**Ermenegard of Narbonne and the World of the Troubadours.** By Fredric L. Cheyette (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2001) 474 pp. $35.00

This book is as much about politics as gender and as much about religion as poetry. It also treats the increased violence associated with the property that was tied to Vicountess Ermenegard (c. 1129–c. 1196), whose lordship over Narbonne gave her a prominent position within the monied cosmopolitan urban centers of twelfth-century Occitania, when that region’s political and economic importance was at its apogee. Unfortunately, the book does not have much to say about Ermenegard’s life. The fault, however, lies not with the author but with Ermenegard’s world, which did not preserve documents about any one individual in great number. The earliest document concerning her is a record of her marriage to Alphonse Jordan, count of Toulouse, in 1142.

Cheyette describes Ermenegard’s rule in terms of both local and regional politics. Members of her immediate entourage came from established families in the region of Narbonne and from the city itself, but Ermenegard was also closely tied to the Trencavel clan. Many of the documents about her are preserved in that family’s cartulary. The surviving evidence that throws most light on Ermenegard or one of her associates often deals with controversies over property or legal rights. Such reports of conflict in the sources are particularly rich in detail, but their use by Cheyette to illuminate the wider scene may give a false impression (despite his warnings) that twelfth-century southern French life was one long struggle over land, taxes, and control of castles and territories, particularly because many of the surviving charter collections, including the Trencavel cartulary, were created in the immediate aftermath of the Albigensian Crusade, when new lay lords or new bishops and abbots all wanted to collect the documents concerning their properties and rights to income.

Although Cheyette seems aware of that trap, the southern France of his presentation does appear, probably correctly, as a period in which local and regional politics were beginning to spin out of control. Perhaps to overcome this tendency of the surviving legal documents to describe conflict, Cheyette turns to poetry as evidence for how members of the military class interacted. From the troubadours, he extracts not just a recollection of the flattery devoted to powerful women like Ermenegard, but a testament to the excitement and anxieties of warfare in a region where conflicting loyalties were the norm. Poetry, in his view, provides evidence about the loyalty of man to man, lord to lord, or knight to lady and about the faith or love between individual fighting men that bound this society together and is suggestive of the Christian charity, or caritas, discussed in monastic circles during this period.

This faith or love between men is also represented in the written oaths of fidelity that fill the charter books. Because the principals are identified by their mothers’ names, these oaths have been the subject of considerable discussion and conjecture, often serving as indices for the
importance of women. But unlike in some of the Italian cases, these matronymics are not used to indicate the sons of priests but to distinguish individuals in families that had a “William” or a “Raymond” in every generation. Cheyette’s explanation for their use differs from, say, Herlihy’s.

Cheyette’s treatment of religious conflict in the region is particularly artful, in part, because he may be the first historian of religion in the region who does not take sides. He does not hesitate to trace the origins of the Albigensian Crusade back to Count Raymond V of Toulouse, who in 1177 enlisted the Church as his “ally.” As Cheyette explains it, “to entice [the Church] into the fray he conjured up the specter of heresy.” About Raymond, he concludes, correctly, “His lasting contribution to Occitania would finally be a Holy War brought home to Christendom” (286). He could have added that this action on Raymond’s part would have considerable negative consequences beyond Occitania in succeeding centuries. He describes the Cistercian preaching in the region in a balanced way that takes into account issues such as the wealth of the local clergy and the appeal of the “good men” (boni homines) of the heretics whose demands on the public were limited (307).

Although this book was ostensibly written about the life of a woman ruler, gender is not a major theme in it. Historians have wondered for some time about how to view Ermengard and other women like her who inherited power in twelfth-century southern France. There is considerable evidence from the tenth through twelfth centuries that the region’s women inherited and ruled when no direct male heirs survived. Modern assessment, however, has become entangled in the discourses of nineteenth-century editors of document collections, who started with the assumption that women could not possibly be ruling. Cheyette argues convincingly against those historians who attempted to explain away the widespread evidence of women’s ability to rule in the region. He does so by showing how those earlier historians presented the evidence selectively, highlighting a handful of early documents that attempted to argue against the southern French practice of women’s rule. Cheyette shows that such historiography was mistaken. Arguments against women’s rule found in certain documents had been prepared by outsiders to the region who misunderstood, or refused to accept, its customs; those arguments had no consequence at the time. In making this distinction, Cheyette has considerably clarified our understanding of twelfth-century Occitania and the inheritance practices of its elites. For this contribution alone, we should be eternally grateful for this excellent treatment.

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