Blanche of Castile, Queen of France

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Lindy Grant's long awaited and magisterial (although here one particularly laments the lack of a gender-appropriate adjective) book offers us a biography of Blanche of Castile, the Iberian princess famously chosen by her grandmother, Eleanor of Aquitaine, to marry the son of Philip II of France, Lord Louis, the future Louis VIII. Despite widespread acknowledgement of the importance of Blanche on many fronts, especially as dowager queen and regent for her son, Louis IX, Grant's is the first substantive study of her since Elie Berger's 1895 *Histoire de Blanche de Castille, Reine de France*. Grant's book is very much a biography, in the best traditional sense, untroubled by considerations of, for example, postcolonial criticism. As such it invites comparison with the sprawling biography by Jacques Le Goff of Blanche's son, the 1996 *Saint-Louis*. But here key differences emerge as well, for as William Chester Jordan has recently noted, Le Goff, hyper-prolific in the article format, was less at ease with long-haul writing, such that, Jordan suggested, his biography of Louis was probably not 'a labor of love'.⁽¹⁾ The opposite is true for *Blanche of Castile*; Grant's enthusiasm not only for her subject, but also for the act of writing about her, illuminates the 300-plus pages of text.

We should note at the outset that this could have been a shorter book. The structure is repetitive, given the decision to divide the book into a part one, which is essentially a chronological narrative of Blanche's life, and a part two, which pulls out themes that characterize Blanche's rulership, like 'Piety and devotion,' or 'The culture of the court', which likewise unfold across time. There is overlap between the two, so that the reader does have a certain sense of déjà vu during the second half. For those trying to discern what Grant thinks about a specific aspect of, say, Blanche's governmental strategies, a less prolix approach might have been more satisfying. But for a reader like this one who is interested in Grant's polyscopic vision of great swaths of the 13th century in France, it was useful to have a second pass at key events and themes.

Several of these themes are laid out in Grant's 25-page introduction. There is the obvious need to situate Blanche within the by-now rich and complex question of elite women and power. The conversation at the moment is crystalizing around a critique of 'exceptionalism', the tendency to view every woman who yielded power as an exception, however ever many women there are who did so.⁽²⁾ Grant's contribution to the debate is to argue that Blanche's life is most usefully viewed as an example of 'what it meant to be a ruler and a member of the medieval elite', rather than specifically a queen (p. 3). In urging that we 'look

beyond queenship' (p. 3), her point is that there were limits on the power of male rulers as well as female, and that the so-called 'soft powers' typically associated with queens were also essential to male rulers, like Blanche's husband or son. Readers should not conclude from this that Grant is uninterested in royal women; the reverse is true, as we shall see. In the introduction we also meet Grant's sources, which are almost entirely 13th-century texts. In addition to the near-hagiographic writings about Blanche's saintly children, the Lives of St. Louis and Isabelle, there is Jean de Joinville's well-known Life of St. Louis, as well as multiple other courtly and monastic chronicles, and also popular song and romance. But what is most striking is the inventive use that Grant makes of terrain that is less well furrowed, the bookkeeping records for Blanche and her circle. These accounts of household expenditure, some unpublished, allow Grant to reconstruct, often in amazing detail, the fabric of daily life for a member of the Capetian court, as well as what amounts to a construction manual for her building projects. Here there is an important point to be made about Grant and her medieval sources. Even in a 455-page book there is only room for so much, and what is largely left out is a conversation with modern and contemporary scholarship. Blanche's intimate knowledge of her sources and her confidence in interpreting them is such that the conversation is almost exclusively between Grant, Blanche of Castile, and Blanche's contemporaries. Grant is clearly well aware of the secondary literature and commendably up-to-date on it, given the long gestation of the book. But modern scholars are mostly relegated to the endnotes and bibliography, and only occasionally appear in the body of the text. Grant's tone with her medieval interlocutors is conversational, even breezy. The book may be long, but it is never dry, and often it is very funny.

Part one surveys, over 115 pages, the historical narrative of Blanche's life separated into six chronological chapters. The general outline is familiar to students of the period, but Grant's account is exceptionally well peopled. Grant is on nodding terms with every aristocrat or cleric on the French scene in the first half of the 13th century. Many of these figures vividly come to life, through Grant's close reading of formal and informal sources, among them Theobald, Count of Champagne, who received a runny cheese in his face when he displeased Blanche's second son Robert by his overly keen attentions to the queen (p. 111). This dense and learned account provides new insights into Blanche's early married life, pointing out, for example, the livelier and culturally richer court that Blanche and the future Louis VIII maintained, in contrast to the more austere household of Philip II (pp. 47–8). There are many plot strands that could be singled out, like Blanche's willingness to alter the terms of her husband's will to found a Cistercian abbey, Royaumont, in his honor, rather than the Augustinian house Louis VIII had requested (pp. 92–3), or the complete orchestration of the reception of the Crown of Thorns (pp. 115–7).

The larger themes of part one are taken up in part two, which occupies the remaining 177 pages of text. Here again six chapters examine Blanche's life and times, organized according to broad and overlapping topics, like 'Religion, the Church, and other faiths,' or 'Piety and devotion,' 'Legitimacy and authority,' and 'Ruler and counsellor'. Large ideas compete for attention with the alluring minutia of court life (Blanche's wardrobe in the lower garden at Pontoise, p. 149; the names of the wet nurses of Blanche's children, p. 155; the fisherman on retainer to supply the court, p. 171), the fruits of Grant's culling of household accounts. This almost overwhelming abundance of information coalesces into several overarching subjects that span multiple chapters. The most obvious is what it meant to be a queen in 13th-century France. Grant uses Blanche's example to consider this topic both from a structural standpoint, and an interpersonal one, placing Blanche within a great network of noble women. From the first standpoint, Grant's chief argument is that Blanche faced few limits on her power because of her gender. Grant returns to the idea that both male and female rulers experienced restrictions, and that it is an oversimplification to think in terms of 'typologies of power' as being gendered (p. 265).

Moreover, Grant emphasizes that French queens, as crowned and anointed, had from the moment of coronation authority in their own right, the 'powers of a reserve ruler,' to be deployed if a husband was ill or absent (p. 274). Obviously this played out differently for different queens, and there was no absolute pattern to be followed, particularly in the matter of what happened when the king was ill or absent on Crusade (p. 275). Grant discusses at length the special circumstances of Blanche's two regencies, demonstrating that there was little real challenge to the dying wish of Louis VIII that Blanche should be sole regent for her

young son (pp. 280–1), though she hedges about Le Goff's assertion that Blanche should be viewed as a 'co-ruler' with her son (p. 284). Of special interest is Grant's discussion of Blanche in the vital kingly role of judge. As regent, she sat in judgment as any king would do, but more notably, during her son's reign, Louis turned to her to preside over the group of judges, or *parlement*, trying cases. Grant stresses that her sources showed no surprise that a queen should exercise this authority (pp. 303–7). Underlying any analysis of reginal authority in France is Marion Facinger's foundational study, which maintained that the increasingly bureaucratic nature of kingship in 13th-century France squeezed queen out of power.⁽³⁾ Grant demonstrates that Facinger's assertion is not born out by the example of Blanche, for whom the expanded administration of kingship offered considerable scope as vice-regent (p. 289).

Interwoven with the nuts and bolts of governance is an account of the personal ties that Blanche maintained as queen and dowager queen with a whole complex of aristocratic women. Grant acknowledges that Blanche was not the ideal mother-in-law and offers a sympathetic account of the fortunes of Margaret of Provence. Grant suggests Margaret's much more limited role at court was not due to changes in attitudes towards queens, but rather due to specific circumstances, such as the potential threat that Margaret's family connections could pose to the Capetians, as well as to a breakdown in trust between her and her husband (pp. 286–9). In contrast to her relations with Margaret, Grant describes Blanche's active support of an extended circle of Capetian women at court, the various countesses with whom Blanche shared descent from Eleanor of Aquitaine. Blanche seems to have served as the family banker to these women, making loans and dispensing rich wedding gifts (pp. 175–7). Unsurprising but enriching to read about are Blanche's warm and lasting relations with her Spanish relatives, whether distant cousins in France, like Berengaria of Navarre, or her sisters, Eleanor, queen of Aragón or Berengaria, queen of Castile-Léon, in Spain. Blanche comes to life as one learns that her relatives sent her pomegranates and ponies, and that she sent them fabric and furs. Clearly Blanche was skilled in the affective modalities of rulership, but affection seems to be at the heart of her many interactions with a constellation of friends and relations.

For this reader an equally important subject is Blanche as a patron, both of monastic institutions and of the buildings associated with them. The topic of Blanche's generosity to religious houses stems, of course, from her piety, which Grant describes as profound, but less ascetic than that of her would-be-monastic children Louis and Isabelle. Grant wants us to understand that Blanche loved life, including all of the diversions and luxury goods that a great court could offer. Supporting religious institutions was of course what Capetian queens did, but it is clear that Blanche was an exceptionally energetic architectural patron. Although Grant is chiefly writing in this book as an historian and biographer, she is also an architectural historian who has as complete a grasp of medieval building practice as anyone living. The Blanche book in effect provides a companion volume for the Capetian world to Grant's invaluable Normandy book, since Grant gives us a survey of every building, extant and lost, that is connected to her patronage or even known to her.⁽⁴⁾ In addition to her foundations of Maubuisson and Le Lys, Grant tells us that Blanche took over the architectural patronage of three additional Cistercian houses for women (p. 259). Grant also tells us what she thinks about every other major building project in the Ile-de-France, from her son's Sainte-Chapelle to Saint-Denis and multiple other abbeys in and around Paris. It is useful to have Grant's take on Robert Branner's classic assertion that Blanche's projects were governed by restraint, in contrast to the Sainte-Chapelle and other buildings constructed for Louis IX. Grant persuasively argues that this is an over simplification, since Branner was pairing court buildings and Cistercian structures, the latter inevitably less lavish, and she adds as well that Blanche likely played a role in shaping the aesthetics of the Sainte-Chapelle (pp. 261–2). Not every reader will agree, however, that Blanche's awareness of the symbolic value of architecture came from 'her ancestors, the Anglo-Norman and Angevin kings', rather than Capetian precedents (pp. 317–8). Of exceptional value are Grant's observations about the fabric and engineering of Blanche's buildings. Through her meticulous sifting through expense records, Grant traces for us the quarrying of stone, the casting of tile drainage pipes, and the laying out of water works for Blanche's beloved foundations, so that these mostly vanished abbeys take shape before our eyes as complex engineering marvels as well as liturgical spaces.

There are criticisms that can be made. There is too much information here for the book to always function

effectively as a biography; periodically Blanche gets lost in a thicket of feuding minor nobles or contending theologians. At other points, the reader wonders how Grant knows exactly what Blanche is thinking and feeling with near-Freudian certainty, despite her immersion in the chronicles (p. 264). Moreover, the organization of the book does not facilitate its utility to a non-specialist, and even a committed reader may long for a more streamlined shape to the volume. But is a generous and joyous book that seeks to make available everything that Grant knows about the first half of the 13th century in France. What she has given us is not so much a biography of Blanche of Castile, as a comprehensive history of France (and also England and Spain) during Blanche's lifetime. Because of Grant's unparalleled knowledge of primary sources, and because of the inclusion of an excellent index, the book will stand as an invaluable resource for studying Capetian France. In the end Grant does justice to her subject and conveys, to an impressive extent, a sense of the lived experience of being Blanche of Castile.

Notes

1. William Chester Jordan, 'Review of Jacques Revel and Jean-Claude Schmitt, eds., *Une autre histoire: Jacques Le Goff (1924-2014)*', *Speculum*, 92 (2017), 572–3.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. See, for example, the collected essays in Heather Tanner, *Medieval Elite Women and the Exercise of Power, 1100–1400: Moving Beyond the Exceptionalist Debate* (London, forthcoming).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Marion Facinger, 'A Study of Medieval Queenship: Capetian France, 987-1237', *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History*, 5 (1968), 3–48.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Lindy Grant, *Architecture and Society in Normandy 1120–1270* (New Haven, CT, 2005).[Back to \(4\)](#)

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