shared the same candlelight at the courts of love as did Eleanor of Aquitaine and Marie of Champagne, at least according to Andrew the Chaplain, and though she is referred to, directly or more subtly, in a significant number of troubadour lyrics, cultural memory has refused to mythologise Ermengard of Narbonne and even with the assistance of this remarkable book she remains a historical shadow.

NOTES

[1] H. Chickering, F. Cheyette, et al. 1983 *NEH Institute Resource Book for the Teaching of Medieval Civilization* (Amherst, Mass.: Five Colleges, 1984).

[2] Fredric L. Cheyette, "Women, Poets, and Politics in Occitania," in *Aristocratic Women in Medieval France*, ed. T. Evergates (Philadelphia, Penn.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), pp. 138-77.

[3] M. Warner, *Joan of Arc: the image of female heroism* (London: Vintage, 1991), p. 27.

[4] A. Weir, *Eleanor of Aquitaine : by the wrath of God, Queen of England* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1999), p. xv.

[5] Weir, p. xvi.

Carol J. Williams
Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies
Monash University, Australia
carol.williams@arts.monash.edu.au

Copyright © 2002 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172