Eleanor de Montfort: A Rebel Countess in Medieval England, by Louise Wilkinson. London: Continuum, 2012. Pp. xvi+213. ISBN: 9781847251947. $34.95.

LOUISE WILKINSON HAS written a modest little book about the youngest sister of an English monarch, Henry III. In just 136 pages of exposition (183 with notes), Wilkinson accomplishes her stated goal of "consider[ing] the life and career of Eleanor, the youngest daughter of King John, against the turbulent background of thirteenth-century English politics and Anglo-French relations, and consider[ing] her transformation from the king's beloved youngest sister into his bitter political enemy" (2). While the book achieves its goal of providing a biography of a previously neglected noblewoman, it also, intentionally or not, inspires much more, motivating scholars to analyze women's status as sisters, in addition to their positions as wives, widows, or mothers, to glean more information about the bases of women's political action.

With obvious reason, the book is organized chronologically around Eleanor's life cycle, beginning with chapter 1 on Eleanor's childhood; chapter 2 on her first marriage, to William Marshall the Younger; chapters 3 and 4 on her first widowhood; chapters 5 through 8 covering her second marriage, to Simon of Montfort, and the baronial rebellion against Henry led by Simon; and chapter 9 on her second widowhood, this time as an exile in France. A picture emerges of a king who cared deeply for his youngest sister, abandoned at the age of two by her widowed and newly remarried mother and a royal princess who never seemed to have enough money to provide for her own living expenses. Through Eleanor's childhood, first marriage, first widowhood, and the beginning of the second marriage, Henry attempted to provide financially for his sister, changing his mind only, Wilkinson argues, when Eleanor and Simon pushed him too far by asking for too much.

Throughout, Wilkinson acknowledges the difficulties one encounters when trying to bring to light the life of a neglected historical figure, supplementing the meager documents left behind by the lady herself with letters and writs of King Henry as well as contemporary chronicles. With Henry's documents, the reader can see the king's concern for his sister's well-being, but the reasons for Eleanor's financial distress are unclear—was Eleanor just a poor manager of her estates or expenses, or were the estates in too poor a condition to provide adequately? We know that she did not get the full amount of dower owed from her first husband's estate, but those lands were not the entirety of her assets.

Additionally, Wilkinson attempts to fill in remaining blanks with

comparisons to other noblewomen in order to determine how Eleanor might have behaved, suggesting, for example, that Eleanor might have expressed her piety by going on pilgrimage like her sister or likely practiced embroidery like her cousin, Isabelle of France (58-59). Wilkinson always couches these comparisions in conditional terms—Eleanor "might have" or "likely did"—leaving a deep impression of how frustrating an enterprise it is to recapture the lives of noblewomen who, to judge by the amount of correspondence and care Henry lavished on Eleanor, were not insignificant in their own time.

Indeed, Wilkinson asserts in the preface that Eleanor's story is important because it demonstrates noblewomen's capacity for political agency, and the author goes on in the rest of the book to provide examples of Eleanor acting successfully as an intercessor with the king on behalf of her own subjects. As a further case in point, Wilkinson points to Eleanor's choice to remarry, to the foreigner Simon of Montfort, despite her vow taken during her first widowhood to remain perpetually chaste and despite the king's own political designs for his sister. For the most part, however, Eleanor's political agency is not as deeply examined as it could be, and the complicating factors of Henry's involvement in choosing Eleanor's first husband and in "advising" Eleanor to accept a disadvantageous dower agreement for her first marriage are not examined in light of this agency.

By contrast, a secondary theme—that of Eleanor's relationship with Henry, and in particular, Henry's feelings toward his youngest sister—emerges on its own. This focus on Henry, rather than Eleanor, is determined by the sources themselves, which are very scarce from Eleanor but more abundant from the king. Wilkinson argues that Henry cared a great deal for his sister and that Eleanor's over-reaching exasperated him at the end. Henry, here, is quite likeable, and, while Eleanor is not unlikeable, the discord between the two siblings is laid at her feet. Wilkinson presents a royal sister who uses her close relationship with the king to secure favors for her tenants, goodwill for her own choice of marriage partner, and several prestigious and expensive gifts. In this way, perhaps due to the limitations of the sources, Eleanor's political agency is seen as a result of her sibling relationship rather than as a consequence of being a wife or heiress.

Recent years have seen a steady output of studies on the political power of medieval women, such as the collections of essays *Aristocratic Women in Medieval France*, edited by Theodore Evergates, and *Capetian Women*, edited by Kathleen Nolan, as well as the steady upsurge in studies on queenship. As far as I know, however, this is the first study of the political activities of a king's

sister as a sister, which makes her more than a countess but less than a queen.[1] Eleanor's position brings up interesting questions of the experiences and power of royal family members. Current work on queens, such as Theresa Earenfight's work on Maria of Castile or Lisa Benz St. John's work on three English queens of the fourteenth century, demonstrates that the wives and mothers of kings parlayed their physical and affective proximity to kings into political power. In her work, Earenfight further reminds us of Ernst Kantorowicz's concept in *The King's Two Bodies* of monarchy functioning as a conglomeration of people (the king and his favorites, ministers, cabinet, etc.) rather than a solitary figure. Louise Wilkinson's Eleanor, like Earenfight's Maria, broadens the definition of monarchy even further, to include the female relatives of the king. This modest biography of a single English princess opens the door to future examinations of the status and power of royal sisters.

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NOTE

1. There have been studies on Louis IX's sister Isabella, but these focus on her religiosity more than on her as a political figure.